

OLESYA

by

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OLESYA

I

Yarmola the woodman—my servant, cook, and hunting companion—came into the room, bending under a bundle of wood, crashed it down on the floor, and breathed upon his frozen fingers to warm them up.

"Some wind outside, master," he said, squatting in front of the stove-door. "I must heal the stove well. May I use your lighter?"

"So we shan't go hare-shooting tomorrow, eh? What do you think, Yarmola?"

"No chance of that—hear how it goes on? The hare are lying low now. You won't see a single track tomorrow."

I chanced to spend six long months in Perebrod, a little God-forsaken village in the Volhynian borderland of Polesye, where game-shooting was my sole occupation and pastime. To be frank, I did not imagine, when I was offered to go to the country, that it would be so unbearably dull. Indeed, I was quite pleased to go. "Polesye, an out-of-the-way corner—nature at its best—simple manners—

primitive characters," I said to myself on the train. "People I know absolutely nothing about, with strange customs and peculiar speech—and a wealth of poetic legends and traditions and songs, no doubt." You see (having started I might as well go all the way), by then I had had a short story published in a small newspaper, describing two murders and a suicide, and I knew at least in theory that a writer should study customs.

However, either because the Perebrod peasants were distinguished by a special, obstinate sort of unsociability, or because I did not know how to go about it, my relations with them never went beyond the fact that, on seeing me from a distance, they would take off their caps and, as they came alongside, would mutter sullenly "Speedjue," which was supposed to mean "God speed you." And when I attempted to get into conversation with them they would stare at me in surprise, refusing to understand the simplest questions I asked and trying again and again to kiss my hands, an old custom dating from the time of Polish serfdom.

Before long I had read the few books I had with me. Out of boredom I tried—though at first the idea did not appeal to me—to make the acquaintance of the local intellectuals, to wit: a Polish priest living ten miles from my place, the organist assigned to him, the local uryadnik [Rural police-officer.—Tr.] and a clerk of the neighbouring estate, a retired non-commissioned officer; but nothing came of it.

Then I had a go at doctoring the Perebrod people. I had at my disposal castor oil, carbolic acid, boric acid, and iodine. But, apart from the scantiness of my knowledge, I was handicapped by the complete impossibility of making any diagnosis, for my patients all had one and the same complaint: "It hurts inside" and "I can't eat or drink."

Along comes, say, an old woman. Embarrassed, she wipes her nose with her right forefinger, takes a couple of eggs from her bosom—I catch a glimpse of her brown skin—and puts them on my desk. Then she tries to get hold of my hands in order to stamp a kiss upon them. I pull them back and admonish her, "Stop it, Grandmother, don't! I'm not a priest, that sort of thing isn't for me. What's ailing you?"

"It hurts inside, master, right inside me—I can't eat or drink."

"When did that come?"

"How should I know?" she asks me in her turn. "It burns and burns. I can't eat or drink."

And no matter how hard I try I fail to bring out any more specific symptoms of her illness.

"Don't you bother," the retired non-com, suggested one day, "they'll get over it by themselves. Like dogs do. You know, I only use one medicine—salammoniac. A muzhik comes along. 'What d'you want?' I ask him. 'I'm ill,' he says. So I poke up a bottle of ammonia to his nose. 'Smell this!' says I. And smell he does. 'Smell some more—harder!' I says. He smells again. 'Feeling better?' I says. 'A bit better, I s'pose,' he says. 'Well, run along in peace,' says I."

Besides, that hand-kissing revolted me—some of my patients even threw themselves at my feet and tried to osculate my boots. What urged them to do so was not an impulse of a grateful heart but a fulsome habit inculcated by centuries of slavery and violence. I looked with sheer amazement on the retired non-com, and the uryadnik, who thrust their huge red paws into the villagers' lips with unruffled gravity.

I was left no choice but game-shooting. But late in January the weather grew so bad as to make even that impossible. A violent wind blew every day, and during the night a hard, icy crust would form on the snow, over which the hare would scamper without leaving any tracks. Shut in and listening to the howling wind, I was bored to death. And that is why I took up so eagerly the innocent pastime of teaching Yarmola to read and write.

It began in rather an unusual way. One day as I was writing a letter I felt that there was someone standing behind me. I turned and saw Yarmola, who had walked up, noiselessly as always, in his soft bast shoes.

"What is it, Yarmola?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm just looking. I wish I could write like you do. No, no, I didn't mean like you," he hastened to explain in abashment as he saw me smile. "I meant just my name."

"What for?" I asked in surprise. I ought to note here that Yarmola was considered the poorest and laziest peasant in all Perebrod; he spent his woodman's wages and whatever his crops brought him on drink; his team of oxen was the worst in the neighbourhood. It seemed to me that he could have no need for literacy. Doubtfully I asked him again, "What do you want to know how to write your name for?"

"You see, master," he replied, in an exceedingly bland tone, "nobody in this village can read or write. When it comes to signing some paper, or seeing to some business in the volost, [Here: a rural district seat.—Tr.] there's nobody can do it. The elder sets the seal, but he doesn't know what the paper says. So it would be lucky for everybody if someone could sign his name."

Yarmola was a notorious poacher, a happy-go-lucky tramp whose opinion the villagers would never have thought of taking into account; yet somehow his solicitude for the public weal of his native village moved me. I offered to give him lessons. But what a hard job it was trying to teach him to read and write! He knew every path in his forest, with nearly every tree in it, he knew his way about anywhere by day or night, and could tell by their tracks all the wolves and hares and foxes in the neighbourhood; but he could not for the life of him understand why τ and a , for example, make up ma . He would sit for ten minutes or more brooding painfully over a problem like that, with the greatest mental strain showing in his deep-set black eyes and his dark lean face, smothered in the coarse black beard and large moustache.

"Come on, Yarmola—say ma . Just say ma ," I would urge him. "Don't stare at the paper, look at me—that's it. Now say ma ."

Yarmola would draw a deep sigh, put the pointer on the table, and say with sad determination, "No, I can't."

"But why not? It's so easy. Simply say ma as I do." "No, I can't, master. I forget."

Every method, every comparison was defeated by his monstrous dullness. But his thirst for enlightenment did not diminish.

"If only I could sign my name!" he would coax me. "I ask no more. Just my name—Yarmola Popruzhuk—and nothing else."

I finally gave up the idea of teaching him to read and write intelligently, and began to teach him to sign mechanically. To my great surprise the new method proved easier for him, so that by the end of the second month he had almost taken

the hurdle of writing his surname. As to his first name, we decided to leave it out altogether to lighten his task.

In the evenings, when he had finished heating the stoves, Yarmola would wait impatiently for me to call him.

"Well, Yarmola, let's study," I would say.

He would sidle up to the table, prop his elbows on it, push the pen between his black, stiff, horny fingers, and ask me with raised eyebrows, "Shall I start?"

"Yes."

He would trace the first letter, P—we called it "a stick with a loop"—rather confidently, then look up, a question on his face.

"Why did you stop? Have you forgotten?"

"Yes." He would shake his head in vexation.

"What a queer one you are! All right put down a wheel."

"That's it—a wheel! Now I know!" He would brighten and carefully draw a figure very much like the Caspian Sea in outline. Then he would admire his work for a while in silence, cocking his head to the left, then again to the right, and screwing up his eyes.

"What's the matter? Go on."

"Wait a bit, master, wait just a moment."

We would ponder for two minutes or so, [and then ask timidly, "It's like the first one, ain't it?"]

"Yes. Come on."

In this manner we gradually made our way to K, the last letter, which we described as "a stick with a crook and a tail."

"You know, master," he said sometimes, looking with proud, loving eyes at his finished job, "if I studied another five or six months I'd be pretty good at it. What do you say?"

II

Yarmola squatted in front of the stove, stirring the charcoal inside, while I walked up and down in my room. Of the twelve rooms of the big landlord's mansion, I occupied only one, the former "sofa room." The other rooms were locked, and mould gathered on the antique furniture upholstered with damask, the outlandish bronze fixtures, and the eighteenth-century portraits.

Outside the mansion, the wind was raging like a shivering old devil, its roar punctuated by groans, screams, and wild laughter. Towards nightfall the snowstorm grew worse. Someone seemed to be hurling handfuls of fine, dry snow against the panes. The nearby forest murmured and hummed with an unceasing, hidden menace.

The wind would get into the empty rooms and drone in chimneys, and then the old tumbledown house, shaky, and draughty, would suddenly come alive with strange sounds, to which I listened in involuntary alarm. There would be a sigh in the white hall—a deep, broken, mournful sigh. Then the rotten dry floor-boards would give way and creak under someone's heavy footsteps. The next moment I would fancy that in the passage adjoining my room someone was cautiously but

doggedly pushing the door-knob, and then he in a sudden fury would start to race about the house, angrily shaking all the shutters and doors, or crawling into the chimney and whining there with a dull, never-ending plaint rising, sometimes to a pitiful scream and then dropping to a beast's snarl. At times, coming from nowhere, the terrible visitor would burst into my own room, rush suddenly down my spine in a cold breath, and shake the flame of the lamp shining dimly under a green paper shade with a scorched top.

I was overcome by a strange, uncertain anxiety. "Here I am," I thought, "sitting on a dark, stormy winter night in a ramshackle house, in a village lost in woods and snow-drifts, hundreds of miles from town life, society, women's laughter, human conversation." And I had a feeling that the stormy night would drag on for years and decades, till my death, and the wind would roar outside just as dismally, the lamp under the shabby green shade would burn just as dimly. I would pace my room just as uneasily, and the silent, brooding Yarmola would squat in front of the stove in the same way, a strange being alien to me and indifferent to everything on earth: to the fact that his family had nothing to eat, to the raging wind, to my uncertain, corroding melancholy.

Suddenly I longed to have the oppressive silence broken by some semblance of a human voice, and so I asked, "Where do you think this horrible wind comes from, Yarmola?"

"The wind?" Yarmola looked up lazily. "Why, don't you know, master?"

"Of course not. How could I know such a thing?"

"Don't you, really!" Yarmola was roused. "I'll tell you," he went on, a shade mysteriously. "Either a witch has been born, or a wizard's making merry."

I pounced eagerly on this. "Who knows," I thought, "perhaps I may worm out of him some interesting story of magic, hidden treasures, or werewolves."

"Have you got any witches here in Polesye?" I asked.

"I don't know. There might be," he replied with his former indifference, and bent over the stove-door again. "Old folk say there were some once. But perhaps—that ain't true."

I was disappointed. I knew how stubbornly untalkative Yarmola was, and I lost all hope of drawing anything else out of him on that interesting subject. To my surprise, however, he suddenly began to speak with his lazy carelessness, as if he were talking to the roaring stove and not to me.

"We had a witch here about five years ago. But the lads drove her away."

"Where to?"

"Why, to the forest, of course. Where else? And they pulled down her house, they did, so that not a chip would be left of her accursed nest. They took her beyond the cherry orchards and kicked her out."

"But why did they treat her like that?"

"She did a lot of harm: she quarrelled with everybody, cast evil spells on houses, plaited the stalks in the sheaves. Once she asked a young wife for a zloty. [Fifteen kopeks.—Tr.] The young woman says, 'I haven't got one, lay off.' 'All right!' says the witch, 'some day you'll be sorry you refused me a zloty.' And what do you think happened, master? The woman's baby fell ill just after that. It was ill for a long time, and then it died altogether. That was when the lads kicked out the witch, blast her eyes!"

"And where is the witch now?" I went on to ask.

"The witch?" he echoed slowly, as he was wont to. "How should I know?"

"Did she leave no kin here?"

"No, she didn't. She was a stranger—a Katsap, [[A Ukrainian nickname for a Russian.—Tr.](#)] or a Gypsy. I was a boy when she came. She had a little lass with her: her daughter or granddaughter. The lads drove both of them away."

"Does nobody go to her any longer—to have his fortune told or ask for some potion?"

"The womenfolk do," he drawled contemptuously.

"Oh, so they know where she lives?"

"I don't know. People say she lives somewhere near Devil's Nook. You know that marsh beyond Irinovo Road? That's where she's living, the accursed hag!"

The news of a witch only a few miles away—a real, live Polesye witch—thrilled and excited me.

"I say, Yarmola, how could I meet her—the witch, I mean?" I asked.

"Bah!" He spat out indignantly. "A fine acquaintance she'd make."

"I mean to see her, fine or not. I'll go to her place as soon as it gets a bit warmer. You'll show me the way, won't you?"

Yarmola was so struck by my last words that he jumped to his feet.

"Me?" he cried indignantly. "Not for all the gold! I won't go, no matter what."

"Nonsense—of course you will."

"No, master, I won't, not for the world. Me go?" he cried again, overcome by a fresh access of anger, "Me go to a witch's nest? God forbid! And I wouldn't advise you to go either, master."

"As you like, but I'll go just the same. I'm very curious to take a look at her."

"There's nothing curious about it," Yarmola grumbled, shutting the stove-door with an angry bang.

An hour later, when Yarmola had had his tea in the dark passage and was about to go home, I asked, "What's the witch's name?"

"Manuilikha," he replied gruffly.

Although he never showed it I had a feeling that he had become strongly attached to me. That was due to our common passion for game-shooting, to my simple manner towards him, to the help which I gave to his eternally-starving family once in a while, but above all to the fact that I was the only person who never censured him for his addiction to drink, something which he hated. That was why my determination to meet the witch put him in an exceedingly bad temper, which he indicated by sniffing hard, and by giving his dog Ryabchik a vicious kick in the ribs when he walked out on to the porch. Ryabchik gave a blood-curdling screech and darted aside, but then immediately ran whimpering after Yarmola.

III

About three days later it grew warmer. One morning Yarmola came into my room very early. "I'd better clean the guns, master," he said casually.

"What's up?" I asked, stretching myself under the sheets.

"The hare have run about last night—there's a lot of tracks. Shall we have a go at them?"

Yarmola was plainly eager to go to the woods but he tried to hide his hunter's longing by a show of indifference. In fact, his carbine was standing already in the hall, a carbine that had never missed a single snipe, although it was adorned with several tin patches round the lock where rust and powder gases had eaten through the metal.

We had scarcely walked into the forest when we came on a hare track: two footprints side by side, and another two behind, following each other. The hare had come out on to the road, run a few hundred yards along it, and then taken a tremendous leap into a clump of young pine-trees.

"We'll now close in on it," said Yarmola. "It'll be lying doggo now. Master, you go—" he paused to decide by signs he alone knew which way to send me. "You go on to the old pot-house, and I'll come in from Zamlin. As soon as the dog starts it I'll halloo to you."

He disappeared at once, plunging into the dense shrubbery. I strained my ears, but not a sound betrayed his poacher's movement, not a twig snapped under his feet.

I sauntered to the old pot-house, a deserted ramshackle hut, and halted on the fringe of the forest, under a tall tree with a straight bare trunk. It was still as it can be only in a forest on a windless winter day. The heavy lumps of snow weighing down the boughs gave them a wonderful, festive appearance. At times a twig broke off a tree-top, and I could very distinctly hear it strike the branches with a light crackle as it fell. The snow showed pink in the sun and blue in the shade. I was overwhelmed by the quiet magic of that solemn, cold silence, and I thought I could feel Time slipping noiselessly past me.

Suddenly Ryabchik's bark rang out far away in the thicket; it was the distinctive bark of a dog chasing game—a high-pitched, nervous sound close to yelping. Immediately afterwards I heard Yarmola's voice shouting fiercely to the dog, "Oo-bee! Oo-bee!" The first syllable came in a sharp, long-drawn-out falsetto, and the second in a jerky boom. I did not learn until much later that this hunter's call of Polesye was derived from oobeevat. [To kill.—Tr.]

Judging by the direction of the barking, I thought the dog must be chasing the hare on my left, and so I ran across the glade to intercept it. But I had not run more than twenty yards when a big grey hare darted out from behind a stump; as if in no hurry to escape, its long ears flat against its head, it crossed the road with a couple of long bounds and disappeared in the undergrowth. Ryabchik shot out on the hare's heels. As he saw me he wagged his tail slightly, snatched up a few mouthfuls of snow, and resumed the chase. All of a sudden Yarmola glided out of the thicket. "Why didn't you cut it off, master?" he shouted, and clicked his tongue reproachfully.

"But I was so far from it, a couple of hundred feet or more."

My obvious consternation softened him. "Never mind. It won't get away. Go on to Irinovo Road—it'll come out there in no time."

I headed for the road, and about two minutes later I again heard the dog chasing the game not far from where I was. Gripped by a sportsman's excitement, I ran with my gun at the ready, breaking through the dense brushwood, and heedless of the cruel blows the twigs dealt me. I ran like that for a while, and I was almost out of breath when the dog stopped barking. I slackened my pace. I imagined that if I kept going straight ahead I was sure to meet Yarmola by Irinovo Road. Soon, however,

I realized that while running and by-passing shrubs and stumps without a thought of direction I had lost my way. Then I hailed Yarmola. But he did not call back.

Mechanically I walked on. Little by little the forest thinned, and the ground grew marshy. My footprints on the snow darkened fast and filled with water. Several times I was bogged knee-deep. I had to jump from mound to mound; my feet sank in the brownish moss as in a soft rug.

Before long I came out of the brushwood. Ahead of me was a large, round snow-covered marsh with tussocks showing here and there. The white walls of a hut showed between the trees at the other end of the marsh. "It must be the Irinovo woodman's house," I thought. "I'd better walk over and ask my way."

But it was not so easy to reach the hut. Every moment I was bogged down afresh. My high boots were full of water and squelched loudly at every step; it became more and more difficult to drag them along.

At last I was across the marsh and I climbed up on a small hummock that gave me a good view of the hut. It was rather like a fairy-tale witch's hut. It stood high above the ground, being built on piles, probably because the Irinovo Woods were always flooded in spring. But, sagging with old age, it had a lame and mournful look. A few window-panes were missing; they had been replaced by dirty rags bellying outwards.

I pushed the knob and opened the door. It was very dark inside; violet circles were floating before my eyes because I had been looking at the snow for a long time, and I was slow in making out whether anyone was in.

"Is anybody in, good people?" I asked aloud.

Something stirred near the stove. I crossed to it and saw an old woman sitting on the floor. A huge pile of chicken feathers rose in front of her. She picked up the feathers one by one, stripped them of the barbs, and put them down in a basket, throwing the shafts on the floor.

"Why, this must be Manuilikha, the Irinovo witch." The thought flashed upon me as soon as I had had a good look at the old woman. She was quite like a folklore Baba-Yaga*: gaunt, hollow cheeks and a long, pointed chin which almost touched the great hooked nose; her sunken toothless mouth moved incessantly, as if chewing; her bulging eyes, once blue, were faded and cold, and with their short red eyelids looked like the eyes of a strange bird of ill omen.

[Witch.—Tr.]

"Good morning, Grandmother!" I said in as friendly a tone as I could muster. "Would you be Manuilikha by any chance?"

There was a rattling and wheezing in the old woman's chest; from her toothless, mumbling mouth came queer sounds like the croaking of a panting old crow, sounds that at times broke into a husky falsetto.

"Perhaps good people did call me Manuilikha once. But now I've got neither name nor fame. Just what do you want?" Her manner was unfriendly, and she did not stop her monotonous work.

"I've lost my way, Granny. Could I have some milk?"

"No milk here," she snapped. "Too many people like you passing here. Can't feed the whole lot."

"You aren't very hospitable, Granny, I must say."

"That's true, sir, I'm not. No meals served here. You may sit down if you're tired, I don't mind. You know the saying: 'Come and sit by our house and hear our church bells ringing, and as for dinner we'd rather come to you.' That's that."

These figures of speech at once convinced me that the old woman did not hail from those parts, where no one liked or appreciated the slashing language, seasoned with rare words, which the eloquent Northerner is so fond of using. Meanwhile the old woman mechanically continued her work, still muttering to herself something that became less and less audible. I could only catch occasional disconnected sentences: "That's Granny Manuilikha for you— But nobody knows who he is— I'm getting on in years now— Fidgeting and chirring and chattering like a regular magpie—"

I listened to her for a while, and suddenly the idea that sitting in front of me was a mad woman both scared and disgusted me.

Still I had a look round. Most of the space was taken up by a huge chipped stove. There were no icons in the front corner. Instead of the usual pictures of green-moustached hunters with violet dogs and the portraits of generals whom no one knew, the walls were hung with tufts of dried herbs, bunches of wrinkled roots, and kitchen ware. I could spy no owl or black cat, but two grave speckled starlings were staring down at me from the stove with an astonished and suspicious air.

"Can I at least have a drink of water, Granny?" I asked, raising my voice.

"There it is, in the bucket," she said.

The water tasted marshy. I thanked the old woman— she took not the slightest notice of it—and asked her how I could find my way to the road.

She raised her head, gazed fixedly at me with her cold bird's eyes, and muttered hurriedly, "Go on. Go your way, young man. You have no business here. A guest is welcome when bidden. Go, sir."

Indeed, I had no choice left but to go. But it occurred to me to make a last attempt to soften the stern old woman a little. I took a brand-new silver coin from my pocket and held it out to her. My guess proved right; at the sight of money her eyes opened wider, and she stretched out her crooked, knotty, trembling fingers to take the coin.

"Oh, no, Grandmother Manuilikha, you can't have it for nothing," I teased her, hiding the coin. "First tell me my fortune."

The witch's brown wrinkled face puckered into a scowl. She was apparently wavering while looking doubtfully at my fist closed upon the coin. But greed took the upper hand.

"All right, come along," she mumbled, rising from the floor with an effort. "I don't tell anybody's fortune nowadays, sonny. I've forgotten how to. I'm too old now, can't see anything. I'll do it just to please you."

Holding on to the wall, her bent form shaking at every step, she went up to the table, got out a pack of brown cards pulpy with long use, and shuffled them.

"Cut 'em with your left hand—the one close to your heart," she said, pushing the pack across to me.

She spat on her fingers and began to lay out the cards. The cards dropped on the table with a thud, as if they were made of dough, and formed an octagonal star. When the last card lay on a king face downwards, Manuilikha held out her palm.

"Cross it with silver, good sir. You'll be happy, you'll be rich," she whined in the cajoling manner of a begging Gypsy.

I slipped the coin into her palm. She hid it behind her cheek with apish alacrity. "You'll gain a great deal through a long journey," she began in a habitual patter. "You'll meet a queen of diamonds, and you'll have a pleasant talk in an important house. Before long you'll get unexpected news from the king of clubs. It falls out that you'll have some trouble, then some little money. You'll be in a large company, you'll be drunk. Not that you'll be very drunk, but still there's a carouse in store for you. Yours will be a long life. If you don't die at sixty-seven—"

She paused, and raised her head, as if listening. I pricked up my ears. A woman's voice, fresh, vibrant and strong, was singing a song as it drew near the hut. I recognized the lyric of a melodious Ukrainian song:

*Is it just a bough in bloom
Bends the rose so red?
Is it drowsiness that weighs,
Weighs my weary head?*

"Now please go, sonny," Manuilikha said, fidgeting uneasily and pushing me away from the table. "You have no business hanging about strangers' homes. Go where you were going."

She even caught hold of my sleeve and started to pull me towards the door. There was a hunted look on her face.

Suddenly the song broke off close by the hut; the iron knob clicked, the door flew open, and a tall, laughing girl appeared in the doorway. With both her hands she was carefully holding up her striped apron, from which three tiny birds' heads stuck up, with red necks and black beady eyes.

"Look at these finches, Granny, they've been hanging on to me again," she cried, laughing heartily. "See how funny they are. They're starved. And I had no bread with me."

Then she saw me and stopped speaking at once, blushing deeply. Her black eyebrows gathered into a resentful frown, and she looked questioningly at Manuilikha.

"The gentleman here—he's asking his way," the old woman explained. "Well, sir," she added, turning to me with determination, "you've been wasting your time more'n enough. You had your drink of water and your bit of talk, now don't overstay your welcome. We're no company for you."

"Look here, my beauty," I said to the girl. "Won't you show me the way to Irinovo Road? I don't think I can ever get out of your marsh by myself."

She was apparently impressed by my gently pleading tone. Carefully she put down her finches beside the starlings, threw on the bench the coat she had taken off, and walked silently out.

I followed her.

"Are your birds tame?" I asked as I overtook her.

"Yes," she replied curtly, without glancing at me. "Well, look," she said, stopping by the wattle-fence. "See that path over there, between those pines?"

"Yes."

"Take it and go straight ahead. When you get to an oak log, turn left. Keep going right on through the forest. That'll bring you to Irinovo Road."

While she was pointing out the way with her outstretched right arm, I could not help admiring her beauty. She was in no way like the local wenches, who wore

their kerchiefs in an ugly manner, covering their foreheads from above and their chins and mouths from below, and whose faces looked so monotonously frightened. The girl beside me, a tall brunette between twenty and twenty-five, had an easy, graceful bearing. A wide white blouse covered her young, shapely bosom. Once you had seen the unusual beauty of her face, you could never forget it; but it was difficult to describe that beauty even when you had got used to it. Its charm lay in those large, shining dark eyes, to which the eyebrows, fine and broken in the middle, gave an elusive quality of archness, imperiousness and naiveté, in her olive skin touched with pink, in the wilful curve of her lips.

"Aren't you afraid of living by yourselves in these wild parts?" I asked, halting by the fence.

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"Why should we be? Wolves never come this way."

"I didn't mean only wolves. You might be snowed up, or a fire might break out. Lots of things might happen. You're all alone here, and nobody'd have a chance to help you."

"So much the better!" She made a scornful gesture. "If only they'd left Grandmother and me alone for good, but—"

"But what?"

"Too much knowledge makes the head bald, you know," she snapped. "And who would you be?" she asked uneasily.

I realized that both the old woman and the girl feared some sort of persecution from the authorities, and I hastened to reassure her.

"Please don't worry. I'm not an uryadnik, clerk, or exciseman—in short I've nothing to do with the authorities."

"You haven't?"

"I give you my word of honour. Believe me, I'm a total stranger here. I've come to stay for a few months and then I'll go back. I shan't tell anybody I was here and saw you, if you don't want me to. Do you trust me?"

Her face brightened a little.

"Well, if you aren't lying, you must be speaking the truth. But tell me, had you heard anything about us before, or did you drop in by chance?"

"I really don't know what to say. I did hear about you, I own, and I even meant to look in at your place some day, but today I got here by chance—lost my way. Now I'd like to know why you're afraid of people. What harm are they doing you?"

She scrutinized me with distrust. But I had a clear conscience, and I withstood her gaze without quailing. Then she spoke with mounting emotion.

"We're having a hard time because of them. Ordinary people are not so bad, but the officials— They always must have some gift—the uryadnik and the stanovoi* and all the others. And that's not enough: they call Grandmother a 'witch,' a 'she-devil,' a 'jail-bird.' Oh, well, what's the use of talking about it!"

"Do they ever molest you?" The indiscreet question came before I knew it.

She tossed up her head with haughty assurance, and there was a flicker of malicious triumph in her narrowed eyes.

"No. Once a land surveyor had a try at me. He wanted to make love, see? Well, I'm sure he still remembers the love I gave him."

These ironical but peculiarly proud words rang with so much crude independence that I could not but think, "Yes, you can see she's grown up in a wild Polesye forest—it certainly isn't safe to trifle with her."

"We don't molest anybody, do we?" she went on, with increasing confidence in me. "Why, we don't even ask for company. I only go to town once a year to buy some soap and salt. And some tea for Granny—she loves it. I might as well see nobody at all, if it weren't for that."

"I see you and your Granny aren't exactly hospitable. But may I drop in for a moment some day?"

She laughed, and how strangely, how unexpectedly her beautiful face changed! Not a trace of the previous sternness was left on it: of a sudden it had become bright and bashful as a child's.

"But why should you? Granny and I are dull company. You may drop in, though, if you really are a good man. Only I'll tell you what: if you ever come our way, better leave your gun behind."

"Are you afraid?"

[District police commissioner.—Tr.]

"What's there to be afraid of? I'm not afraid of anything." Again her voice rang with confidence in her own strength. "I just don't like the whole business. Why kill birds or, say, hares? They do nobody any harm, and they want to live as much as you and I do I love them— they're so small and silly. Well, I must say goodbye now," she added hastily. "Sorry, I don't know your name. I'm afraid Granny will scold me."

With a light, swift movement she ran back to the hut, her head bent and her hands holding her hair, tousled by the wind.

"Wait a minute!" I shouted. "What's your name? Let's introduce ourselves properly."

She stopped for a second and turned round.

"My name is Alyona. Here they call me Olesya."

I shouldered my gun and set out in the direction she had indicated. I climbed a hillock from which a narrow, hardly visible forest path started, and looked back. Olesya's red skirt, waving slightly in the wind, could still be seen on the steps, a bright spot set off by the even background of dazzling white snow.

Yarmola came home an hour after me. True to his habitual distaste for idle talk, he did not ask me a single question about how or where I had lost my way. He only said, as if casually, "I've got that hare, over in the kitchen. Shall I roast it, or are you going to send it to somebody?"

"I'm sure you don't know where I've been today, Yarmola," I said, anticipating surprise.

"Don't I?" he growled. "Called on the witches, of course."

"How did you find that out?"

"It was easy enough. You didn't answer my call, so I walked to your track. You shouldn't do things like that, master!" he added, with reproachful annoyance. "It's a sin!"

That year spring came early and, as always happens in Polesye, with unexpected abruptness. Turbulent, glittering brown rivulets ran down the village streets, frothing angrily round the stones in their way and whirling chips and goose-down; enormous pools mirrored the blue sky with round white clouds that seemed to revolve as they sailed across it; tinkling drops of water fell in a rush from the roofs. The sparrows clustering on the roadside willows twittered so excitedly that they drowned all other sounds. Everywhere you could feel the joyous, hurried stir of rousing life.

The snow melted away, except in hollows and shaded copses, where it lingered in dirty, sponge-like patches. The thaw laid bare the warm, damp earth that had had a good winter's rest and was full of fresh sap, of a renewed craving for motherhood. A light vapour wreathed above the black fields, filling the air with the smell of thawed earth, that fresh, subtle, heady smell of spring which you distinguish among hundreds of other smells even in town. I felt as if a spring-time sadness, sweet and delicate, full of wistful expectations and vague hopes, flowed into my soul along with that fragrance—a poetical melancholy that makes every woman seem pretty and is always seasoned with uncertain regrets of past springs. The nights had become warmer, and Nature's invisible creative labour could be sensed going on hastily in the intense, humid darkness.

Olesya's image never left my mind in those spring days. When alone, I liked to lie down, shut my eyes for better concentration, and continuously call up in my imagination her face, now stern or arch, then beaming with a tender smile, her young body, which had grown up in the freedom of the old forest to be as slender and strong as a young fir-tree, her fresh voice with its unexpectedly low, velvety notes. "There is," I thought, "something noble—in the best meaning of that rather commonplace word—a sort of inborn, elegant moderation about every movement she makes, every word she speaks." What drew me to Olesya was also the halo of mystery that surrounded her, the superstitious fame of a witch living in the forest thicket, in the midst of a marsh, and particularly that proud confidence in her own strength which sounded in the few words she had spoken to me.

No wonder that as soon as the forest paths dried a little I set out for the witch's hut. In case I had to appease the querulous old woman, I took with me a half pound of tea and a few handfuls of lump sugar.

I found both women in. Manuilikha was fussing about the blazing stove, and Olesya was spinning flax, sitting on a very high bench. As I entered with a slight noise she turned round, the thread broke in her hands, and the spindle rolled over the floor.

The old woman eyed me for a while with angry attention, shielding her puckered face with her palm from the heat of the stove.

"Good day, Granny!" I said in a loud, cheerful voice. "I suppose you don't recognize me? Remember I looked in last month to ask my way? And you told my fortune, remember?"

"I don't remember anything, sir," she mumbled, shaking her head with displeasure, "I'm sure I don't. And I can't understand what you may want here. We're no company for you, are we? We're plain, ignorant people. You have no business with us. The woods are large enough—you can take your walks elsewhere, and that's that."

Flabbergasted by her ungracious welcome, I was at a loss, feeling silly and not knowing whether to take her rudeness as a joke, or flare up, or turn and go without

saying a word. I turned helplessly to Olesya. She smiled slightly, with a touch of good-humoured mockery, rose from her spinning-wheel, and walked over to the old woman.

"Don't be afraid, Granny," she said in a conciliatory tone. "He's all right, he won't do us any harm. Please sit down," she added, pointing to the bench in the front corner and no longer heeding the old woman's grumbling.

Encouraged by her attention, I thought of using the most effective means.

"How unfriendly you are, Granny! You start scolding a visitor the moment he walks in. And I thought I'd bring you a present." I took the parcels out of my bag.

Manuilikha glanced at the parcels and at once turned away to the stove.

"I don't want your presents," she grumbled, fiercely raking the coals with the poker. "I know the worth of the likes of you. First they win your favour by a lot of blarney, then— What have you got in that little bag?" she asked suddenly, turning round to me.

I handed her the tea and sugar. This had a softening effect upon her, and although she went on grumbling the tone was not so uncompromising as before. Olesya went back to her spinning, and I placed myself beside her on a low, short, and very rickety bench. With her left hand she would rapidly twist the white, silky fibre, while her right hand with a light whirr spun the spindle, letting it go almost to the floor, and then catching it up deftly and setting it twirling again with a short movement of her fingers. She did it—a work so simple at first sight but actually requiring the immense skill and dexterity acquired by man through age-long practice— with great ease. I could not help noticing those hands; work had coarsened and blackened them, but they were small and so beautiful that many genteel young ladies would have envied her.

"You didn't say last time that Granny told you your fortune," said Olesya. And seeing me look back with apprehension, she added, "Never mind her, she's a bit deaf, so she won't hear. It's only my voice that she makes out well."

"Yes, she told my fortune. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wondering. Do you believe in it?" She gave me a swift, stealthy glance.

"Believe in what? Do you mean in what your grandmother told me, or fortune-telling in general?"

"I mean in general."

"Well, it's hard to say. I rather think I don't, but still—who knows? They say sometimes it comes true. Even learned people deal with that in books. But I don't at all believe in what your grandmother told me. Any countrywoman could tell fortunes like that."

Olesya smiled.

"Yes, it's true that she can't do it well any longer. She's old now, and she's afraid, too. But what did the cards tell you?"

"Nothing interesting. I don't even remember now. The things you usually hear: a long journey, a gain through the clubs—I've forgotten, really."

"Yes, she isn't much good at fortune-telling now. She's forgotten a lot of words because she's so old. How could she do it well? Besides, she's afraid. She only does it once in a while, if she's offered money."

"But what is she afraid of?"

"The authorities, of course. The uryadnik always bullies her when he comes. 'I could shut you up any day,' he says. 'Do you know,' he says, 'what witches like you

get for practising magic? Hard labour on Sakhalin Island, for life.' Do you think it's true?"

"Well, there is some truth in what he says. This sort of thing is punishable, but it isn't as bad as all that. And you, Olesya, can you tell fortunes?"

She seemed to falter, but only for a second.

"Yes. But not for money," she hastened to add.

"Would you mind laying out the cards for me?"

"Yes, I would," she said, softly but firmly.

"But why? If you don't care to do it now, do it some other time. Somehow I feel that you'll tell me the truth."

"No. I won't do it. Not for the world."

"Now that's unfair of you, Olesya. For the sake of our acquaintance you shouldn't refuse me. Why don't you want to?"

"Because I have already laid out the cards for you, and I mustn't do it any more."

"You mustn't? But why not? I don't understand."

"No, no, I really mustn't," she whispered with a superstitious fear. "You mustn't search your fortune twice. That wouldn't do. It might find out, might overhear you. Fortune doesn't like to be questioned. That's why all fortune-tellers are unhappy."

I was about to answer Olesya with some joke but could not: there was so much sincere conviction in her words, that when, after mentioning fortune, she looked back at the door with a strange dread, I involuntarily did the same.

"Well, since you won't lay out the cards, at least tell me what you found out last time," I begged her.

She suddenly threw down her spindle and touched my hand with hers.

"No, I'd rather not," she said, and a childish imploring expression came into her eyes. "Please don't ask. It was bad for you. You'd better not ask."

But I insisted. I could not make out whether her refusal and her obscure hints at fate were affectations of a fortune-teller, or whether she actually believed in what she said, but somehow I felt an uneasiness that was close to dread.

"All right, I'll tell you," Olesya agreed at last. "But remember, a bargain's a bargain, and you mustn't be cross if I tell you something you may not like. Here's what fell out: You're a kind man all right, only you're weak. Your kindness isn't good, it doesn't come from your heart. You don't stick to your word. You like to have the upper hand over people, but you knuckle under to them even though you don't want to. You like wine, and also— Oh, well, I'll tell you everything while I'm at it. You're very fond of us women, and that'll get you into a lot of trouble. You don't value money and don't know how to lay it by—you'll never be rich. Shall I go on?"

"Yes! Tell me all you know."

"It fell out that your life wasn't going to be a happy one. You'll love nobody with your heart because your heart is cold and lazy, and you'll cause much sorrow to those who will love you. You'll never get married and will die single. You won't have any great happiness in life, but a lot of dreariness and hardship. A day will come when you'll feel like killing yourself. Something will happen to make you feel that way. Only you won't dare to, you'll just put up with it. You'll be much in need, but towards the end of your life your fortune will change through the death of someone who's dear to you, and that quite unexpectedly. But all that won't

come for many years, and as for this year—I don't know just when, but the cards tell me it'll be soon. Perhaps even this month—"

"But what'll happen this year?" I asked her when she paused again.

"I'm afraid to go on, really. A great love falls out for you from a queen of clubs. I can't guess if she's married or single, but I know that she has dark hair."

I glanced at her head.

"Why are you looking at me?" She blushed suddenly, understanding the meaning of my glance with that intuition which some women possess. "Well, yes, about the same as mine," she went on, mechanically smoothing her hair and blushing still more.

"A great love from the queen of clubs, eh?" I said jokingly.

"Don't laugh at me, you mustn't laugh," she admonished me earnestly, almost sternly. "I'm only telling you the truth."

"Very well, I won't. What else was there?"

"What else? It'll fall out very badly for that queen of clubs, worse than death. She'll suffer great shame because of you, a shame she won't forget all her life, a long sorrow. But nothing bad will fall to you through her."

"Look here, Olesya, mayn't the cards have misled you? Why should I be so very unpleasant to the queen of clubs? I'm a quiet, modest man, and yet you've said so many awful things about me."

"That's what I don't know. Besides, it won't be you who'll do it, but the whole misfortune will come through you. You'll remember my words when they come true."

"And it was the cards that told you all that, Olesya?"

She did not answer me at once.

"The cards too," she said evasively, with seeming reluctance. "But I can tell a lot even without them—by a man's face, for instance. If a man's going to die a dreadful death soon, I can read that in his face at once; I don't even have to talk to him."

"But what can you see in his face?"

"I don't know myself. I suddenly feel scared, as if he were standing dead in front of me. Ask Granny—she'll tell you I'm speaking the truth. Last year Trofim the miller hanged himself in his mill. I saw him two days before and I said to Granny right away, 'Mark my words, Granny, Trofim's going to die a horrible death one of these days.' And so he did. Last Christmas Yashka—he was a horse-thief—dropped in and asked Granny to tell his fortune. Granny spread out her cards and started. And he asked in joke, 'Tell me, Granny, what kind of death I'm going to die.' He laughed, but I looked at him and froze to my seat: I saw him sitting there, and his face was dead and green. His eyes were shut and his lips were black. Then, a week later, we heard that the peasants had caught Yashka just as he was trying to steal some horses. They beat him all night. People here are pitiless and cruel. They drove nails into his heels, and broke his ribs with stakes, and by the morning he was gone."

"But why didn't you tell him he was going to get into trouble?"

"Why should I?" she replied. "How can you get away from your fate? He'd just have worried uselessly in his last days. I feel nasty myself because I can see things like that, and I hate myself for it. Only what can I do? It's my fate. My grandmother could foretell death when she was younger, and my mother too, and my grandmother's mother—it's not our fault, it's just in our blood."

She had stopped spinning and sat with bowed head, her hands lying quietly in her lap. Her staring eyes with the dilated pupils reflected some dark terror, an involuntary submission to the mysterious powers and supernatural knowledge that had descended on her soul.

V

Just then Manuilikha spread a clean towel with embroidered ends on the table, and put a steaming pot on it.

"Supper's on the table, Olesya," she called to her granddaughter. To me she added after a momentary hesitation, "Wouldn't you like to join us, sir? You're welcome, but ours is poor food. It's just a plain soup."

She was none too insistent with her invitation, and I was about to decline when Olesya in her turn invited me with such charming simplicity and so friendly a smile that I could not but accept. She herself ladled me a plateful of the buckwheat soup with bacon, onions, potatoes, and chicken—exceedingly tasty and nutritious. Neither grandmother nor granddaughter crossed themselves as they sat down to their meal. At supper I kept watching the two women because I have always believed that when eating people show their characters more clearly than at any other time. Manuilikha was devouring the soup with hasty greed, champing loudly and pushing into her mouth huge pieces of bread that made her flabby cheeks bulge. Olesya, on the other hand, displayed an innate breeding even in the way she ate.

An hour after supper I took my leave of the occupants of the witch's hut.

"Would you like me to walk a little way with you?" Olesya suggested.

"What's this about going with him?" Manuilikha mumbled angrily. "Can't you sit still for a while, you fidget?"

But Olesya had already put on her red cashmere shawl; suddenly she ran up to her grandmother, put her arms round her, and gave her a smacking kiss.

"Granny! Dearest Granny, it'll only take me one minute—I'll be back in no time."

"All right, all right," the old woman protested feebly. "Please excuse her, sir: she's so silly."

From a narrow path we came out on to a forest road black with mud, trampled by horses and furrowed by cart-wheels, the ruts full of water that reflected the blazing sunset. We walked along the roadside covered with the brown leaves of the previous year, still moist after the snow. Here and there large campanulas—the earliest flower in Polesye—stuck up their lilac heads through the dead yellow of the leaves.

"Listen, Olesya," I began, "I'd like very much to ask you something, but I'm afraid you may be angry with me. Tell me, is it true that your grandmother—er—how shall I put it—"

"—is a witch?" Olesya prompted calmly.

"No, not a witch," I faltered. "Well, yes, a witch if you like. People say such a lot of foolish things. Perhaps she simply knows certain herbs and remedies and charms. You needn't answer me if you'd rather not."

"Why not? I don't mind," she replied simply. "Yes, she is a witch. But now she's old and can't do what she used to."

"And what could she do?" I asked with curiosity.

"All sorts of things. She could cure people, soothe toothache, stop blood, charm away a bite by a mad dog or a snake, discover treasures—there was nothing she couldn't do."

"You know, Olesya—I'm very sorry, but I don't believe in that sort of thing. Be frank with me, won't you— I shan't tell anybody: all that is just so much pretence to humbug people, isn't it?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You may think whatever you please. Of course, it's easy enough to humbug a countrywoman, but I wouldn't dream of deceiving you."

"So you firmly believe in witchcraft?"

"Of course I do! All our family has practised it. I can do quite a lot myself."

"Olesya, my dear, if you only knew how much that interests me. Won't you ever show me anything?"

"Why not?" she answered readily. "Do you want it now?"

"Yes, if I may."

"You won't be afraid?"

"What nonsense. I might be afraid if it were night, but it's still light now."

"All right. Give me your hand."

I obeyed. She quickly rolled up the sleeve of my overcoat and unclasped the stud at my cuff; then she took from her pocket a small dagger about five inches long, and pulled it out of its leather sheath.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, a mean fear stirring inside me.

"Just a moment. You said you wouldn't be afraid!"

Suddenly her hand made a hardly perceptible movement, and I felt on my wrist, slightly above where the pulse is counted, the irritating touch of the sharp blade. Blood oozed out at once along the cut, trickled down my wrist, and dripped fast on to the ground. I could hardly hold back a cry, and I think I went pale.

"Don't be afraid—you aren't going to die." Olesya laughed.

She firmly grasped my arm above the wound, bent her head low over it, and began to whisper rapidly, her hot, fitful breath searing my skin. And when she straightened up and let go my arm I saw nothing but a red scratch where the wound had been.

"Well? Are you satisfied?" she asked with a sly smile, putting away her dagger. "Or do you want more?"

"Of course I do. Only I'd prefer something less horrifying—and no bloodshed, please."

"What shall I show you?" she said musingly. "All right, go ahead of me along the road. Only see that you don't look back."

"It won't be something horrible, will it?" I asked, trying to smile away a fearful anticipation of some disagreeable surprise.

"No, not a bit. Go on."

I started to walk, greatly interested in the experiment and feeling Olesya's tense gaze on my back. But having taken about twenty steps, I suddenly tripped at a completely smooth place and fell on my face.

"Go on, go on!" Olesya shouted. "Don't look back! That's nothing, you'll be as good as new. Hold on to the earth when you fall."

I walked on. After another ten steps I sprawled on the ground once more.

Olesya burst out laughing, and clapped her hands.

"Well? Have you had enough?" she cried, her white teeth flashing. "Do you believe now? Never mind—you went down, not up."

"How did you do it?" I asked in astonishment, shaking off the sprigs and dry grass-blades that had stuck to my clothes. "It isn't a secret, I hope?"

"No secret at all. I'll tell you with pleasure. Only I'm afraid you won't understand. I mayn't be able to explain it properly."

She was right—I did not quite understand her. But if I am not mistaken, the trick was that she walked behind me step by step, keeping pace with and looking fixedly at me, and tried to imitate my every movement, even the slightest, identifying herself with me, as it were. Having walked a few paces, she began to imagine, at some distance ahead of me, a rope strung some ten inches above the ground. The instant I must touch the imaginary rope with my foot she suddenly made a falling movement, and then the strongest man was bound to fall, she told me. A long time afterwards, when reading Dr. Charcot's account of the experiments he had made with two Salpetriere patients, professional sorceresses suffering from hysteria, I recalled Olesya's confused explanation. And I was greatly surprised to learn that French sorceresses used to resort to the very same stunt as had been performed by the pretty Polesye witch.

"I can do a lot more," said Olesya with assurance. "For example, I could give you a scare."

"What do you mean?"

"I could make you feel scared. You would be sitting, say, in your own room one evening, and all of a sudden you'd feel so terribly scared you'd shake in your boots and wouldn't even dare to look behind you. Only to do that I must know where you live, and must first see your room."

"Oh, well, that is quite simple," I tried to scoff. "You'd walk up to my window and knock on it, or shout something."

"No, no. I'd be here in the forest, right in my house. But I'd sit there and keep thinking that I was walking down the street, going into your house, opening your door, walking into your room. You'd be sitting somewhere—let's say at the table—I'd steal up on you from behind—you wouldn't hear me—and I'd clutch your shoulder with my hands and begin squeezing it—harder, harder, harder—staring at you all the time, like this— look."

She suddenly knitted her fine eyebrows and fixed her eyes on my face, with a terrible and luring expression, her pupils dilating and taking on a deep-blue shade. I at once recalled Medusa's head, a painting I had seen at the Tretyakov Art Gallery in Moscow—the artist's name has slipped my memory. Under that fixed, uncanny gaze I was gripped with a chilling terror of the supernatural.

"Stop that Olesya, please," I said with a forced laugh. "I like you much better when you smile—then you have such a lovely, childish face."

We walked on. I thought of Olesya's way of speaking —so expressive and, indeed, so refined for an uneducated girl—and I said, "Do you know what surprises me about you, Olesya? You've grown up in the woods, seeing nobody. And you can't have read much, for all I can say."

"I can't read at all."

"Well, there you are. Yet you speak like a real young lady. Why is that? Do you understand what I'm asking?"

"Yes, I do. It all comes from Granny. Don't judge her by her looks. She's so clever! Perhaps she'll get to talking when you're there, some day when she's got more used to you. She knows everything, absolutely everything you can ask her about. Of course, she's old now."

"Then she must have seen a lot in her life? Where does she come from? Where did she live before?"

These questions did not seem to please Olesya. She did not answer at once.

"I don't know," she said, evasively and reluctantly. "She doesn't like to talk about it. And if she ever says anything she asks me to forget it and never mention it again. It's time I was going back, though," she hastened to add, "or Granny'll be cross with me. Goodbye. I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

I introduced myself.

"Ivan Timofeyevich? Good. Well, goodbye, Ivan Timofeyevich! Please don't shun our house—come once in a while."

I held out my hand, and her small, strong hand responded with a firm, friendly grasp.

VI

From that day on I was a frequent visitor to the witch's hut. Each time I came Olesya received me with her usual reserved dignity. But I always noticed, by the first spontaneous movement she made upon seeing me, that she was glad I had come. Manuilikha continued to mutter something to herself but did not otherwise show any unfriendliness towards me, probably thanks to her granddaughter's invisible intercession. Besides, the presents I occasionally brought her, such as a warm shawl, a jar of jam, or a bottle of cherry liqueur, made her more favourably disposed towards me. As if by tacit agreement, it had become a habit with Olesya and myself that she always walked back with me as far as Irinovo Road. And because we always started a lively and interesting conversation we both tried unwittingly to prolong the walk along the quiet forest borders by slackening our pace as much as we could. After reaching the road I would walk back with her about half a mile, but still, before parting, we would talk on for a long time, standing under the fragrant shelter of pine boughs.

It was not Olesya's beauty alone that fascinated me; I was also charmed by her integrity, her distinctive and free character, and by her mind, clear and yet wrapped in unshakeable hereditary superstition, a mind as innocent as a child's, and yet not devoid of the arch coquetry of a beautiful woman. She was tireless in asking me detailed questions about all that caught and held her primitive, vivid imagination: countries and people, natural phenomena, the structure of the earth and the universe, men of learning, big cities, and what not. Many things seemed to her wonderful, fantastic, impossible. But because I had always been earnest, simple and sincere in my talks with her, she readily and unquestioningly believed whatever I told her. Sometimes, when I was at a loss to explain something which I thought was too complicated for her half-savage mind—or about which I was not quite clear myself—I would say in reply to her eager queries, "I'm afraid I can't explain that to you. You wouldn't understand."

Then she would implore me, "Oh, please tell me. I'll try to understand. Tell me somehow, even if you think it won't be easy for me."

She made me venture on monstrous parallels or cite most audacious examples, and if I floundered for the right phrase she would encourage me by a shower of impatient questions like those you put to a stammerer who has got stuck with some word. And indeed, in the end her keen and versatile mind and her fresh imagination would triumph over my lack of skill as an instructor. I had to admit that, for a person of her environment and education—or lack of education, to be exact—she had extraordinary capabilities.

Once in passing I mentioned Petersburg. She at once asked me, "What is Petersburg? A small town?"

"No, it isn't a small town. It's the biggest Russian city."

"The biggest? You mean the very biggest? And there isn't any bigger one?" she questioned me naively.

"No. All the bigwigs live there. The houses are all made of stone—there are no wooden ones."

"It must be much bigger than our Stepan, I suppose?" she asked confidently.

"O yes, a little bigger—about five hundred times, I'd say. In some of the houses there live twice as many people as in the whole of Stepan."

"Good heavens! What are those houses like, then?" she asked, almost terrified.

As usual I had to resort to a comparison.

"Terrific houses. Five, six, or even seven storeys. Do you see that pine-tree there?"

"You mean the tallest? Yes."

"Well, those houses are as tall as that. And crammed with people from top to bottom. Those people live in small rooms like birds in cages, about a dozen in each, so that there isn't even enough air for them all. And others live down below, under the earth, in damp and cold; some of them see no sunshine in their room all the year round."

"I'd never swap my woods for that city of yours," she said, shaking her head. "Even Stepan seems horrible to me when I go to the market there. Pushing and yelling and wrangling all around. I feel such a longing for the woods I could throw up everything and run away. I'd never consent to live in a city."

"But suppose your husband came from a city?" I asked, with a fleeting smile.

She frowned, and her fine nostrils quivered.

"Pshaw!" she said disdainfully. "I don't want any husband."

"You're only talking like that now, Olesya. Almost all girls say the same, but they get married all right. Wait till you fall in love with somebody, and then you'll be willing to follow him to the world's end, let alone to a city."

"Oh, no, please, don't let us talk about that," she insisted, annoyed. "What's the good of it? Please don't."

"How funny you are, Olesya. Do you really imagine you'll never love a man? You're so young and beautiful and strong. Once your blood is up you'll forget any pledge you may have taken."

"What if I do fall in love!" she answered, and her eyes flashed defiantly. "I won't ask anybody's permission."

"So you'll get married too," I teased her.

"You mean in church?"

"Of course. The priest will lead you round the lectern and the deacon will sing Rejoice, Isaiah! and they'll put a crown on your head."

She dropped her eyelids and shook her head with a wan smile.

"No, my friend. You may not like what I'm going to tell you, but nobody in our family got married in church: both my mother and my grandmother managed without that. We mayn't even enter a church."

"All because of your witchcraft?"

"Yes, because of our witchcraft," she replied calmly. "How could I dare to turn up in church when my soul's been sold to him since I was born?"

"Believe me, you're deceiving yourself, Olesya dear. What you're saying is simply preposterous—it's laughable."

The odd expression of grim resignation to her mysterious destiny, which I had noticed before, came into her face again.

"No, no. You can't understand that, but I feel it. I feel it here"—she pressed her hand to her breast—"in my heart. There's an everlasting curse on all our family. Judge for yourself: Who else is helping us if it isn't he"? How can an ordinary person do what I can? All our power comes from him."

And each time this unusual subject came up our conversation finished that way. In vain did I bring forward all the arguments within her grasp and talk to her in simple terms about hypnotism, suggestion, psychiatrists and Indian fakirs, in vain did I attempt a physiological explanation of some of her experiments, such as charming away haemorrhage, so easily achieved by skilfully pressing a vein; much as she trusted me in everything else, she obstinately rejected all my explanations.

"All right, I'll grant what you say about charming away blood, but where does everything else come from?" she would argue, raising her voice. "Charming away blood isn't all I can do, is it? Do you want me to rid your house of all its mice and roaches in one day? Do you want me to cure the worst fever with plain water in two days, even if all your doctors should give up the patient? Do you want me to make you completely forget some word? And why can I interpret dreams? Why is it that I know what'll happen in the future?"

The dispute always ended in Olesya and myself changing the subject, not without pent-up resentment against each other. There was much in her black magic that my little knowledge could not explain away. I cannot tell whether she possessed even half the secrets she spoke about with so much unaffected conviction. But what I did see often enough, made me firmly believe that she had that instinctive, hazy, strange knowledge, acquired through chance experience, which forestalls science by centuries and lives on in the ignorant masses of the people, a knowledge mingled with ridiculous and monstrous superstitions and handed down from generation to generation as a great secret.

Despite our sharp differences over this one point, we were getting more and more attached to each other. So far we had not exchanged a word of love, but it had become a necessity for us to be together, and often, in those silent moments when our eyes chanced to meet, I saw Olesya's eyes grow moist and the thin blue vein on her temple throb faster.

On the other hand, my relations with Yarmola were spoiled for good. My visits to the witch's hut and my evening walks with Olesya were obviously an open secret to him: he always knew with astonishing accuracy what was going on in his forest. He had begun to avoid me. His black eyes watched me from afar with a look of reproach and displeasure whenever I made ready to start for the forest,

although he did not speak a word of disapproval. Our comically serious studies had ceased. When I occasionally suggested a lesson in the evening he would dismiss the idea with a careless gesture.

"What's the use? It's a waste of time, master," he would say with lazy contempt.

Nor did we go shooting any more. Whenever I brought up the matter Yarmola found some pretext to refuse: a gun out of repair, a sick dog, lack of time.

"I've no time, master, I've got to do some ploughing," he would say more often than not in reply to my invitation; and I knew very well that he had no intention of ploughing but was going to hang about the tavern all day long, hoping against hope that someone might stand him a drink. His tacit, smouldering hostility was beginning to weary me, and I was thinking of seizing the first opportunity to dismiss him. What made me hesitate was commiseration for his large, poverty-stricken family, whom his wage of four rubles kept from starving to death.

VII

One day when as usual I came to the witch's hut shortly before dusk, I was struck by the dejected spirits of its occupants. Manuilikha sat hunched on her bed with her feet tucked under her, rocking back and forth and muttering to herself, her head clasped in her hands. She ignored my greeting. Olesya responded with her habitual friendliness, but our conversation flagged. She must have been listening abstractedly, for her replies were completely off the point. Her beautiful face was shadowed by inner anxiety.

"I see you're in some sort of trouble, Olesya," I said, and gently touched her hand lying on the bench.

Quickly she turned away to stare out of the window. She tried to look calm, but her knitted eyebrows trembled, and her teeth dug into her lip.

"No, what could have happened to us?" she said tonelessly. "Everything's just as it was."

"Why won't you tell me the truth, Olesya? That isn't fair of you. I thought we were friends."

"There's nothing wrong, I assure you. Just our little troubles—all kinds of trifles."

"No, Olesya, trifles wouldn't make you look like that."

"That's your fancy."

"Please be frank with me, Olesya. I don't know if I can help you, but I may at least be able to give you some advice. And after all, you'll feel better simply because you'll have shared your sorrow with me."

"Oh, it's no use talking about it, really," she replied impatiently. "There's nothing you can do to help us."

The old woman suddenly burst into our conversation with unusual heat.

"Stop being a fool, will you? You should listen when he speaks sense to you instead of sticking up your nose. Think there is nobody on earth cleverer than you? Let me tell you the whole story, sir," she said, turning to me.

The trouble proved to be far more serious than I could have gathered from proud Olesya's hints. The uryadnik had dropped into the witch's hut the night before.

"At first he sat down nicely and asked for some vodka," said Manuilikha, "and then he let go. 'You clear out of this house,' he says, 'in twenty-four hours, with bag and baggage. If I find you in here when I come next,' he says, 'I'll have you transported, and no mistake. I'll pack you off to your home with two soldiers, damn you!' he says. Now my home is far away, sir—the town of Amchensk. I don't know a living soul there any more and, besides, our passports ran out a long, long time ago. Anyway they weren't in order from the outset. Oh dear!"

"But he didn't mind your living here before, did he?" I said. "Why must he bully you now?"

"That's just what I'd like to know. He gabbed something, but I couldn't make it out. You see, this hut we live in isn't ours, it's the landlord's. We used to live in the village, and then—"

"I know, Granny, I've heard about it. The peasants got angry with you."

"So they did. Then I went to the old landlord, Mr. Abrosimov, and cried, and he let me have this hovel. But now it seems a new landlord's bought the forest and wants to drain the marsh or something. Only why can't I stay here?" "Perhaps the whole thing's just a tale, Granny?" I remarked. "The uryadnik may simply be wanting you to grease his palm."

"I tried that, my friend, I did. He wouldn't take it! Would you believe that? I offered him twenty-five rubles, and he wouldn't have it. Oh, no! He was so mad I was scared out of my wits. He just kept bawling, 'Get out of here!' What are we going to do now, poor orphans that we are! If only you could help us, good sir, and talk him out of it, the greedy dog! You'd oblige me no end."

"Granny!" said Olesya, with reproachful emphasis.

"Granny what?" Manuilikha returned testily. "I've been your granny for twenty-four years. Do you think we'd better go begging? Don't listen to her, sir. Please help us if you can."

Vaguely I promised to plead for them, although, to tell the truth, there seemed little hope. For the uryadnik to refuse a bribe, the thing must be serious indeed. That evening Olesya bade me a cold goodbye and would not walk with me as she usually did. I saw that the proud girl resented my interference, and also that she was a little ashamed of her grandmother's tearful behaviour.

VIII

It was a grey, warm morning. Already there had been several brief showers of large raindrops of the beneficial kind that makes young grass sprout under your eyes and fresh shoots come up. After each shower the sun would peep out for a moment to shine joyfully down on the rain-washed leaves of the lilacs—still a delicate green—that crowded my front garden; the perky sparrows would chirp more loudly on the loosened kitchen-garden beds; the sticky brown buds of the poplars would give off a stronger fragrance. I sat sketching a forest cottage when Yarmola stepped in.

"The uryadnik's here," he said glumly.

I had quite forgotten that two days ago I had told him to let me know if the uryadnik arrived, and so I could not understand what business that representative of the authorities might have with me just then.

"What's that?" I asked in perplexity.

"I said the uryadnik was here," Yarmola replied, in that hostile tone which he had been using towards me lately. "I saw him at the dam a minute ago. He's coming this way."

Wheels rattled outside. I rushed to the window and opened it. A skinny, chocolate-coloured gelding with a drooping lip and hurt mien was pulling at a staid trot a high, shaky wicker gig to which it was harnessed by a single shaft, the other being replaced by a stout rope—the local wags claimed that the uryadnik was using such a sorry turnout on purpose to prevent undesirable rumours. The uryadnik himself was driving, his monstrous form, clad in a greatcoat of expensive grey cloth and taking up both seats.

"My compliments, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich!" I shouted, leaning out of the window.

"Oh, good morning! How are you?" he responded in the amiable, rolling baritone of a superior.

He reined up the gelding, saluted me, and bent forward with a ponderous grace.

"Could you drop in for a second? I've some little business to discuss with you."

He shook his head.

"I can't. I'm carrying out my duties. Driving to Volosha to inspect a dead body—a drowned man."

But by then I knew his foibles and therefore said with affected indifference, "That's too bad. I've got two bottles of some nice stuff from Count Wortzel's estate, and I thought—"

"I can't. Duty, you know."

"A man I know sold it to me. He'd been hoarding it in his cellar like a family treasure. Perhaps you'll drop in, after all. I'll have some oats given to your horse."

"You mustn't insist, really," he said. "Don't you know duty comes first? What's in those bottles, anyway? Plum brandy?"

"Plum brandy, indeed! It's old vodka, sir, that's what it is!"

"I've already had something, to be frank." He scratched his cheek, grimacing regretfully.

"Of course it may not be true," I went on as coolly as before, "but the man swore it was two hundred years old. It smells like real cognac, and it's as yellow as amber."

"See what you're doing to me!" he exclaimed in comic dismay. "Now who'll take over the horse?"

I actually had several bottles of old vodka, although it was not quite so ancient as I had boasted; but I counted on the force of suggestion to make it a few score years older. Anyway it was real home-made old vodka of a stunning strength, the pride of the cellars of a ruined magnate. The uryadnik, who came of a clergyman's family, at once secured a bottle from me against the possibility of what he called illness from a cold. And the snack I offered—fresh radish with newly-churned butter—was highly palatable.

"And what may your business be?" he asked me after his fifth glass, and sat back in an old easy chair, which groaned under his weight.

I depicted to him the poor old woman's plight, mentioned her helpless condition and despair, and made a passing allusion to unnecessary form. He listened to me with bowed head, methodically cutting off the roots of the red, sturdy radish and crunching it with gusto. Occasionally he looked up at me with his impassive, bleared eyes, blue and ridiculously small, but I could read neither sympathy nor protest in his huge red face.

"So what do you want me to do?" was all he asked me when I paused at last.

"What do you mean what?" I replied excitedly. "Can't you see the plight they're in? Two poor, defenceless women—"

"And one of them as pretty as a rosebud!" he put in sarcastically.

"Perhaps so, but that's beside the point. What I'd like to know is why you can't show some sympathy for them. You don't expect me to believe you must evict them so very urgently, do you? You might at least wait a little end give me a chance to plead for them with the landlord. What would be the risk of waiting a month or so?"

"What risk?" He sprang up from his easy chair. "Why, it might cost me a lot, and my job first of all. God knows what that new landlord, Mr. Ilyashevich, is like. He might be a busy-body, one of those who write off to Petersburg the moment they come across some trifle. We get people like that down here all right!"

I tried to calm the irate uryadnik.

"Come, now, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich, you're laying it on a bit too thick. And then, even if there is a risk, there'll be gratitude too."

"Pah!" he exclaimed, and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his wide trousers. "Talk of gratitude! D'you think I'd stake my job for a measly twenty-five rubles? No, sir, you don't know me if you imagine that."

"Don't take on, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich. It isn't a question of money at all, it's—It would be an act of humanity."

"Hu-man-it-y?" he repeated ironically, syllable by syllable. "Here's where that humanity weighs on me!"

He vigorously slapped his hand across his powerful bronzed nape overhanging the collar in a hairless fold.

"You're exaggerating, I think, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich."

"Not a bit, sir. 'It's a scourge of these parts,' to use an expression by Mr. Krylov, the famous fabulist. That's what those two ladies are, sir! Have you read The Police-officer, that splendid book by His Highness Prince Urusov?"

"No, I haven't."

"You've missed a lot, sir. It's an excellent and highly edifying work. I suggest that you read it at leisure."

"Very good, I'll read it gladly. But still I don't see what that book's got to do with the two poor women."

"What it's got to do with them? A great deal. Point one"

—he bent his thick, hairy left forefinger— "The police officer shall watch unflinchingly that every person assiduously attends the House of God, which duty he should not, however, deem to be a burthen.' May I ask you if that woman—what d'you call her—Manuilikha, is it?—if she ever goes to church?"

I made no comment, struck dumb by the unexpected turn the conversation had taken. He gave me a triumphant look, and bent his middle finger.

"Point two: 'It is prohibited to engage anywhere in false prophecies or false auguries.' See how it is, sir? And now comes point three: 'It is prohibited to make oneself out to be a sorcerer or magician, or to resort to any similar fraudulent practices.' What do you say to that? Suppose all that came out all of a sudden or reached the higher authorities somehow? Who'd be called to account? Me. Who would get the sack? Me again. So there you are."

He sat down again. His eyes wandered vacantly over the walls, while his fingers drummed loudly on the table.

"But if I asked you as a special favour, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich?" I began again, in an ingratiating tone. "You are doubtless burdened by complex and troublesome duties, but then I know you have an exceedingly kind, a golden heart. You could quite easily promise me not to disturb those women."

The uryadnik's roaming eyes hovered somewhere above my head.

"A fine gun you've got there," he said casually, still drumming. "An excellent gun. Last time when I was here and didn't find you in I admired it so much. A wonderful gun!"

I turned my head to look at the gun.

"Yes, it's all right," I praised it. "It's an old one, you know, made in Europe. I had it refashioned into a centre-fire gun last year. Take a look at the barrels."

"Certainly, the barrels are just what I've been admiring most. A splendid thing. I should say quite a treasure."

Our eyes met, and I saw a faint but meaning smile flutter in the corners of his mouth. I got up, took the gun down from the wall, and walked up to him.

"The Circassians have a charming custom of presenting their guests with anything they admire," I said amiably. "You and I aren't Circassians, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich, but I beg you to accept this from me as a souvenir."

He pretended to be embarrassed.

"Oh, come, you can't give away such a beauty! No, really, that's too generous a custom!"

But I did not have to press him long. He accepted the gun, stood it gently between his knees, and carefully wiped the dust from the trigger with a clean handkerchief. I was somewhat reassured as I saw that my gun had passed into the possession of a connoisseur. The uryadnik rose almost immediately after the transfer, and made haste to leave.

"I've got urgent business to see to but I've been chatting instead," he said, stamping on the floor to get his galoshes on. "You're welcome to my place when you visit our parts."

"And how about Manuilikha, sir?" I reminded him discreetly.

"We'll see," he grunted noncommittally. "There was something I wanted to ask you for. You've got wonderful radish."

"I grew it myself."

"It's amazing radish. You know, my better half has a weakness for all kinds of vegetables. So I wondered if you couldn't—just one bunch, you know."

"I'd be delighted to, Yevpsikhy Afrikanovich. I'd consider it an honour. I'll send you a basketful by messenger today. And some butter if you don't mind. I've got butter of rare quality."

"Oh, well, and some butter," he condescended. "And you may let those women know that I'm not going to disturb them for a while. But let them bear in mind"—

he suddenly raised his voice—"they won't get off with a thank you. And now, goodbye. Thanks again for the present and the treat."

He clicked his heels in military fashion and walked with the heavy gait of a well-fed man of importance to his carriage, near which the sotsky* [[Rural policeman](#).—Tr.] the elder, and Yarmola were standing respectfully, cap in hand.

IX

The uryadnik kept his word and left the occupants of the forest hut alone for the time being. But there came an abrupt and appalling change in my relationship with Olesya. She now treated me without a trace of her former trusting and artless friendliness, of the vivacity in which the coquetry of a beautiful girl had mingled so charmingly with the sportiveness of a naughty boy. An insurmountable awkwardness had crept into our conversation. With hurried timidity, Olesya avoided all the lively subjects, which had given such a wide scope to our curiosity.

In my presence she would give herself up to her work with stern, tense concentration, but I could often see her hands drop limply on her lap, while she stared at the floor. If at a moment like that I called her by name or asked her a question, she would start and slowly turn to me a frightened face that reflected an effort to grasp the meaning of my words. Sometimes I felt as if my presence were a nuisance or a burden to her; but this seemed strange after the profound interest which only a few days ago she had shown in every comment I made, every word I spoke. And so I could only think that she would not forgive my pleading with the uryadnik—an act of patronage which must have offended her sense of independence. But this conjecture did not satisfy me, either, for how indeed could an ordinary girl, who had grown up in the woods, be so squeamishly proud?

An explanation was certainly called for, but Olesya stubbornly avoided every opportunity for a heart-to-heart talk. Our evening strolls ceased. In vain did I look eloquently and imploringly at her every day as I rose to leave—she made believe she did not understand. On the other hand, the old woman's presence disturbed me, even though she was deaf.

At times I was angered by my own inability to break the habit of going to see Olesya every day. I had no inkling of the strong invisible threads that bound my heart to the captivating, unaccountable girl. I did not think of love yet, but I was already going through the restless period preceding love, a period full of vague, agonizingly sad sensations. No matter where I was or how I tried to divert myself, my mind was taken up by Olesya's image, my whole being yearned for her, and the recollection of her words—sometimes quite insignificant ones—her gestures or her smile would grip my heart with a gentle, sweet pain. Then dusk would fall, and I would sit for hours on the low, shaky bench by her side, feeling, to my vexation, ever more timid, ever more awkward and dull-witted.

Once I spent a whole day sitting like that beside Olesya. I had not been feeling well since the morning, although I did not quite know yet what was wrong with me. Towards evening I felt worse. My head was heavy, there was a ringing in my ears and a dull, persistent pain at the back of my head, as if someone were

pressing it with a soft, strong hand. My mouth was dry, and a sluggish, languid weakness pervading my whole body made me want to yawn and stretch all the time. My eyes ached intensely as if I had been staring at a dazzling object.

As I was walking home late that evening I suddenly began to shiver violently. I stumbled on like a drunken man, hardly knowing where I was going, and my teeth chattered loudly.

I do not know to this day who brought me home. For fully six days I shook with the terrible, relentless Polesye fever. During the day the illness would seem to subside, and I would recover consciousness. Completely worn out by the disease, I would crawl about the room, my knees weak and aching; if I moved with any vigour the blood would rush to my head in a hot wave, shutting out everything before my eyes. And at nightfall, usually about seven o'clock, the disease would swoop down on me anew, and I would spend a horrible night, as long as a century, during which I alternately shook with cold under the sheets and burned with an unbearable heat. The slightest touch of drowsiness brought with it painful nightmares, bizarre and crazy, that tortured my heated brain. My visions were full of minute, microscopic details that piled up and clung to each other in an ugly hustle and bustle. I would fancy I was sorting out some coloured boxes of grotesque shapes, taking small boxes out of big ones, and smaller boxes out of the small ones, unable to stop the endless task, which had become loathsome to me. Then long, colourful strips of wallpaper would flit before my eyes at a dizzy speed, and with striking lucidity I would see on them, instead of patterns, veritable garlands of human faces—some of them handsome, kind and smiling, others making fearful grimaces, putting out their tongues, baring their teeth, or rolling their enormous eyeballs. Then again Yarmola and I would engage in an abstract dispute, tangled and exceedingly complicated. The arguments we brought forward would become more and more cunning and profound; certain words and even letters would suddenly acquire a mysterious, unfathomable meaning, and I would be beset more and more by a fastidious terror of the unknown, weird force which drew ugly sophisms out of my head one by one and would not let me stop a dispute that had long become hateful.

It was a seething whirlwind of human and bestial forms, landscapes, objects of the most singular shapes and colours, words and phrases whose meaning I perceived with all my senses. Yet, strange as it may seem, I kept on seeing at the same time a neat circle of light, which the lamp with the green, scorched shade threw on the ceiling. And somehow I knew that in that peaceful circle with its blurred rim there lurked a silent, mysterious and terrible life, more dreadful and oppressive than the frenzied chaos of my dreams.

Then I would wake up, or rather find myself awake all at once. I would almost regain consciousness, and would realize that I was ill and in bed, that I had just been delirious, but still the latent and sinister threat of the bright circle on the dark ceiling would frighten me. Feebly I would reach for my watch, only to find in anguished perplexity that the whole endless succession of my hideous dreams had lasted no longer than two or three minutes. "God! When will daylight come!" I would think in despair, tossing my head on the hot pillows and feeling my own panting breath burn my lips. Then a light sleepiness would overpower me once more, and again my brain would become a plaything for a jumbled nightmare, and again I would wake up two minutes later, a prey to mortal anguish.

Six days later my strong constitution, aided by quinine and an infusion of plantain, overcame the illness. I got up from bed, completely shattered and tottering. I recovered fast. My head, wearied by six days of feverish delirium, was now lazily and pleasantly devoid of thoughts. My appetite came back redoubled, and my body gathered strength hourly, its every particle absorbing health and the joy of living. I felt a fresh urge to go to the lone sagging hut in the forest. My nerves had not yet rallied from the illness, and whenever I recalled Olesya's face and voice I was so tenderly moved that I could have cried.

X

Five more days passed, and I was strong enough to walk all the way to the witch's hut without feeling tired in the least. As I approached the threshold my heart beat in fear. I had not seen Olesya for nearly a fortnight, and now I realized with particular clarity how dear she was to me. My hand on the door-knob, I wavered for a few seconds, hardly drawing my breath. I even shut my eyes for a while in my hesitation before pushing the door open.

It is difficult to make out impressions like those which followed my entrance. Indeed, is it possible to remember the words spoken during the early moments of a meeting of mother and son, husband and wife, or two lovers? The words spoken ere very ordinary—in fact, they would have sounded ridiculous if recorded. But each word is fitting and infinitely precious merely because it is spoken by the dearest voice on earth.

I do remember, and very distinctly too, that Olesya quickly turned a pale face towards me and that that sweet face, which seemed new to me, reflected in instant succession perplexity, fright, and loving tenderness. The old woman mumbled something, shuffling about me, but I did not hear her greeting. Olesya's voice came to me like sweet music.

"What happened to you? Were you ill? How thin you've grown, my poor one."

For a long time I could say nothing in reply, and we stood silently facing each other, holding each other's hands, gazing happily into each other's eyes. I consider those few silent seconds the happiest in my life; never before had I felt, nor have I felt ever since, so pure, so complete and all-absorbing an ecstasy. And the things I read in Olesya's big dark eyes—the emotion over the meeting, the reproach for my long absence, the passionate confession of love! I felt that, along with that gaze, she was joyfully giving me her whole being, without any conditions, without wavering.

She was the first to break the spell by indicating Manuilikha with a slow movement of her eyelids. We sat down side by side, and she began to ask me solicitous questions about my illness, the medicines I had taken, the things that the doctor had said (he had come from the town twice to see me). She made me repeat my story about the doctor several times, and occasionally I saw a mocking smile quiver on her lips.

"If only I'd known you were ill!" she cried, with impatient regret. "I'd have had you back on your feet in a day. How can you trust people who don't know anything _anything at all? Why didn't you send for me?"

I faltered.

"You see, Olesya, it came so unexpectedly and, besides, I didn't dare to disturb you. You've been treating me in a queer way lately, as if you were cross with me, or fed up with me. Listen, Olesya," I added, lowering my voice. "We must talk over many, many things, just the two of us—you know what I mean."

She dropped her eyelids in acquiescence, then glanced timidly at her grandmother, and whispered quickly, "Yes, I wanted that myself, only not now—later."

Scarcely had the sun set when she urged me to go home.

"Get ready, quick," she said, pulling me by the hand from the bench. "If the damp gets into you now the illness will come back at once."

"Where are you going, Olesya?" asked Manuilikha as she saw her granddaughter hurriedly putting on her grey woollen shawl.

"I'll walk with him a bit," answered Olesya.

She said it with seeming indifference, looking at the window and not at Manuilikha, but in her voice I detected a hardly perceptible shade of exasperation.

"So you are going after all?" said the old woman with emphasis.

Olesya's eyes flashed as she looked at Manuilikha.

"Yes, I am!" she replied haughtily. "We've talked about it quite enough. It's my business, and I'll take the consequences."

"So I see!" cried Manuilikha, irritably and reproachfully.

She had been about to add something, but instead she waved her hand hopelessly, shambled on her wobbly feet into a corner, and got busy with a basket.

I gathered that the rapid, resentful dialogue I had just heard was a sequel to a long series of quarrels.

"Your granny doesn't want you to go out with me, does she?" I asked Olesya as we descended to the forest.

She shrugged her shoulders in annoyance.

"Don't pay any attention to that. Well, no, she doesn't. What of it? Surely I'm free to do as I please!"

Suddenly I felt an urge to reproach her for her former severity.

"So you could have gone out with me even before my illness, but you didn't care to. If only you knew how much pain you caused me, Olesya! Every evening I hoped you would go with me. But you were so cold and dull and cross. Oh, how you tormented me, Olesya!"

"Stop it, please, dear one. Forget it," she begged me, a gentle apology in her voice.

"Well, I'm not blaming you—it just came out. Now I know the reason, but at first I had a feeling—it's funny to think of it, really—I had a feeling that you were angry with me because of the uryadnik. And that hurt me a lot. It seemed to me you considered me such a stranger that you found it hard to accept a mere friendly service from me. It made me so unhappy. I had no idea, you see, that it all came from Granny."

Olesya suddenly flushed deeply.

"No, it didn't! I just didn't want it myself!" she cried defiantly.

I looked at her from the side, and saw the pure, delicate profile of her slightly bowed head. Only now did I notice that she herself had grown thinner and that there were bluish shadows under her eyes. She sensed that I was gazing at her, and

looked up, but at once dropped her eyes again, and turned away with a bashful smile.

"Why didn't you want it, Olesya? Why?" I asked her, my voice breaking with emotion, and, seizing her by the hand, I made her stop.

We were in the middle of a long, narrow lane, straight as an arrow. Tall, slender pines flanked us on both sides, forming an avenue that ran away into the distance, with a canopy of fragrant intertwining boughs. The bare trunks bore crimson reflections of the dying sunset.

"Why, Olesya? Why?" I asked her again and again in a whisper, tightening my grip on her hand.

"I couldn't. I was afraid," she said in a hardly audible voice. "I thought I could get away from fate. But now—"

She gasped as if for air, and suddenly threw her arms round my neck in a strong embrace, and I felt on my lips the burning sweetness of her hurried, tremulous whisper.

"Now I don't care any more, I don't! Because I love you, my dear one, my happiness, my own!"

She clung to me ever closer, and I felt her robust, warm body quivering in my arms, and her heart racing against my chest. Like strong wine, her passionate kisses went to my head, still weak from the illness, and I began to lose my self-control.

"Olesya, for God's sake, don't—let me go," I said, trying to unclasp her arms. "Now I'm afraid too, afraid of myself. Let me go, Olesya."

She turned up her face, and a languorous smile crept across it.

"Don't be afraid, my darling," she said, with an ineffable look of tender caress and touching boldness. "I'll never reproach you or be jealous. Just tell me if you love me."

"Yes, Olesya. I've loved you for a long time, with all my heart. But—don't kiss me any more. I feel weak and dizzy, I'm not sure of myself."

Once again her lips held mine in a long, tantalizingly sweet kiss, and I guessed rather than heard her say, "Then don't be afraid, and don't worry any longer. This is our day, and nobody can take it from us."

And the whole of that night merged into one enchanting fairy-tale. The moon rose, mottling the forest with grotesque, mysterious colours, casting pale blue spots of light on gnarled stumps, crooked boughs, and the soft, plush-like carpet of moss. The slender white trunks of birch-trees stood out in clear outline, while their sparse leaves seemed to be veiled in silvery gauze. Here and there, where the moonlight could not pierce the awning of pine branches, the darkness was complete and impenetrable, except for a beam of light which had somehow made its way into the middle to catch a long row of trees and lay a straight narrow path on the ground, as bright and lovely as a tree-lined walk trimmed by elves for the solemn march of Oberon and Titania. And we walked arm in arm amid that living, smiling legend, without saying a word, overwhelmed by our happiness and the eerie stillness of the forest.

"Why, darling, I quite forgot you must hurry home," said Olesya suddenly. "How selfish of me! You've only just recovered, and here I am keeping you so long in the woods."

I embraced her, and pushed back the shawl from her rich dark hair.

"You aren't sorry, Olesya, are you?" I asked softly, bending over her ear. "You don't regret it?"

She slowly shook her head.

"No. I shan't be sorry no matter what comes afterwards. I'm so happy."

"Must something come?"

There was a flicker of the familiar mystical terror in her eyes.

"Yes, it must. Remember what I told you about the queen of clubs? I am that queen, and it's to me that the misfortune the cards foretold will happen. You know, I was going to ask you to stop coming to our place altogether. But just then you fell ill, and I didn't see you for nearly a fortnight. I felt so terribly lonely and sad I thought I'd give anything on earth just to be with you for one moment. That was when I made up my mind. Come what may, I said to myself, I won't give up my happiness for anything."

"You're right, Olesya. I felt that way too," I said, touching her temple with my lips. "I didn't know I loved you till I had to part with you. It's true, whoever said it, that separation does to love what the wind does to the fire: it puts out a small love and fans a big one."

"What was that? Please say it again," said Olesya, interested.

I repeated the aphorism. Olesya fell to musing, and I could see by her moving lips that she was repeating the words.

I peered closely at her pale upturned face, into her big black eyes with the bright glint of moonlight in them, and a vague foreboding of impending misfortune chilled suddenly my heart.

XI

The naive, fascinating fairy-tale of our love lasted for almost a month, and those blazing sunsets, those dewy mornings so fragrant with honey and lily of the valley, so full of crisp freshness and the resounding hubbub of birds, those lazy June days, so warm and languorous, live on unfadingly in my soul, along with Olesya's wonderful image. Never did boredom, weariness, or the eternal wanderlust, stir in my heart throughout that time. Like a heathen god or a young, strong animal, I revelled in light and warmth, in a conscious joy of life, and in my tranquil, healthy sensual love.

After my recovery old Manuilikha had become so peevish, met me with such frank hatred and, as I sat in the hut, moved the pots about in the stove with so much noisy bitterness that Olesya and I preferred to meet in the forest. And the majestic beauty of the green pines adorned our serene love like a precious setting.

I discovered daily with increasing amazement that Olesya, a girl who had grown up in the woods and who could not even read, in many instances displayed a sensitive delicacy and a special, innate tact. Love in its direct, coarse sense always has certain repellent aspects which cause torture and shame to nervous artistic natures. But Olesya knew how to avoid them, and she did so with such naive chastity that not once did an ugly comparison or a cynical moment insult our relationship.

Meanwhile the day was drawing near when I must leave. In fact, my official duties in Perebrod were finished and I was purposely putting off my return to the city. I had not yet said a word about it to Olesya, and I was afraid even to imagine what her reaction would be to the news of my coming departure. I was in a predicament. Habit had already taken deep root in me. It was more than a necessity for me to see Olesya every day, to hear her sweet voice and her ringing laughter, to feel the delightful tenderness of her caresses. On those rare days when rain prevented our meeting I felt forlorn, as if I had been robbed of what was most important to me in life. Any occupation would seem dull and useless, and all my being longed for the forest, for light and warmth, for Olesya's sweet familiar face.

More and more often I thought of marrying Olesya. At first the idea came into my head only occasionally, as a possible, in the last resort, honest solution of our relationship. There was only one circumstance that deterred me: I did not dare to picture Olesya in a stylish dress, talking in my drawing-room with the wives of my colleagues—an Olesya snatched out of the enchanting setting of the old forest that was so full of legend and mystery.

But as the day of my departure approached I was beset by a deep sadness and a growing horror of solitude. My determination to marry Olesya grew firmer every day, and I no longer saw it as an audacious challenge to society. "After all, there are good and learned men who marry seamstresses and housemaids, aren't there?" I reassured myself. "And they live very well together and to their last day bless the destiny which led them to take that decision. I hope my luck won't be any worse."

One day in mid-June I was waiting for Olesya as usual at the curve of a narrow forest path winding between hawthorn shrubs in bloom. I recognized from afar her light, quick footfall.

"Good evening, my love," said Olesya, a little breathless as she put her arms round me. "Kept you waiting a long time, didn't I? I could hardly get away. Had a quarrel with Granny."

"Is she still carrying it on?"

"Oh, yes! 'He'll be your undoing,' she says. 'He'll have his fill of fun with you and then throw you over. He doesn't love you a bit.' "

"Meaning me, eh?"

"Yes, darling. But I don't believe a word of it."

"Does she know everything?"

"I can't say for sure. I think she does. I never talk to her about it—she does her own guessing. Oh, well, no need to worry. Come along."

She broke off a hawthorn sprig with a rich cluster of white blossoms and stuck it in her hair. We started on a leisurely stroll along the path, to which the afternoon sun gave a touch of pink.

I had decided the night before that this evening I would speak at any cost. But a strange timidity tied my tongue. I wondered whether Olesya would believe me if I told her about my departure and my decision to marry her. Might she not take my proposal as a mere attempt to lessen, to assuage the first pain of the wound I was inflicting upon her? "I'll begin as soon as we get to that barked maple," I said to myself. We came alongside it, and, paling with agitation, I took a deep breath to speak, but unexpectedly my courage ebbed, resolving into a nervous, painful heart-beat and a cold sensation in the mouth. "Twenty-seven's my lucky number," I thought a few minutes later. "I'll count to twenty-seven and then—" And I began counting in my mind, but on reaching twenty-seven I felt that my resolution was

not yet ripe. "No," I told myself, "I'd better count on to sixty— that'll make exactly one minute, and then I'll certainly begin."

"Is anything wrong, dear?" Olesya asked me all of a sudden. "You're thinking of something unpleasant. What is it?"

Then I did speak, but it was in a tone hateful to myself, with an affected, unnatural carelessness, as though it were a question of some trifle.

"Yes, it is a little unpleasant—you guessed right, Olesya. You see, my service here is over, and my superiors want me back in town."

Glancing sideways at Olesya, I saw her face drain of colour and her lips tremble. But she did not speak a word in reply. I walked on beside her for a few minutes. Grasshoppers were chirping loudly, and far off I could hear the monotonous creak of a landrail.

"Of course you understand, Olesya," I began afresh, "that I can't very well stay here, and I have no place to stay either. And then I mustn't neglect my duties."

"No, I suppose not—that's clear enough," she replied, with seeming calm but in so toneless and flat a voice that I felt a dread. "Since it's your duty you must go—of course."

She halted near a tree and leaned her back against it, pale as a sheet, with arms hanging limply at her sides, a miserable, painful smile on her lips. Her pallor frightened me. I rushed to her and gripped her hands.

"Olesya! What is it, Olesya dear?"

"Never mind—I'm sorry—I'll be all right. I just felt dizzy."

She made an effort and stepped forward, without taking away her hand.

"You must have thought badly of me just now, Olesya," I said reproachfully. "Shame on you! Do you, too, imagine that I could go and leave you? No, my dear. As a matter of fact, I started this talk because I want to tell your grandmother this very night that you're going to be my wife."

To my utter perplexity, she was hardly surprised to hear that.

"Your wife?" She shook her head, slowly and sadly. "No, Vanya dear, that's impossible!"

"But why, Olesya? Why?"

"No, no. You know yourself it's silly even to think of it. What sort of a wife would I make you? You're a gentleman, you're clever and educated, and I? Why, I can't even re-ad, and I don't know how to behave. You'd be ashamed of me."

"What nonsense, Olesya!" I remonstrated hotly. "You won't recognize yourself in six months from now. You have no idea how intelligent and quick-witted you are. We'll read lots of good books together, meet kind, intelligent people, see the whole wide world, Olesya. We'll be together all our lives, just as we are now, and far from feeling ashamed of you, I'll be proud of you, and grateful to you!"

In answer to my passionate speech she squeezed my hand with feeling, but stood firm.

"But that isn't all! Perhaps you don't know it. I've never told you. You see, I have no father. I'm illegitimate."

"Stop it, Olesya. That's my least worry. What do I care about your kin if you yourself are dearer to me than my own father or mother, dearer than the whole world? It's all nonsense and petty excuses!"

She pressed her shoulder to mine in a gentle, submissive caress.

"My dear one! It would be better if you had never started this talk. You're young and free. Do you think I could bind you hand and foot for life? What if you

came to care for another woman afterwards? Then you'd hate me, and you'd curse the hour when I agreed to marry you. Don't be angry, dear!" she cried entreatingly as she saw from my face that I was pained. "I don't want to hurt you. I'm only thinking of your happiness. And you forgot about Granny. Judge for yourself—would it be fair of me to leave her all alone?"

"Well, we'd find room for her too." Frankly, the idea came as a shock to me. "And in case she didn't care to live with us, there are homes in any town—they're called alms-houses—where old women like her get all the rest and care they need."

"Oh, no, that's impossible. She won't go anywhere away from the woods. She's afraid of people."

"Then think how to settle that best, Olesya. You'll have to choose between Granny and me. Only remember that without you life will be torture to me."

"My love!" she murmured with deep tenderness "Thank you just for saying that. You've warmed my heart. But still I shan't marry you. I'd» rather go with you as I am, if you'll have me. Only please wait a little—don't rush me. Give me a couple of days to think it over. I must talk to Granny too."

"Look here, Olesya," I said as a fresh idea suddenly occurred to me. "Isn't it again that you're afraid of church?"

I ought probably to have begun from that end. I argued with Olesya almost daily, trying to reassure her about the alleged curse weighing on her family because of the magic powers they possessed. Virtually every Russian intellectual is a bit of an enlightener. It is in our blood, it has been inculcated by Russian literature of the last decades. Perhaps if Olesya had been deeply religious, if she had strictly kept the fasts and had not missed a single service in church, I might have mocked—just a little, because I have always been religious myself—at her piety and worked to develop the critical inquisitiveness of her mind. But, the fact was that, with firm and naive conviction, she confessed her communion with dark forces and her estrangement from God, whom she was afraid even to mention.

My efforts to shake her superstition were futile. All my logic, all my mockery, at times rude and cruel, smashed against her meek faith in her mysterious and fatal mission.

"Ape you afraid of church, Olesya?" I asked again.

She silently bowed her head.

"You think God won't accept you?" I went on, with mounting passion. "You think he won't have mercy enough for you? He who, while commanding millions of angels, descended upon the earth and died a terrible, an ignominious death for the salvation of all men? He who didn't disdain the repentance of the lowest woman and promised a robber and murderer that he would join him in paradise that same day?"

There was nothing new to Olesya in all that—we had talked about it before; but this time she would not even listen to me. With a swift movement she pulled off her shawl, crumpled it, and flung it in my face. A playful struggle began. I tried to snatch away her hawthorn blossom. In resisting me she fell and pulled me down with her, laughing happily and putting up to me her sweet moist lips, parted by fast breathing.

Late that night, when we had separated and gone a considerable distance from each other, I heard Olesya calling to me, "Vanya! Wait a moment. I want to tell you something!"

I walked back to meet her. She ran up to me. The indented silvery crescent of the new moon was in the sky, and by its wan light I saw that Olesya's eyes were full of large tears.

"What is it, Olesya?" I asked anxiously. She seized my hands and began to kiss them in turn. "Darling! How good you are! How kind!" she said in a tremulous voice. "I've just been thinking how much you love me. And, you know, I want so much to do something very, very nice for you." "Olesya, my wonderful girl, calm yourself!" "Tell me," she went on, "would you be very glad if I went to church some day? Only tell me the truth, the real truth."

I pondered. A superstitious thought occurred to me: might that not bring on some misfortune?

"Well, why don't you speak? Tell me, quick, would you be glad, or wouldn't you care?"

"How shall I put it, Olesya?" I stammered. "Well, yes, I suppose I'd be pleased. I've often told you, haven't I, that a man may not believe, he may doubt, or even sneer. But a woman—a woman should be pious without question. I always feel there's something movingly feminine and beautiful in the simple and sweet confidence with which she commits herself to God's protection."

I paused. Olesya made no reply, nestling her head against my chest.

"But why did you ask me about it?" I inquired.

She started.

"Oh, I just wanted to know. Forget about it. Well, goodbye, darling. Be sure to come tomorrow."

She was gone. I peered for a long time into the darkness, listening to the rapidly receding footfall. Suddenly I was gripped by a dreadful foreboding. I felt an irresistible urge to run after Olesya, to overtake her and beg her, implore her not to go to church, or even demand it if necessary. But I checked my impulse, and said aloud as I turned to walk homewards, "You seem to have gone superstitious yourself, my dear Vanya."

Oh, God! Why did I not yield then to the vague impulse of my heart which—I now believe in this absolutely!— never errs in its swift, secret presentiments?

XII

The day after that meeting happened to be Trinity Sunday. That year the feast fell upon the day of Timothy the Martyr when, according to popular legend, signs of crop failure appear. The village of Perebrod had a church but no priest, and the rare services—at Lent and on major feasts—were held by a visiting priest from the village of Volchye.

That day I had to go to the neighbouring town on business, and I set out on horseback about eight o'clock in the morning, when it was still cool. I had long before bought for my trips a small stallion about six or seven years old. It was of an ordinary local breed but had been carefully groomed by its former owner, a land surveyor. Its name was Taranchik. I had taken a great fancy to the likeable beast with its strong, shapely legs, its shaggy forelock under which gleamed an angry and distrustful eye, and its vigorously compressed lips. Its colour was rather

a rare and amusing one: it was mouse-grey, except that the rump was dappled with white and black spots.

I had to ride through the village from end to end. The large green square spreading between the church and the tavern was completely taken up by long rows of carts in which peasants from the neighbouring villages of Volosha, Zulnya and Pechalovka had arrived with wives and children for the feast. People were bustling among the carts. Despite the early hour and strict regulations some of them were already drunk. (On holidays and at night, vodka could be got on the sly from the former publican, Srul.) The morning was windless and sultry. The air was humid, and the day promised to be unbearably hot. Not the smallest cloud could be seen in the torrid sky, which seemed to be veiled in silvery dust.

After settling my business in town, I went to the inn for a hurried meal of pike, stuffed Jewish fashion, washed it down with abominable, muddy beer, and started homewards. But as I was riding by the smithy I recalled that Taranchik's left foreshoe had been loose for some time, and I halted to have it attended to. That took me another hour and a half, so that I rode up to Perebrod some time between four and five o'clock in the afternoon.

The square was teeming with drunken, boisterous people. Customers jostling and crushing each other had literally flooded the courtyard and the porch of the tavern; Perebrod peasants were mixed with arrivals from the neighbourhood, sitting on the grass in the shade of carts. Heads tipped back and upraised bottles could be seen everywhere. There was not a single man left sober. The general intoxication had reached the point where the muzhik begins impetuously and boastfully to exaggerate his drunkenness, where he begins to move with a heavy, flabby swing, so that instead of, say, nodding his head he sags from the thighs, bends his knees and, suddenly losing his equilibrium, lurches helplessly back. Children were romping and screaming at the feet of horses impassively chewing hay. Here and there a wailing, swearing woman, who could scarcely stand up herself, tugged at the sleeve of her balking, disgustingly drunken husband, trying to get him home. In the shade of a fence, a group of about twenty peasant men and women formed a close ring round a blind hurdy-gurdy player, whose quaking tenor, accompanied by monotonous humming, came out sharply above the general uproar. I heard the familiar words of a ballad:

*Ho, the evening sun went down,
The dark night quickly fell.
Ho, the Turkish horde swept down
Like a black cloud from hell.*

The ballad goes on to tell how the Turks, unable to take the Pochayev Monastery by assault, resorted to a ruse. They sent as a gift to the monastery a huge candle stuffed with gunpowder. The candle was delivered by a team of twelve pairs of oxen and the overjoyed monks were about to light it before the icon of the Pochayev Virgin, but God did not allow the heinous crime to be committed.

*A vision then the lector had—
He was cautioned by Our Lord
To take the candle to the field*

And smite it with his sword.

And the monks did so:

*Then they took out into the field
And smote the candle down,
And balls and bullets from inside
They scattered all around.*

The hot air seemed to be pervaded through and through by the sickening mixed smell of vodka, onions, sheepskin coats, strong home-grown tobacco, and dirty, sweating human bodies. Carefully threading my way through the crowd and with difficulty holding back the restless Taranchik, I met unceremonious, inquisitive and hostile looks as I rode along. Contrary to custom no one took off his cap, but the noise seemed to subside a little at my appearance. Suddenly a drunken hoarse shout rang out somewhere in the middle of the crowd; I could not make out the words, but it was greeted by subdued laughter. A frightened woman's voice tried to check the shouter.

"Shut up, you fool! What are you yelling for? He might hear you."

"What if he does?" the man cried boldly. "Is he my boss or something? It's only in the woods, with his—"

A long, foul, terrible sentence rent the air, together with a burst of uproarious laughter. I swiftly turned my horse about and clutched the handle of my whip, seized with that mad fury which is blind to everything, which does not reason and fears no one. And suddenly a strange, painful thought crossed my mind: "All this has happened to me before—many, many years ago. The sun was just as hot. The huge square was flooded with a noisy, excited crowd as it is now. I turned about just as now in a fit of frenzied anger. But where was that? When?" I lowered my whip and galloped off homewards.

Yarmola came slowly out of the kitchen. He took over the horse, and said roughly, "There's the steward from Marinovka Estate waiting for you in your room, master."

I fancied that he was about to add something—something very important and disagreeable to me—indeed I thought I saw the shadow of a malicious smirk flit across his face. I lingered purposely in the doorway and looked back at him defiantly. But he was already pulling at the bridle, with his face turned away, and the horse was gingerly following him with outstretched neck.

I found in my room Nikita Mishchenko from the neighbouring estate. He wore a short grey jacket with enormous russet checks, narrow trousers of cornflower blue and a flaming necktie. His greased hair was parted in the middle, and he gave off a fragrance of Persian Lilac. The moment he saw me he jumped up from his seat and began to scrape, doubling up at the waist rather than bowing, with a grin that bared the pallid gums of both jaws.

"My compliments," he chattered amiably. "Very happy to see you. I've been waiting for you since mass. It's such a long time since I saw you last that I thought I'd drop in. Why don't you ever come and see us? The young ladies are making fun of you."

And suddenly, remembering something, he burst out laughing uncontrollably.

"Some fun we had today, I can tell you!" he cried, choking with laughter. "Ha-ha-ha! I just split my sides!"

"What do you mean? What fun?" I cut in rudely, making no effort to conceal my displeasure.

"There was a row after mass here," he continued, punctuating his speech with peals of laughter. "Some Perebrod girls—no, by God, I can't! Some Perebrod girls caught a witch in the square. I mean, they consider her a witch, the ignorant rustics. Well, they gave her a nice shake-up! They were going to tar her, but she slipped away somehow."

A terrible conviction flashed upon me. I rushed to the clerk and clutched at his shoulder, beside myself with anxiety.

"What are you talking about?" I roared in a frenzy. "Stop laughing, damn you! What witch do you mean?"

He at once broke off his laughter and stared at me, his eyes bulging with fright.

"I—er—I really don't know, sir," he spluttered in confusion. "I think her name's Samuilikha, or Manuilikha—wait a second, she's the daughter of a Manuilikha, it seems. The muzhiks were talking about it, but I forgot what they said, honestly."

I made him tell me from the beginning all he had seen and heard. He spoke stupidly, incoherently, mixing up details, and every moment I interrupted him by impatient questions or exclamations, all but swearing at him. I gleaned very little from his story, and it was not until about two months later that I reconstructed the accursed event in its entirety from what the forester's wife, who had been at mass that day, told me.

Presentiment had not deceived me. Olesya had overcome her fear and gone to church; she had arrived when, mass was half finished, and placed herself at the back of the aisle, but all the peasants who were there at once noticed her. Throughout the service the women whispered among themselves and kept on looking back. :

Nevertheless, Olesya mustered up courage enough to remain in church till the end of mass. Perhaps she had misunderstood the meaning of the hostile looks, or had ignored them out of pride. But when she walked out of the church, a bunch of women surrounded her by the fence, growing from minute to minute and closing in on her. At first they only stared rudely at the helpless girl, who was casting terrified glances about her. Then came a shower of coarse jeers, salty words, oaths accompanied by laughter, and then the various cries merged into a continuous ear-splitting noise that excited the women to an even greater fury. Olesya made several attempts to break out of the terrible live ring, but she was pushed back into the centre again and again. Suddenly an old woman screeched from behind the crowd, "Tar her, the hussy!" (In the Ukraine tarring, even of the gate of the house in which a girl lives, is a great, indelible disgrace to her.) Almost instantly a pail with tar and brush appeared above the heads of the raging women, and was passed on from hand to hand.

Then Olesya, in a fit of anger, terror and despair, flew at one of her tormentors so violently that she knocked her down. A scuffle ensued, with dozens of women in a bawling, struggling mass on the ground. By some miracle Olesya succeeded in wriggling out of the tangle, and she started to run down the road, her kerchief gone, her dress torn to rags and her naked flesh showing in many places. The crowd swore and laughed and hooted, and hurled stones at her. But she was chased by only a few, who soon fell back. Having run about fifty feet away,

Olesya stopped, turned her pale, scratched and bleeding face to the brutal mob, and shouted so loudly that every word could be heard in the square, "All right! You'll remember this! You'll cry your eyes out yet!"

The threat, as the eyewitness told me, was uttered with such passionate hatred, in such a resolute, prophetic tone, that for an instant the whole crowd seemed to freeze with fear; but it only lasted an instant, for the next moment there came a fresh burst of oaths.

I repeat that I did not learn many details of the incident until much later. I had neither the strength nor the patience to hear Mishchenko's story to the end. I thought that Yarmola had probably not had time to unsaddle the horse, and I hurried out into the courtyard without a word to the dumbfounded clerk. And so it was —Yarmola was still walking Taranchik back and forth along the fence. I quickly bridled the horse, tightened the saddle-girth, and galloped off to the forest by a roundabout way, so as not to have to go through the drunken crowd again.

XIII

My state during that furious race is beyond description. At moments I completely forgot where I was riding and why. I was vaguely aware that something irreparable, something- absurd and terrible had happened— an awareness that was like the deep, groundless anxiety that sometimes besets you in a feverish nightmare. And, oddly enough, the broken, thin voice of the blind hurdy-gurdy player kept on echoing in my mind to the rhythm of the horse's clatter:

*Ho, the Turkish horde swept down
Like a black cloud from hell.*

Having reached the narrow path which led straight up to Manuilikha's hut, I alighted from Taranchik and led him by the bridle. The edges of his saddle-cloth and the parts of his skin covered by the harness were thickly lathered. Because of the intense heat of the day and the swift ride, the blood was rushing through my head as if a huge pump were forcing it relentlessly.

I tied the horse to the fence and walked into the hut. At first I thought Olesya was not there, and I froze inwardly with fear; but a minute later I saw her lying in bed, her face to the wall and her head buried in the pillows. She did not turn her head as the door opened.

Manuilikha, who was sitting on the floor by the bed, struggled to her feet and waved her arms at me.

"Quiet! Go easy, curse you!" she whispered threateningly, and stepped close up to me. Looking straight at me with her faded, cold eyes, she hissed angrily, "Well? See where you've got us, my friend?"

"Look here, Grandmother," I replied sternly, "this is no time for settling accounts and finding fault. How's Olesya?"

"Hush! Quiet! She's unconscious, that's how she is. If only you hadn't stuck your nose into what was no business of yours, if only you hadn't told the girl all

sorts of foolish things, nothing would have happened. And I, old fool that I am, looked on and winked at it. I knew there was trouble ahead. I'd known it ever since you almost broke into this hut. Well? Are you going to tell me it wasn't you who talked her into going to church?" she burst out suddenly, her face distorted with hatred. "Wasn't it you, you damned idler? Don't you lie now, don't shift and shuffle like a fox, you shameless cur! Why did you have to get her to church?"

"I didn't, Grandmother. Upon my word I didn't. She wanted it herself."

"Oh, God!" she wrung her hands. "She came back, her face an awful sight, her blouse in rags, her kerchief gone. And when she told me about it all she laughed and cried as if she were mad. She lay down in bed and cried and cried, and then I saw she'd sort of dozed off. I was so glad, old fool that I am, thinking she'd sleep it off and get over it. I saw her arm was hanging down, so I said to myself, 'I must put the arm right or else it'll get numb.' I touched her arm—it was burning hot. She'd got fever, my poor darling. She talked without stopping for about an hour, so fast and so pitifully. She stopped only a moment ago. See what you've done. See what you've done to her!" she cried, in a new surge of despair.

And suddenly her brown face twisted into a monstrous, horrible weeping grimace: her lips stretched and drooped at the corners, all her facial muscles became taut and trembled, her eyebrows rose high, furrowing her forehead with deep wrinkles, and tears as large as peas rolled from her eyes with extraordinary rapidity. Clasping her head with her hands and putting her elbows on the table, she started rocking back and forth with all her body.

"My own li-i-ttle one!" she howled. "My de-ear little gi-irl! Oh, how mis-er-able I a-am!"

"Stop your wailing, old woman," I interrupted her rudely, "you'll wake her up!"

She fell silent, but went on rocking to and fro with the same horrible grimace on her face, while large tears kept dropping on the table. About ten minutes passed thus. I sat by Manuilikha's side and listened in anguish to the monotonous, jerky buzzing of a fly beating against the window-pane.

"Granny!" we suddenly heard Olesya call in a feeble, scarcely audible voice. "Granny, who's here?"

Manuilikha shambled hastily to the bed, and at once resumed her wailing.

"Oh, my dear girl, my o-o-own! Oh, how miserable I am, how wretched!"

"Stop it, Granny, please!" said Olesya, with pitiful entreaty and suffering in her voice. "Who's in our hut?"

I tiptoed to the bed with an awkward, guilty awareness of my good health and clumsiness—a feeling you always have with a sick person.

"It's me, Olesya," I said, lowering my voice. "I've just ridden down from the village. I was in town all morning. Are you feeling bad, Olesya?"

Without taking her face away from the pillows, she stretched her bare arm backwards, as if groping in the air. I understood, and took her hot hand in both my hands. Two huge blue spots, one above the wrist and the other above the elbow, stood out sharply on her white, delicate skin.

"My dear one," Olesya began slowly, spacing her words with difficulty. "I want to—look at you so, but I can't, They've spoiled—my face. Remember—you liked it? You did like it, darling, didn't you? And I was always so glad you did——But now you'll be disgusted—to see me! Well, so I—don't want you to." "Forgive me, Olesya," I whispered, bending low over her ear. Her burning hand held mine for a long-time in a strong grasp.

"How can you say that? How can you, darling? Aren't you ashamed to think of it? Is it your fault? I brought it on myself, fool that I am. Why did I have to do it at all? No, my love, don't blame yourself."

"Allow me, Olesya—But first promise you'll do what I ask."

"I promise, dear—anything you wish."

"Please allow me to send for the doctor. I beg you! You may do nothing of what he tells you to, if you don't care to. But say yes for my sake at least, Olesya! "

"Oh, darling! How you trapped me! No, please allow me not to keep my promise. I wouldn't let a doctor come near me even if I really were ill and dying. And I am not. I was just scared, that's all, I'll get over it by tonight. And if I don't, Granny will give me an infusion of lilies of the valley, or tea with raspberries. Why call a doctor? You are my best doctor. I feel much better now that you're here. There's only one thing I'm sorry for: I'd like to have a look at you, just one look, but I'm afraid."

With tender effort I raised her head from the pillow. Her face was blazing feverishly, her dark eyes shone with unnatural brightness, her parched lips twitched. Long, red scars furrowed her face and neck. She had dark bruises on her forehead and under her eyes.

"Don't look at me. Please don't. I'm ugly now," she whispered imploringly, trying to shut my eyes with her hand.

My heart brimmed over with pity. I pressed my lips to her hand, which lay motionless on the blanket, and covered it with long, gentle kisses. I had kissed her hands before, but she had always snatched them away bashfully. But now she did not resist my caress, and stroked my hair with her other hand.

"Do you know everything?" she asked me in a whisper.

I nodded. I had not made out all that Mishchenko had told me, but I did not want Olesya to upset herself recalling that morning's incident. Yet at the thought of the outrage done to her I was gripped with mad fury.

"Oh, why wasn't I there at the time!" I cried, straightening up and clenching my fists. "I'd—I'd—"

"Please don't. It's all right, really. Don't be angry, dear," Olesya stopped me meekly.

I could no longer hold back the tears that had been choking me and burning my eyes. Putting my face to Olesya's shoulder, I broke into silent and bitter sobs, shaking all over.

"You're crying?" Her voice rang with surprise, tenderness, and compassion. "My darling! Please stop—don't torture yourself, dear. I feel so happy with you. Let's not cry while we're together. Let's be gay these last days, and then it won't be so hard for us to part."

I raised my head in surprise. An uncertain presentiment slowly took hold of my heart.

"The last days, Olesya? Why the last? Why should we part?"

She closed her eyes, and did not speak for a few seconds.

"We've got to part, Vanya," she said with determination. "We'll leave as soon as I feel a bit better. We can't stay here any more."

"Are you afraid of something?"

"No, dear, I'm not afraid of anything, if it comes to that. Only why drive people to crime? Perhaps you don't know. Over there in Perebrod I threatened them—I was so angry and ashamed. Now they're going to blame us for anything that

happens. Whether it's cattle dying or a house catching fire, we shall be held guilty. Am I right, Granny?" she asked, raising her voice.

"What were you saying, my girl? I didn't hear," mumbled Manuilikha, coming nearer and cupping her hand round her ear.

"I was saying that now they'll blame us for any misfortune that may happen in Perebrod."

"So they will, Olesya, they'll blame poor us for everything. They won't let us live in peace, they'll do us in, they will, the damned fools. And that time they drove me out of the village—wasn't it the same thing? I threatened in anger a silly cow of a woman, and then her baby died. God knows I had nothing to do with it, but they nearly killed me, curse them. They threw stones at me as I ran away, and I only tried to shield you—you were only a child. 'Let 'em hit me,' I said to myself, 'but why should harm come to an innocent child?' They're barbarians, a bunch of heathens fit for the gallows, that's what they are!"

"But where can you go? You have no kith or kin anywhere. Besides, you need money to settle in a new place."

"We'll manage somehow," said Olesya carelessly. "Granny'll dig up some money, she's laid something by."

"Do you call that money?" Manuilikha replied testily, moving away from the bed. "It's just a few measly kopeks soaked in tears."

"What about me, Olesya? You won't even think of me!" I cried, with bitter, unkind reproach.

She sat up and, unembarrassed by Manuilikha's presence, took my head into her hands and kissed me several times on the forehead and cheeks.

"I'm thinking of you more than of anybody else, my love. Only, you see, we aren't destined to be together. Remember I laid out the cards for you? Everything's turned out just as they told me then. That means fate doesn't want you and me to be happy together. Do you think I'd be afraid of anything if it weren't for that?"

"Talking about fate again!" I cried impatiently. "I don't want to believe in it, and I never will!"

"Oh, no, no! Don't say that," she whispered in fright. "It's for you I'm afraid, dear, not for myself. You'd better not start talking about it at all."

I tried in vain to dissuade her, painting her a picture of unruffled happiness that neither fate nor coarse, cruel people would be able to disturb. Olesya merely kissed my hands, shaking her head.

"No, no—I know, I can see it," she insisted. "It would be nothing but sorrow, nothing at all."

Disconcerted and confused by her superstitious obstinacy, I finally asked her, "Will you at least let me know when you're going?"

She reflected. Then a faint smile touched her lips.

"I'll tell you a little story. One day a wolf was running through the wood and he saw a hare. 'I'll eat you up, hare!' he says. 'Have pity on me, wolf,' the hare begged, 'I want to live, my little ones are waiting for me at home.' The wolf wouldn't listen to him. Then the hare said, 'Well, at least let me live three days longer, and then you may eat me up. It'll be easier for me to die that way.' The wolf gave him the three days—he didn't eat him up, just kept an eye on him. One day passed, then another, and at last the third day came. 'Get ready now,' says the wolf, 'I'm going to eat you.' And the hare began to cry bitterly. 'Why did you ever give me those three days, wolf! You should have eaten me up as soon as you saw me. Those three days

were worse than death to me!' That hare spoke the truth, dear. Don't you think so?"

I did not speak, overcome by a gloomy anticipation of solitude to come. Suddenly Olesya sat up in bed; she spoke very earnest.

"Tell me, Vanya," she said with emphasis, "were you happy while we were together?"

"Olesya! How can you ask?"

"Wait. Were you sorry you had met me? Did you think of any other woman while you were with me?"

"Not for a second! Not only in your presence but even when I was alone, I thought of nobody but you."

"Were you jealous? Were you ever displeased with me? Were you bored in my company?"

"Never, Olesya! Never!"

She put her hands on my shoulders and gazed into my eyes with ineffable love.

"Well, then, my dear one, you'll never think of me unkindly or angrily," she said, as firmly as if she were reading my future in my eyes. "You'll feel unhappy at first after we part, oh, so very unhappy! You'll cry, you won't have any peace. Then it'll pass and be gone. And afterwards you'll think of me without sorrow, but with a light and joyful heart."

She put her head back on the pillow.

"Now go, dear," she whispered feebly. "Go home, darling. I'm a little tired. Wait—give me a kiss. Don't be afraid of Granny—she won't mind. You won't mind, will you, Granny?"

"All right, all right, say goodbye properly," Manuilikha answered grudgingly. "What's the use of hiding from me? I've known it for a long time."

"Kiss me here, and here, and here," said Olesya, putting her finger to her eyes, cheeks, and mouth.

"Olesya! You're saying goodbye to me as if we weren't going to meet any more!" I exclaimed, frightened.

"I don't know, darling. I don't know anything. Well, now go in peace. No, wait one more second. Bend your ear to me. Do you know what I'm sorry about?" she whispered, her lips touching my cheek. "It's that I have no baby of yours. Oh, how happy I'd have been!"

I walked out, accompanied by Manuilikha. A black cloud with a sharply outlined curly rim covered half the sky, but the sun was still shining as it dipped westwards, and there was something sinister about that blend of light and oncoming darkness. The old woman looked up, shading her eyes with her hand, and shook her head significantly.

"There'll be a rainstorm over Perebrod today," she said with conviction. "It may even hail, which God forbid."

I had almost reached Perebrod when a sudden whirlwind snatched up clouds of dust and sent them rolling along the road. The first drops of rain—few and heavy—came down.

Manuilikha had been right. The rainstorm, which had been gathering throughout that hot, sweltering day, burst above Perebrod with extraordinary force. The lightning flashed almost incessantly, and my window-panes shook and resounded with the peals of thunder. The storm died down for a few minutes towards eight o'clock in the evening, only to begin again with fresh violence. Suddenly something drummed on the roof and against the walls of the old house with a deafening noise. I dashed to the window. Huge hailstones, the size of walnuts, were hurtling down and bouncing off the ground. I looked at the mulberry-tree that grew near the house; it was completely bare, all its leaves knocked off by the battering hail. In the gloom below the window, I saw the dark figure of Yarmola, who had run out of the kitchen, his head and shoulders covered by his coat, to close the shutters. But he was too late. An enormous lump of ice struck against one pane with such force that the glass was smashed to smithereens, and bits of it tinkled on to the floor of my room.

Feeling tired, I lay down on my bed without undressing. I thought I should be unable to sleep that night and should toss in helpless anguish till morning; I therefore decided not to take off my clothes, so that afterwards I might tire myself a little by monotonously pacing the room. But a very strange thing happened. It seemed to me that I had closed my eyes for only a moment; but when I opened them again bright sunbeams were slanting through the chinks in the shutters, with countless golden dust-grains whirling in their light.

Yarmola was standing over my bed, with a look of severe anxiety and impatient expectation on his face. He must have been waiting a long time for me to wake up.

"Master," he said in a voice that sounded alarmed. "Master, you've got to go away."

I swung down my feet, and looked at him in astonishment.

"Go? Go where? Why? You must be crazy."

"No, I ain't," he snarled. "Do you know what the hail did last night? Half the crops are as if they'd been trampled down. One-eyed Maxim's, Kozyol's, Mut's, the Prokopchuk's, Gordy Olefir's—So she did make trouble, the accursed witch! May she wither!"

In a flash I recalled all that had happened on the previous day, the threat which Olesya had shouted near the church, and her fears.

"Now the whole community's up," Yarmola went on. "They've all been drinking since the morning, and now they're yelling. They're shouting some nasty things about you too, master. And d'you know what our people are like? If they do anything to those witches it'll serve 'em right—it'll only be fair. But to you, master, I'll say this much: get out as fast as you can."

So Olesya's fears had come true. I must immediately warn her and Manuilikha of the impending danger. I dressed in great haste, splashed some water on my face, and half an hour later was riding towards Devil's Nook at a brisk trot.

The nearer I drew to the witch's hut the greater became the uncertain, painful anxiety I felt. I was telling myself that a new, unexpected sorrow was about to befall me.

I fairly ran along the path winding up the sandy slope. The windows of the hut were open, the door stood ajar.

"My God! What's happened here?" I whispered, my heart sinking as I stepped in.

The hut was empty. Inside was that sad mess which always marks a hasty departure. Rubbish and rags lay in heaps on the floor, and the wooden frame of the bedstead stood bare in its corner.

My heart heavy and welling up with tears, I was about to walk out when my attention was caught by a bright object hung on a corner of the window-frame, obviously on purpose. It was a string of the cheap red beads known in Polesye as "corals": the only thing left to me as a keepsake of Olesya and her tender, generous love.

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