

Dark Avenues



“I have been keeping an eye on Bunin’s brilliant talent. He really is the enemy.”

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“Your influence is truly beyond words... I do not know any other writer whose external world is so closely tied to another, whose sensations are more exact and indispensable, and whose world is more genuine and also more unexpected than yours.”

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“He was a great stylist who wrote very suggestively. He didn’t spray us with ideologies or worries. His writing is pure poetry.”

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“A most powerful ‘connoisseur of colours’. One could write an entire dissertation on his colour schemes.”

Vladimir Nabokov

“You have, Mr Bunin, thoroughly explored the soul of vanished Russia, and in doing so you have most deservedly continued the glorious traditions of the great Russian literature.”

Professor Wilhelm Nordenson,
at the 1933 Nobel Prize banquet

ALMA CLASSICS

Dark Avenues

Ivan Bunin

Translated by Hugh Aplin



ALMA CLASSICS

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Ivan Bunin (1870–1953)

Dark Avenues

Part One

Dark Avenues

IN THE COLD, FOUL WEATHER of autumn, on one of Tula's highways, flooded by rains and indented with many black ruts, up to a long hut with a government posting station in one wing and private living quarters where one could rest or spend the night, have dinner or ask for the samovar in the other, there drove a tarantass,* bespattered with mud and with its top half-raised, pulled by three quite ordinary horses with their tails tied up out of the slush. On the box of the tarantass sat a sturdy peasant in a tightly belted, heavy cloth coat, serious and dark-faced, with a sparse, jet-black beard, looking like a robber of old, and inside the tarantass sat a svelte old military man in a large peaked cap and a grey greatcoat with an upright beaver collar of Nicholas I's time, still black-browed, but with white whiskers which joined up with similar sideburns; his chin was shaved, and his appearance as a whole bore that resemblance to Alexander II* which was so prevalent among military men at the time of his reign; his gaze was both enquiring, stern and at the same time weary.

When the horses came to a halt, he threw a leg in a level-topped military boot out of the tarantass and, holding back the skirts of the greatcoat with suede-gloved hands, ran up onto the porch of the hut.

“To the left, Your Excellency,” the coachman cried out rudely from the box and, stooping slightly on the threshold because of his height, the man went into the little entrance hall, then to the left into the living quarters.

The living quarters were warm, dry and tidy: there was a new, gold-coloured icon in the left-hand corner, beneath it a table covered with a clean, unbleached tablecloth, and at the table there were benches, scrubbed clean; the kitchen stove, occupying the far right-hand corner, was newly white with chalk; nearer stood something like an ottoman, covered with mottled rugs, with its folding end resting against the side of the stove; from behind the stove door came the sweet smell of cabbage soup – cabbage boiled down until soft, beef and bay leaves.

The new arrival threw his greatcoat down on a bench and proved to be still more svelte in just his dress uniform and long boots; then he took off the gloves and cap, and with a weary air ran a pale, thin hand over his head – his grey hair, combed down on his temples towards the corners of his eyes, was slightly curling; his attractive, elongated face with dark eyes retained here and there minor traces of smallpox. There was nobody in the living quarters and, opening the door into the entrance hall a little, he cried out in an unfriendly way:

“Hey, anybody there?”

Immediately thereafter into the living quarters came a dark-haired woman, also black-browed and also still unusually attractive for her age, looking like an elderly gypsy, with dark down on her upper lip and alongside her cheeks, light on her feet, but plump, with large breasts under her red blouse and a triangular stomach like a goose’s under her black woollen skirt.

“Welcome, Your Excellency,” she said. “Would you be wanting to eat, or would you like the samovar?”

The new arrival threw a cursory glance at her rounded shoulders and light feet in worn, red Tatar slippers, and curtly, inattentively replied:

“The samovar. Are you the mistress here or a servant?”

“The mistress, Your Excellency.”

“The place is yours then?”

“Yes, sir. Mine.”

“How’s that, then? A widow, are you, that you run things yourself?”

“Not a widow, Your Excellency, but you do have to make a living. And I like being in charge.”

“Right, right. That’s good. And how clean and pleasant you have it.”

The woman was all the time looking at him searchingly, with her eyes slightly narrowed.

“I like cleanliness too,” she replied. “I grew up with gentlefolk, after all, so how could I fail to know how to keep myself respectable, Nikolai Alexeyevich?”

He straightened up quickly, opened his eyes wide and blushed.

“Nadezhda! Is it you?” he said hurriedly.

“It’s me, Nikolai Alexeyevich,” she replied.

“My God, my God!” he said, sitting down on a bench and staring straight at her. “Who could have thought it! How many years since we last saw one another? About thirty-five?”

Thirty, Nikolai Alexeyevich. I'm forty-eight now, and you're getting on for sixty, I think."

"Something like that... My God, how strange!"

"What's strange, sir?"

"But everything, everything... How can you not understand!"

His weariness and absent-mindedness had vanished; he stood up and began walking decisively around the room, gazing at the floor. Then he stopped and, blushing through his grey hair, began to speak:

"I know nothing about you from that time on. How did you end up here? Why didn't you stay with your owners?"

"Soon after you, my owners gave me my freedom."

"And where did you live afterwards?"

"It's a long story, sir."

"You weren't married, you say?"

"No, I wasn't."

"Why? With the sort of beauty that you had?"

"I couldn't do it."

"Why not? What do you mean?"

"What is there to explain? You probably remember how I loved you."

He blushed to the point of tears and, with a frown, again began his pacing.

"Everything passes, my friend," he began mumbling. "Love, youth – everything, everything. The ordinary, vulgar story. Everything passes with the years. How does the Book of Job put it? 'Thou shalt remember it as waters that pass away'."*

"God treats people differently, Nikolai Alexeyevich. Youth passes for everyone, but love's a different matter."

He raised his head and, stopping, gave a painful grin:

"But I mean, you couldn't have loved me all your life!"

"But I could. However much time passed, I kept on living for the one thing. I knew the former you was long gone, that for you it was as if there had never even been anything, but then... It's too late for reproaches now, but you know, it's true, you did abandon me ever so heartlessly – how many times did I want to lay hands upon myself out of hurt alone, not even to mention everything else. There was a time, after all, Nikolai Alexeyevich, when I called you Nikolenka, and you called me – do you remember what? And you were good enough to

keep on reciting me poetry about various ‘dark avenues,’” she added with an unfriendly smile.

“Ah, how good-looking you were!” he said, shaking his head. “How ardent, how beautiful! What a figure, what eyes! Do you remember how everyone used to stare at you?”

“I do, sir. You were extremely good-looking too. And you know, it was you I gave my beauty to, my ardour. How on earth can such a thing be forgotten?”

“Ah! Everything passes. Everything gets forgotten.”

“Everything passes, but not everything gets forgotten.”

“Go away,” he said, turning and going up to the window. “Please, go away.”

And taking out a handkerchief and pressing it to his eyes, speaking rapidly he added:

“If only God can forgive me. For you, evidently, have forgiven me.”

She went up to the door and paused:

“No, Nikolai Alexeyevich, I haven’t. Since our conversation has touched upon our feelings, I’ll tell you straight: I never could forgive you. Just as there was nothing on earth dearer to me at that time than you, so was there nothing afterwards either. And that’s why I can’t forgive you. Well, but what sense is there in remembering, the dead don’t get brought back from the graveyard.”

“No, that’s right, there’s no point, order the horses to be brought up,” he replied, moving away from the window with a face already stern. “I’ll tell you one thing: I’ve never been happy in life, please don’t think that. I’m sorry that I may be wounding your pride, but I’ll tell you frankly – I was madly in love with my wife. But she was unfaithful, and abandoned me even more insultingly than I did you. I adored my son – while he was growing, what hopes did I not place on him! But he turned out a good-for-nothing, a spendthrift, insolent, without a heart, without honour, without a conscience... However, all that is the most ordinary, vulgar story too. Keep well, dear friend. I think I too lost in you the dearest thing I had in life.”

She went up to him and kissed his hand, and he kissed hers.

“Order the horses...”

When they had set off on their way, he thought gloomily: “Yes, how delightful she was! Magically beautiful!” He remembered with shame his final words and the fact that he had kissed her hand, and was

immediately ashamed of his shame. “Isn’t it the truth, then, that she gave me the best moments of my life?”

Close to setting, a pale sun had peeped out. The coachman drove at a trot, ever shifting from one black rut to another, choosing the less muddy ones, and thinking about something too. Finally he said with serious rudeness:

“She kept on looking out of the window, Your Excellency, as we were leaving. You’ve probably been good enough to know her a long time?”

“A long time, Klim.”

“That woman’s got her head on her shoulders. And they say she keeps on getting richer. She lends money on interest.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t! Who doesn’t want to live a bit better! If you lend with a conscience, there’s nothing much wrong with that. And they say she’s fair on that score. But she’s a harsh one! If you haven’t repaid on time, you’ve only yourself to blame.”

“Yes, that’s right, you’ve only yourself to blame... Keep driving on, please, I’m afraid we might miss the train...”

The low sun shone yellow on the empty fields, the horses splashed steadily through the puddles. He gazed at the fleetingly glimpsed horseshoes, his black brows knitted, and thought:

“Yes, you’ve only yourself to blame. Yes, of course they were the best moments. And not merely the best, but truly magical! ‘All round the scarlet dog rose bloomed, the avenues of dark limes stood...’* But my God, what would have happened later on? What if I hadn’t abandoned her? What nonsense! This Nadezhda, not the keeper of a lodging house, but my wife, the mistress of my house in St Petersburg, the mother of my children?”

And closing his eyes, he shook his head.

20th October 1938

The Caucasus

ON ARRIVING IN MOSCOW, I put up furtively at inconspicuous rooms in a side street near the Arbat and led the tiresome life of a recluse – from meeting to meeting with her. During those days she visited me just three times, and each time she came in hurriedly with the words:

“I’ve only come for a minute...”

She was pale with the beautiful pallor of an excited woman in love, her voice would break, and the way that, after tossing her umbrella down anywhere, she would hurry to raise her veil and embrace me struck me with pity and delight.

“It seems to me,” she would say, “he suspects something, that he even knows something – perhaps he’s read one of your letters, found a key to open my desk... I believe he’s capable of anything with his cruel, proud character. Once he said to me outright: ‘I won’t stop at anything in defending my honour, the honour of a husband and an officer!’ Now for some reason he’s watching literally my every move, and for our plan to succeed I have to be terribly careful. He’s already agreed to let me go, so vehemently did I suggest to him I’d die if I didn’t see the south, the sea, but for God’s sake be patient!”

Our plan was audacious: to leave for the coast of the Caucasus by one and the same train and to live there in some completely wild place for three or four weeks. I knew that coast, I had once lived for some time near Sochi – when young and single – I had those autumn evenings amidst black cypresses by the cold, grey waves committed to memory for the rest of my life... And she would turn pale when I said: “And now I’ll be there with you, in mountainous jungle, by the tropical sea...” We did not believe in the realization of our plan until the last minute – too great a happiness did it seem to us.

* * *

It was cold and wet in Moscow, it looked as if the summer was already over and would not return, it was dirty, murky, the crows were cawing,

the streets glistened wet and black with the opened umbrellas of passers-by and the raised tops of cab men's droshkies, shaking as they sped along. And it was a dark, repulsive evening as I drove to the station, and everything inside me was freezing from anxiety and the cold. I ran through the station and along the platform with my hat pulled down towards my eyes and my face buried in the collar of my coat.

In the small first-class compartment which I had booked in advance, the rain was pouring noisily over the roof. I lowered the window blind at once and, as soon as the porter, wiping his wet hand on his white apron, had taken his tip and gone, I locked the door. Then I opened the blind a little and froze, my eyes fixed upon the heterogeneous crowds, scurrying back and forth beside the carriage with their things in the dark light of the station lamps. We had agreed that I would arrive at the station as early as possible and she as late as possible, so that I should not somehow bump into her and him on the platform. It was now already time they were here. I looked ever more tensely – still they weren't here. The second bell rang – I turned cold in fright: she was late, or suddenly at the last minute he had not let her go! But immediately after that I was struck by his tall figure, officer's peaked cap, tight greatcoat and the suede-gloved hand with which he held her by the arm as he strode out briskly. I recoiled from the window and fell into the corner of the couch. The second-class carriage was next door – in my mind I saw him getting into it with her masterfully, looking around to see if the porter had arranged things for her well, taking off his glove, taking off his cap, kissing her, making the sign of the cross over her... The third bell deafened me, the train moving off plunged me into a state of numbness... The train gathered pace, knocking, rocking, then began moving evenly at full speed... With an icy hand I slipped a ten-rouble note to the conductor who brought her to me and carried her things...

* * *

Coming in, she did not even kiss me, only smiled pitifully as she sat down on the couch and took off her hat, unfastening it from her hair.

"I couldn't eat dinner at all," she said. "I didn't think I could sustain this dreadful role through to the end. And I'm terribly thirsty. Give me some Narzan,* dear," she said, addressing me intimately for the first

time. "I'm convinced he'll come after me. I gave him two addresses, Gelendzhik and Gagry. Well, and in three or four days he'll be in Gelendzhik... But who cares, better death than this torment..."

* * *

In the morning, when I went out into the corridor, it was sunny and stuffy; from the toilets came the smell of soap, eau de cologne and everything a carriage full of people smells of in the morning. Passing outside the windows, heated up and dull with dust, was the level, scorched steppe, dusty wide roads could be seen, and carts drawn by bullocks, there were glimpses of trackmen's huts with the canary-yellow circles of sunflowers and scarlet hollyhocks in the front gardens... Further on there began the boundless expanse of bare plains with barrows and burial grounds, the unendurable dry sun, the sky resembling a dusty cloud, then the spectres of the first mountains on the horizon...

* * *

From both Gelendzhik and Gagry she sent him a postcard and wrote that she did not yet know where she would stay.

Then we went down along the coast towards the south.

* * *

We found a primeval place, overgrown with forests of plane trees, flowering shrubs, mahogany, magnolias and pomegranate trees, among which there rose fan palms and the cypresses showed black...

I would wake up early and, while she slept, before tea, which we drank around seven o'clock, walk over the hills to the woodland thickets. The hot sun was already strong, clear and joyous. In the woods the fragrant azure mist was shining, dispersing and melting away, beyond the distant wooded summits gleamed the everlasting whiteness of the snowy mountains... I would go back through our village's sultry marketplace with its smell of pressed dung burning from the chimneys; trade was seething there, it was crowded with people, saddle horses and donkeys – a multitude of mountaineers of different races assembled there at the market in the mornings – Circassian girls floated about in long, black

clothes down to the ground and red slippers, with their heads enfolded in something black, and with quick, birdlike glances flashing at times from that funereal enfoldment.

Later we would leave for the seashore, always completely deserted, bathe and lie in the sun right up until lunch. After lunch – always pan-fried fish, white wine, nuts and fruit – in the sultry twilight of our hut, under its tiled roof, hot, gay strips of light reached through the slatted shutters.

When the heat abated and we opened the window, the part of the sea that was visible from it between the cypresses standing on the slope below us had the colour of violets and lay so flat and peaceful that it seemed there would never be an end to this tranquillity, to this beauty.

At sunset, amazing clouds often piled up beyond the sea; their glow was so magnificent that at times she would lie down on the ottoman, cover her face with a gauze scarf and cry: another two or three weeks – and Moscow again!

The nights were warm and impenetrable, in the black darkness fireflies floated, twinkled, shone with a topaz light, tree frogs clanked like little glass bells. When the eye grew accustomed to the dark, the stars and the crests of the mountains stood out on high, and above the village were the outlines of trees that we did not notice in the daytime. And all night, from there, from the inn, could be heard the muffled banging of a drum and the throaty, doleful, hopelessly happy wailing of what always seemed to be one and the same endless song.

Not far from us, in a coastal ravine descending out of the wood to the sea, a shallow, limpid little river leapt quickly along its stony bed. How wonderfully its lustre rippled, seethed, at that mysterious hour when, like some marvellous creature, the late moon looked out intently from behind the mountains and the woods.

Sometimes during the night, terrifying clouds would approach from the mountains; there would be an angry storm; in the noisy, sepulchral blackness of the woods, magical green abysses were continually gaping open, and cracking out in the heavenly heights there were antediluvian claps of thunder. Then in the woods eaglets would wake up and mew, the snow leopard would roar, the jackals would yelp... Once a whole pack of them came running to our lighted window – on such nights they always congregate around dwellings – we opened the window and looked at them from above, and they stood in the gleaming torrent

of rain and yelped, asking to come in... She cried for joy, looking at them.

* * *

He searched for her in Gelendzhik, in Gagry, in Sochi. The day after his arrival in Sochi, he bathed in the sea in the morning, then shaved, put on clean linen, a snow-white tunic, had lunch at his hotel on the terrace of the restaurant, drank a bottle of champagne, had coffee with chartreuse, unhurriedly smoked a cigar. Returning to his room, he lay down on the couch and shot himself in the temples with two revolvers.

12th November 1937

A Ballad

ON THE EVE OF the big winter holidays the country house was always heated up like a bathhouse and presented a strange picture, for it consisted of spacious and low rooms, the doors of which were all wide open throughout – from the entrance hall to the divan room, situated at the very end of the house – and its red corners* gleamed with wax candles and lamps in front of the icons.

On the eve of those holidays, they washed the smooth oak floors – which soon dried out from the heating – everywhere in the house, and then carpeted them with clean rugs; they set out in their places in the very best order the furnishings that had been moved aside for the period of work, and in the corners, in front of the gilded and silver settings of the icons, they lit the lamps and the candles and extinguished all other lights. By this time the winter night was already darkly blue outside the windows and everyone dispersed to their own sleeping quarters. Complete quiet was then established in the house, a peace that was reverential and seemingly waiting for something, and which could not have been more in keeping with the sacred nocturnal appearance of the mournfully and touchingly illumined icons.

In the winter the wandering pilgrim Mashenka was sometimes a guest on the estate, grey-haired, withered and tiny, like a little girl. And it was just she alone in all the house who did not sleep on such nights: arriving in the hallway from the servants' quarters after supper and removing the felt boots from her little, woollen-stockinged feet, she would go noiselessly over the soft rugs through all those hot, mysteriously lit rooms, kneel down everywhere, cross herself, bow down before the icons, and then go back to the hallway, sit down on the black chest that had stood in it from time immemorial, and in a low voice recite prayers, psalms, or else simply talk to herself. It was thus I found out one day about this “beast of God, the Lord's wolf”: I heard Mashenka praying to him.

I could not sleep, and I went out late at night into the reception hall to go through to the divan room and there get something to read

from the bookcases. Mashenka did not hear me. She was sitting saying something in the dark hallway. Pausing, I listened closely. She was reciting psalms from memory.

“Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry,” she said, without any expression. “Hold not thy peace at my tears, for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner on the earth, like all my fathers were...”

“Say unto God: how terrible art thou in thy works!”

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty... Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder, the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under foot...”

At the last words she quietly but firmly raised her voice and pronounced them with conviction: trample upon the lion and the dragon. Then she paused and, after slowly sighing, spoke thus, as if conversing with somebody:

“For every beast of the forest is his, and the cattle upon a thousand hills...”

I peeped into the hallway: she was sitting on the chest with her little, woollen-stockinged feet hanging down from it evenly and holding her arms crossed at her breast. She was looking straight ahead, not seeing me. Then she raised her eyes to the ceiling and uttered distinctly:

“And thou, beast of God, the Lord’s wolf, pray for us to the Queen of Heaven.”

I approached and said softly:

“Mashenka, don’t be afraid, it’s me.”

She let her arms drop, stood up, gave a low bow:

“Hello, sir. No, sir, I’m not afraid. What have I got to be afraid of now? It was in my youth I was silly, afraid of everything. The dark-eyed demon troubled me.”

“Please sit down,” I said.

“No, sir,” she replied. “I’ll stand, sir.”

I put my hand on her bony little shoulder with its big collarbone, made her sit down, and then sat down next to her:

“Sit still, or else I’ll leave. Tell me, who was it you were praying to? Is there really such a holy one – the Lord’s wolf?”

Again she tried to get up. Again I restrained her:

“Ah, just look at you! And there you are, saying you’re not afraid of anything! I’m asking you: is it true that there’s such a holy one?”

She had a think. Then she replied seriously:

“There must be, sir. There is the beast Tiger-Euphrates,* after all. And if it’s painted in a church, there must be. I saw it myself, sir.”

“How do you mean, you saw it? Where? When?”

“Long ago, sir, in a time beyond memory. And where – I can’t even say: I remember one thing – we were travelling there three days. There was a village there, Krutiye Gory. I’m from far away myself – perhaps you’re so good as to have heard of the place: Ryazan – and those parts would be even further down, beyond the Don, and what a rough place it is there, you couldn’t even find the words. It was there our prince had his main village, his grandfather’s favourite – maybe a full thousand clay huts on bare mounds and slopes, and on the very highest hill, on its crown, above the Kamennaya River, the masters’ house, all bare too, three-tiered, and a yellow church with columns, and in that church this here God’s wolf: in the middle, then, there’s a cast-iron slab over the tomb of the prince it slaughtered, and on the right-hand pillar – the creature itself, this wolf, painted at its full height and size: it sits in a grey fur coat on a thick tail, and its whole body’s reaching up, with its front paws resting on the ground – and its eyes just boring into yours: a grey fur collar, long-haired and thick, a large head, sharp-eared, its fangs bared, furious, bloodshot eyes, and around its head a gold aureole, like saints and holy men have. It’s terrible just remembering such a wondrous marvel! It’s so lifelike sitting there, looking as if it’ll rush upon you at any moment!”

“Wait, Mashenka,” I said, “I don’t understand a thing: who painted this terrible wolf in the church and why? You say it slaughtered a prince – so then why is it holy, and why should it be over the prince’s tomb? And how did you find yourself there, in that dreadful village? Tell me everything clearly.”

And Mashenka began telling her story:

“I found myself there, sir, for the reason that I was then a serf girl, serving in our prince’s house. I was an orphan, my father, so they had it, was some sort of man passing through – a runaway, most likely – he seduced my mother unlawfully and disappeared God knows where, and mother, soon after giving birth to me, she passed away. Well, so the master took pity on me, took me from the menials into the house as soon as I hit thirteen, and put me at the beck and call of the young mistress, and for some reason I so took her fancy she wouldn’t let me

out of her favour for any time at all. And it was she that took me on the voyage with her when the young prince got the idea of taking a trip with her to his grandfather's legacy, to that there main village, to Krutiye Gory. That estate had been long neglected, deserted – the house had just stood boarded up, desolate, ever since the grandfather's death – well, and our young master and mistress thought they'd like to visit it. But what a terrible death the grandfather had died, we all knew about that from legend..."

In the reception hall something gave a slight crack, then fell with a little thud. Mashenka threw her legs down from the chest and ran into the hall: there was already a smell of burning there from the fallen candle. She put out the still-smoking candlewick, stamped out the smouldering that had started on the nap of a rug and, jumping up onto a chair, relit the candle from the other burning candles stuck into silver sockets beneath the icon, and fitted it into the one from which it had fallen: she turned the bright flame downwards, dripped the wax, which ran like hot honey, into the socket, then inserted it; deftly, with slender fingers, she removed the burnt deposit from the other candles, and jumped back down onto the floor.

"My, how cheerfully it's started gleaming," she said, crossing herself and gazing at the revived gold of the candle lights. "And what a smell of the church there is now!"

There was the smell of sweet fumes, the little lights trembled, from behind them the ancient face of the icon gazed from a blank circle in its silver setting. In the upper, clear panes of the windows, which were frosted over at the bottom with thick, grey rime, the night was black, and white nearby in the front garden were the ends of boughs burdened with layers of snow. Mashenka looked at them too, crossed herself once more and came back into the hallway.

"It's time for you to sleep, sir," she said, sitting down on the chest and stifling her yawns, covering her mouth with her withered little hand. "The night's grown menacing now."

"Why menacing?"

"Because it's mysterious, when only the chanticleer, the cockerel, as we call it, and the night crow, the owl, can stay awake. Then the Lord Himself listens to the earth, the most important stars begin to twinkle, the ice holes freeze in seas and rivers."

"And why is it you yourself don't sleep at night?"

“I sleep as much as is needed as well, sir. Is an old person meant to have a lot of sleep? Like a bird on a branch.”

“Well, go to bed, only finish telling me about that wolf.”

“But you know, it’s a dark business, long ago, sir – perhaps a ballad.”

“What’s that you said?”

“A ballad, sir. That’s what all our masters used to say, they liked reading those ballads. Sometimes I’d be listening and there’d be a tingling on my head:

Howls the cold wind o’er the mountain,
Whirls in white the pasture,
Comes foul weather and the blizzard,
Buried deep’s the highway*

“How beautiful, Lord!”

“What’s beautiful about it, Mashenka?”

“What’s beautiful about it, sir, is you don’t know what it is that’s beautiful. It’s scary.”

“In the old days, Mashenka, everything was scary.”

“How can I put it, sir? Perhaps it’s true that it was scary, but it all seems dear to me now. I mean, when was it? Just so long ago – all the kingdoms have gone, all the oaks have crumbled from old age, all the graves are level with the earth. Now this story too – among the menials it used to be told word for word, but is it the truth? The story was supposed to have happened still in the time of the great Tsarina,* and the reason why the prince was sitting in Krutiye Gory was supposed to be that she’d grown angry with him over something, had shut him up a long way away from her, and he’d become really fierce – most of all in the punishment of his serfs and in fornication. He was still very much in his prime, and as for his appearance, wonderfully handsome, and both among his menials and throughout his villages there wasn’t supposed to be a single girl he hadn’t demanded come to him, to his seraglio, for her wedding night. So he went and fell into the most terrible sin: he was even tempted by his own son’s new bride. The son was in St Petersburg in the military service of the Tsarina, and when he’d found himself his intended, he got permission for the marriage from his father and married, and so then he came with his new bride to pay his respects to

him, to that there Krutiye Gory. And the father goes and falls for her. Not for nothing, sir, is it sung about love:

Love's fires rage in ev'ry kingdom,
People love all round the globe...*

And however can it be a sin, when even an old man's thinking about his beloved, sighing over her? But here, after all, it was a completely different matter, here it was like it was his own daughter, and he'd stretched his grasping intentions to fornication."

"And so what happened?"

"Well, sir, the young prince, remarking this parental design, decided to flee in secret. He put the stablemen up to it, gave them all sorts of presents, ordered them to harness up a good quick troika for midnight, stole out from his own family home as soon as the old prince had fallen asleep, led out his young wife – and he was off. Only the old prince wasn't even thinking of sleeping: he'd already found everything out that evening from his informers and straight away gave chase. Night-time, an unspeakable frost, so there's even rings lying round the moon, snows in the steppe deeper than the height of a man, but it's all nothing to him: he flies along on his steed, sabres and pistols hanging all over him, beside his favourite whipper-in, and already he can see the troika with his son up ahead. He cries out like an eagle: stop, or I'll shoot! But they don't pay any heed there, they drive the troika on at full blazing speed. Then the old prince began shooting at the horses, and killed as he rode first the one outrunner, the right-hand one, as it ran, then the other, the left-hand one, and already he meant to lay low the shaft horse, but he glanced to the side and sees rushing at him across the snow, beneath the moon, a great, fantastic wolf with eyes red like fire and with an aureole around its head! The prince set about firing at it too, but it didn't even bat an eyelid: rushed at the prince like a whirlwind, jumped onto his chest – and in a single instant slashed through his Adam's apple with its fang."

"Ah, what horrors, Mashenka," I said. "Truly, a ballad!"

"It's a sin to mock, sir," she replied. "God's world is full of wonders."

"I don't disagree, Mashenka. Only it's strange, nonetheless, that this wolf has been painted right beside the tomb of the prince it slaughtered."

“It was painted, sir, as the prince himself wished; he was brought home still alive, and he had the time before dying to make his confession and take communion, and in his final moment he ordered that wolf to be painted in the church above his tomb – as a lesson, then, for all the prince’s descendants. Who could possibly have disobeyed him in those days? And the church was his domestic one too, built by him himself.”

3rd February 1938

Styopa

JUST BEFORE EVENING on the road to Chern the young merchant Krasilschikov was caught by a thunderstorm and torrential rain.

In a knee-length jacket with raised collar and a peaked cap pulled well down with streams running off it, he was riding quickly in a racing droshky, sitting astride right up against the dashboard with his feet in high boots pressed hard against the front axle, jerking with wet, frozen hands on the wet, slippery, leather reins, hurrying along a horse that was full of life anyway; to his left, beside the front wheel, which spun in a whole fountain of liquid mud, a brown pointer ran steadily with his long tongue hanging out.

At first Krasilschikov drove along the black-earth track beside the highway, then, when it turned into an unbroken grey, bubbling torrent, he turned onto the highway and began crunching over its little broken stones. Neither the surrounding fields nor the sky had been visible for a long time now through this flood, which smelt of the freshness of cucumbers and of phosphorus; before his eyes, like a sign of the end of the world, in blinding ruby fire, a sharp, nakedly branching flash of lightning kept searing sinuously down from above across a great wall of clouds, and with a crack above his head there would fly the sizzling tail, which then exploded in thunderclaps, extraordinary in their shattering power. Each time the horse would jerk its whole body forwards, pressing back its ears, and the dog was already at a gallop... Krasilschikov had grown up and studied in Moscow, had graduated from university there, but in the summer, when he came to his Tula estate, which resembled a rich dacha, he liked to feel himself a landowning merchant of peasant origin, he drank Lafitte and smoked from a gold cigarette case, yet wore blacked boots, a *kosovorotka* and *poddyovka*,* and was proud of his Russian character – and now, in the torrential rain and thunder, feeling the coldness of the water pouring from the peak of his cap and his nose, he was full of the energetic pleasure of rural life. This summer he often recalled the summer of the previous year, when, because of a liaison with a well-known actress,

he had moped the time away in Moscow right up until July, until her departure for Kislovodsk: idleness, the heat, the hot stench and green smoke from the asphalt glowing in iron vats in the upturned streets, lunches in the Troitsky basement tavern with actors from the Maly Theatre who were preparing to leave for the Caucasus too, then sitting in the Tremblé coffee house, and waiting for her in the evening at his apartment with the furniture under covers, with the chandeliers and pictures in muslin, with the smell of mothballs... The summer evenings in Moscow are unending, it gets dark only towards eleven, and there you are, waiting, waiting – and still she’s not there. Then finally the bell – and it’s her, in all her summer smartness, and her breathless voice: “Please do forgive me, I’ve been flat on my back all day with a headache, your tea rose has completely wilted, I was in such a hurry I took a fast cab, I’m terribly hungry...”

When the torrential rain and the shaking peals of thunder began to die down and move away and it began clearing up all around, up ahead, to the left of the highway, the familiar coaching inn of an old widower, the petty bourgeois Pronin, appeared. There were still twenty kilometres to go to town – I should wait a little, thought Krasilschikov, the horse is all in a lather, and there’s still no knowing what might happen again, look how black it is in that direction, and it’s still lighting up... At the crossing point to the inn he turned at a trot and reined the horse in beside the wooden porch.

“Granddad!” he gave a loud cry. “You’ve got a guest!”

But the windows in the log building under its rusty iron roof were dark, nobody responded to the cry. Krasilschikov wound the reins onto the dashboard, went up onto the porch after the wet and dirty dog which had leapt up onto it – it had a mad look, its eyes shone brightly and senselessly – pushed the cap back from his sweaty forehead, took off his jacket, heavy with water, threw it onto the handrail of the porch, and, remaining in just a *poddyovka* with a leather belt decorated in silver, he wiped his face, mottled with muddy splashes, and began cleaning the mud from the tops of his boots with his whip handle. The door into the lobby was open, but there was a feeling of the building being empty. Probably bringing in the livestock, he thought, and, straightening up, he looked into the fields: should he drive on? The evening air was still and damp, in different directions in the distance quails were making a cheerful noise in corn crops heavy with moisture, the rain had stopped,

but night was coming on, the sky and earth were darkening morosely, and a cloud beyond the highway, behind a low, inky ridge of woodland, was a still more dense and gloomy black, and a red flame was flaring up, widespread and ominous – and Krasilschikov strode into the lobby and groped in the darkness for the door into the living quarters. But they were dark and quiet, only somewhere on a wall was there a one-rouble clock ticking away. He slammed the door, turned to the left, groped for and opened another one, into the rest of the hut: again nobody, in the hot darkness the flies alone began a sleepy and discontented buzzing on the ceiling.

“As if they’d snuffed it!” he said out loud – and immediately heard the quick and melodious half-childish voice of Styopa, the owner’s daughter, who had slipped down from the plank bed in the darkness.

“Is that you, Vasil Lixeyich? I’m here by meself, the cook had a row with Daddy and went home, and Daddy took the workman and went away into town on business, and he’s unlikely to get back today... I was frightened to death by the storm, and then I hear someun’s driven up, got even more frightened... Hello, please forgive me...”

Krasilschikov struck a match and illuminated her black eyes and swarthy little face:

“Hello, you little idiot. I’m going into town as well, but you can see what’s happening, I dropped in to wait it out... And so you thought it was robbers that had driven up?”

The match had begun to burn out, but it was still possible to see that little face smiling in embarrassment, the coral necklace on the little neck, the small breasts under the yellow cotton dress. She was hardly more than half his height and seemed just a little girl.

“I’ll light the lamp straight away,” she began hurriedly, made even more embarrassed by Krasilschikov’s penetrating gaze, and rushed to the lamp above the table. “God Himself sent you, what would I have done here alone?” she said melodiously, rising onto tiptoe and awkwardly pulling the glass out of the indented grille of the lamp, out of its tin ring.

Krasilschikov lit another match, gazing at her stretching and curved little figure.

“Wait, don’t bother,” he suddenly said, throwing the match away, and took her by the waist. “Hang on, just turn around to me for a minute...”

She glanced at him over her shoulder in terror, dropped her arms and turned around. He drew her towards him – she did not try to break away, only threw her head back wildly in surprise. From above, he looked directly and firmly into her eyes through the twilight and laughed:

“Got even more frightened?”

“Vasil Lixeyich...” she mumbled imploringly, and pulled herself out of his arms.

“Wait. Don’t you like me, then? I mean, I know you’re always pleased when I drop in.”

“There’s no one on earth better than you,” she pronounced quietly and ardently.

“Well, you see...”

He gave her a long kiss on the lips, and his hands slid lower down.

“Vasil Lixeyich... for Christ’s sake... You’ve forgotten, your horse is still where it was by the porch... Daddy will be coming... Oh, don’t!”

Half an hour later he went out of the hut, led the horse off into the yard, stood it underneath an awning, took the bridle off, gave it some wet, mown grass from a cart standing in the middle of the yard, and returned, gazing at the tranquil stars in the clear sky. Weak, distant flashes of summer lightning were still glancing from different directions into the hot darkness of the quiet hut. She lay on the plank bed all coiled up, her head buried in her breast, having cried her fill of hot tears from horror, rapture and the suddenness of what had happened. He kissed her cheek, wet and salty with tears, lay down on his back and placed her head on his shoulder, holding a cigarette in his right hand. She lay quiet, silent, and with his left hand, as he smoked, he gently and absent-mindedly stroked her hair, which was tickling his chin... Then she immediately fell asleep. He lay gazing into the darkness, and grinned in self-satisfaction: “Daddy went away into town...” So much for going away! It’s not good, he’ll understand everything at once – such a dried-up and quick little old man in a little grey *poddyovka*, a snow-white beard, but whose thick eyebrows are still completely black, an extraordinarily lively gaze, talks incessantly when drunk, but sees straight through everything.

He lay sleepless until the time when the darkness of the hut began to lighten weakly in the middle, between the ceiling and the floor. Turning his head, he saw the east whitening with a greenish tinge outside the

windows, and in the twilight of the corner above the table he could already make out a large icon of a holy man in ecclesiastical vestments, with his hand raised in blessing and an inexorably dread gaze. He looked at her: she still lay curled up in the same way, her legs drawn up, everything forgotten in sleep! A sweet and pitiful little girl.

When it became fully light in the hut, and a cockerel began yelling in various different voices on the other side of the wall, he made a move to rise. She leapt up and, half-seated, sideways on, unbuttoned at the breast and with tangled hair, she stared at him with eyes that understood nothing.

“Styopa,” he said cautiously. “It’s time I was off.”

“You’re going already?” she whispered senselessly.

And suddenly she came to and, arms crossed, struck herself on the breast with her hands:

“And where are you going? How will I get along without you now? What am I to do now?”

“Styopa, I’ll come back again soon...”

“But Daddy will be at home, won’t he? – how ever will I see you? I’d come to the wood on the other side of the highway, but how can I get out of the house?”

Clenching his teeth, he toppled her onto her back. She threw her arms out wide and exclaimed in sweet despair, as though about to die: “Ah!”

Afterwards he stood before the plank bed, already wearing his *poddyovka* and his cap, with his knout in his hand and with his back to the windows, to the dense lustre of the sun, which had just appeared, while she knelt on the bed and, sobbing and opening her mouth wide in a childish and unattractive way, articulated jerkily:

“Vasil Lixeyich... for Christ’s sake... for the sake of the King of Heaven Himself, take me in marriage! I’ll be your very meanest slave! I’ll sleep by your doorstep – take me! I’d leave and come to you as I am, but who’ll let me do it like this! Vasil Lixeyich...”

“Be quiet,” Krasilschikov said sternly. “In a few days’ time I’ll come and see your father and tell him I’m marrying you. Do you hear?”

She sat down on her legs, breaking off her sobbing immediately, and obtusely opened wide her wet, radiant eyes:

“Is that true?”

“Of course it’s true.”

“I already turned sixteen at Epiphany,” she said hurriedly.

“Well then, so in six months’ time you can get married too...”

On returning home, he began preparations at once, and towards evening left for the railway in a troika. Two days later he was already in Kislovodsk.

5th October 1938