

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

## THE RIVER PLAYS

### Sketches from a Travel Diary

Translated from the Russian by Suzanne Rozenberg

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#### I

For some time after I awoke, I could not quite grasp where I was.

Overhead spread the blue sky; a silvery cloud was drifting languidly across it and melting away. Tossing my head back a little, I could see high above a dark wooden church which glanced down innocently at me from behind a clump of trees on a hilltop. A few yards away, on my right, stood an unfamiliar-looking hut, on my left—a drab, graceless pole, with a wide plank shelter, an alms cup nailed to it, and a board on which was written:

*Give alms, passer-by,  
for the Lord's bell.*

At my very feet splashed the tide.

It was the splashing that awakened me from my sweet slumber. It had long been poking into my consciousness with its disturbing whisper, like a loving but at the same time relentless voice rousing one at dawn to begin the day's inevitable labours. And one is so reluctant to rise....

I shut my eyes again, so that lying still I could account to myself how I came to be here at all, beneath the wide sky, on the banks of the splashing river, a stone's throw from that hut and that pole with its unembellished appeal to the passers-by.

Bit by bit I was able to reconstruct the preceding events. Thus all of the previous day I had spent on the shore of the Holy Lake, in the whereabouts of the submerged, as legend had it, invisible town of Kitez, milling around with the crowds there, listening to the twangy singing of blind beggars, pausing before makeshift altars under spreading trees, where *bespopovtsi* and breakaway monks and nuns of every persuasion chanted their own masses, while in other parts of the

lake's shore, religious arguments waxed hot in dense knots of people. I spent the whole night long on my feet, squeezed in among the teeming crowd in front of the old chapel. I remembered the fatigued faces of a missionary and two priests, the books piled up on the lectern, the flames of the tallow candles by which the debaters traced texts in the heavy folios to back up their arguments, the flushed faces of the schismatists and the church conformists who met with much vociferation every sound objection to their views. There came back to me, too, the old chapel, with the yellow lights flickering in front of the icons seen through its open doors, and the bright moon sailing gently across the dark sky above the chapel and the shadowy, whispering trees. With difficulty I elbowed out of the crowd at dawn, coming into the open, weary, dispirited by the futility of the scholastic arguments, disheartened and disappointed. Following in the wake of the departing pietists, I dragged myself along the field paths in the direction of the blue strip of forest on the banks of the Vetluga. I was carrying away with me the most wearisome impressions from the shores of the Holy Lake, and the invisible town, to which the populace was so hypnotically drawn. It seemed to me that I had spent that sleepless night in a suffocating tomb by dim and fading lamplight, listening to a chant from behind the wall, recited in a droning voice, a prayer mourning the irrevocable dormancy of popular thought.

The sun had already risen above the woods and waters of the Vetluga when, after walking about fifteen versts along forest paths, I reached the river bank. And there and then I dropped on the sand, overcome by fatigue and by the dour impressions I carried away from the shore of the lake.

With these latter behind me now, I gladly shook off the remains of my drowsiness and sat up on my bed of sand.

## II

The river's friendly murmur did me a good turn indeed. Three hours before when I settled down for a nap on the beach—and a wait for a Vetluga steamboat to pick me up—the water was at low ebb, its edge marked by an old overturned boat; but now on waking I found the boat being washed and rocked by the tide. The river was a rushing and frothing mass, splashing practically at my feet. Thus in another half hour—had I been more soundly asleep—I might have found myself wrestling with the water, not unlike the capsized boat.

It looked like the Vetluga was on a rampage. There had been heavy rain during the last few days; torrents rolled from the depths of the woods; the river swelled and flooded its gay, verdant banks. Swift streamlets now chased one another, pushing, spinning ahead, twirling into eddies and untwirling, and again rushing headlong, the whole river transformed into racing and hurtling whorls of cream-coloured froth. At the edge of the water, the burdock, caught up by the tide, struggled to get free, the unsubmerged tops swaying tremulously above the water. But where the river was deeper, the same burdock and colt's foot, indeed the entire brotherhood of fern and plant, seemed resigned to their fate, while osier saplings with their green overhanging twigs shuddered at every surge of the water.

On the opposite bank the broom, young oak growth and the white willow were gaily tousled. Behind them dusky firs traced a serrated line, and farther still

towered the black poplars and stately pines. Stacks of planks, freshly-cut logs and house frames gleamed white in one spot of the banks. A little distance away the top of a sunken landing-stage jutted from the water.... This entire placid landscape seemed to come alive before my eyes, impregnated now with the swish, splash and gurgle of the agitated river. There in the deep stream splashed the playful eddies; the waves tinkled as they beat upon the sides of the decrepit boat. The entire river vibrated with the perpetual bursting of fluffy whorls of froth, or "bloom", as they term it here on the banks of the Vetluga.

I felt I had seen all this long before; it seemed so near and dear, so poignantly familiar: the river with its curly banks, the unassuming little church on the hilltop, the hut, and the plea to give alms for the "Lord's bell" looking down at me from the pole in a diffident scribble....

*It had all happened long before,  
But when I remember not....*

A poet's lines came to mind.

### III

"Eh, man, I saw the river creep up on ye as I be passing home. On my way back me thinks—bet the river's got at him. You be sleeping sound, good man!"

The speaker is a man in his middle years. He is sitting on a bench in front of the hut; the sounds of his speech, too, are oddly familiar and pleasant. He has a deep chest voice, slightly hoarse as from a bad hangover, but with notes in it just as simple and guileless as are the little church, the road post and the inscription on it.

"Look ye at the river! It's wild ... trouble's a-coming, mark ye!"

This is Tyulin, the ferryman—he sits there crestfallen in front of the hut, with a sunken look about his whole figure. He wears a grimy cotton shirt and dark-blue homespun breeches, his bare feet slipped into worn-out boots. The face is rather youthful, with no beard or moustache to speak of, the features expressive, with a pronounced Vetluga fold around the lips, but now wearing the frown of a good-natured man who is oppressed in spirit.

"My boat'll be carried off," he remarks listlessly but knowingly. "Sure thing!"

"You had better get it ashore," I reply, limbering up.

"Yea, I had. But now? Look what's doing! Tis rough!"

The boat shudders, rears, performs a convulsive movement and falls back helplessly into its former position.

"Tyu-yu-yu-li-in!" The call comes from the opposite bank. Where the timber lies, at the crossing, looms the tiny figure of a horse and a small man who has come down to the very edge of the water. He is waving his arms frantically and calling out in the thinnest of falsetto voices:

"Tyu-yu-li-in!"

Tyulin continues to eye his boat with the same gloomy look and gives a shake of his head.

"See, she's risin' again. Yesterday the ferry-landing was clear of the water. But there's no tellin' what the night'll bring. The river's up to its pranks and when it starts playin', brother, you better watch out!"

"Tyu-yu-yu-li-in! You devil!" The call comes and fades away again, without producing the least effect on Tyulin, as though the desperate summons is as much part of the river as the playful rippling, the rustling of the trees, and the murmur of the frothing water.

"You're being called!" I say to Tyulin.

"So I am!" he replies indifferently, and in the same philosophical tone as when he spoke of the boat and the river's pranks. "Ivanko, eh, Ivanko! Ivanko-o-o!" he calls.

Ivanko, a flaxen-haired boy of about ten, who is digging for worms on a hillside pays as much heed to his father as the latter did to the man on the opposite bank.

In the meantime a woman with a child in her arms is making her way down the steep path from the church. Swaddled in rags to the top of its head, the child screams shrilly. Another child—a little girl of about five—clings to the woman's skirts. The woman looks angry and worried. At the sight of her Tyulin grows more sullen and grave.

"There's a woman comin'," he says, turning his head away.

"Well?" says the woman harshly, going right up to Tyulin, and eyeing him with scorn. It is quite obvious that a long-standing feud exists between these two—the carefree Tyulin and the careworn, tired woman with her two children.

"Well what? What d'ye want?" Tyulin asks.

"What do I want? Get that boat ready! If there was any other way to cross the river, d'ye think I be stoppin' and talkin' to a bungler like ye?"

"Ain't we proud today! Shooting our mouth off...."

"Why shouldn't I? Look at the sot! Our men ought 'ave kicked ye out of the ferry trade long ago, a good-for-nothing drunkard like ye! Get the boat, d'ye hear me?"

"The boat? The laddie here'll get you across.... Ivanko, d'ye hear me? Ivanko-o!... He'll catch it from me, the scamp! I need a good rod. I say, traveller...."

Tyulin turns to me.

"Come ye, get me a good rod!"

And with a lurching effort he makes believe that he is going to get up. Whereupon, in the twinkling of an eye, Ivanko darts off to the boat and catches hold of the oars.

"Charge the woman two kopecks, nothing for the little girl," Tyulin listlessly gives his order and again turns to me.

"My head's splittin', something awful."

"Tyu-yu-lin!" the wailing is repeated from across the river. "Get the raft!"

"Dad, eh Dad, he's shouting for the raft," Ivanko calls, evidently with the hope of being released from the job of ferrying the woman across.

"I hear him, he's been shouting long enough," Tyulin replies imperturbably. "Talk it over with him. See if he really means to go. Maybe he doesn't.... What's making my head split like that?" he addresses himself to me again. His tone is most appealing and trustful.

The reason is obvious enough: the poor devil reeks of alcohol, and I can smell it at a distance of a few yards, the fumes like a pungent spray mingling with the odour of the river and the green brushwood of the banks.

"It'd be different if I had a drink," says Tyulin musingly, "but I had none."

His head drops even lower on his chest.

"Haven't been drinking a long time ... only had a drop yesterday."

And he plunges into thought.

"Supposin' it had been more than a drop ... did have quite a bit yesterday, but nothin' today!"

"You're probably having a hangover," I mildly suggest.

After a long and grave stare, Tyulin seems ready to concede the point.

"That may be so," he says. "Today I had no more than a drop."

Slowly but surely, if in a tortuous way, Tyulin is getting at the true reason for his discomfort. But in the meantime the man on the opposite bank has almost completely lost his voice.

Hardly audible above the agitated swishing of the river comes the cry—"Tyu-yu-yu...."

"It might be as you say," Tyulin goes on. "I suppose, man, you're right there, for I do swill it!"

#### IV

The man's hopeless call from across the river is no longer heard. Leaving behind on the other bank his horse and cart, he is now crossing to our side with the boy Ivanko to have it out with Tyulin. But to my astonishment he greets Tyulin most good-naturedly and sits down beside him on the bench. The newcomer is a considerably older man, with a grey beard and blue eyes, faded like Tyulin's, wears a high felt hat, and his lips, too, curl into the typical Vetluga fold.

"You're in a bad way, eh?" he asks Tyulin with a wry smile.

"My head, man, is just splitting in two. And why?"

"Cut down on your brandy."

"Maybe brandy is the reason. The traveller here says so, too."

"Why don't you get your boat away? It'll be carried off."

"Looks like it'll be carried off."

Both men stare for a while at the boat which is tossing about as in the throes of agony.

"Come now, get the raft, I've got to be going."

"Sure you want to go? To Krasikha I suppose? To get drunk there?"

"Well, you've had your fill already...."

"I did, and my head's bad. And you—maybe you'll change your mind about going?"

"You goof! My daughter's married there. We're invited. My wife's with me."

"Well, that settles it. If your woman's with you, go we must. But I've no poles."

"What! Talking daft, are you? What are those?"

"They're too short. Look at the current! The poles need be fifteen feet long."

"Why haven't you brought the long ones, when you saw how wild the river was getting, you goof?... Ivanko! Run along, boy, and get the poles."

"You had better go yourself," Tyulin says, "they're too heavy for the boy."

"You go—that's your job!"

"But *you* wants to get across, not me!"

Both men, and Ivanko, too, do not budge.

Tyulin, as once before, makes believe that he's going to get up, and shouts: "I'll give it to him, the scamp, wait till I get a rod." Then he turns to me, "Stranger, get me a good rod!"

With a loud screech, Ivanko takes himself off and runs up the hill to the village.

"He's not big enough!" says the man.

"The poles are heavy!" Tyulin agrees.

"Run up and help him!" the man suggests, as he sees Ivanko struggling with the poles on top of the hillock.

"Just what I meant to tell you to do!"

Both go on sitting and gaping at the boy.

Just then a woman's shrewish voice comes from the other side of the river: "Evstignei! You devil!"

"My wife's calling," says the man Evstignei uneasily.

With the woman that far, Tyulin preserves his calm.

"The gelding might break loose," says Evstignei, "and he'll hurt 'em."

"Frisky, is he?"

"Bet he is!"

"He might and no mistake ... why don't ye turn back? What's the hurry?"

"What a chump you are! Can't you see it's along with my woman I've set off, so how can I turn back?"

Ivanko, his legs buckling under him, finally drags the poles over and drops them down on the ground with a wild sob. The last hitch removed, Tyulin has got to do his job.

"Say, stranger!" He seems to be favourably disposed towards me. "Look ye, come along—better join us—the river's gettin' wild."

We board the creaking raft, Tyulin being the last to get on; he hesitates for a few seconds, perhaps tempted to stay behind and leave us to our own resources. But in the end he comes on, splashing through the water. And then, casting a deeply mournful look at the pickets to which the mooring ropes are hitched, says in meek reproach, addressing no one in particular:

"The ropes! Why didn't one of ye unhitch them?"

"But you were the last to come," I remonstrate. "Why didn't you unhitch them?"

He makes no answer, perhaps thus acknowledging the justice of my reproof, and just as listlessly, with the same dismal melancholy, lowers himself into the water to unhitch the ropes.

The raft creaks, lurches, and is afloat. The next moment, as though by a magic hand, the ferryman's hut, the upturned boat and the church atop the hill, are being swiftly removed from us, while the spit on the opposite bank with the green willow, lapped by the river, is racing to meet us. Tyulin shoots a glance at the fast-moving bank, scratches his mop of hair, and eases his weight on the pole.

"We're goin' fast."

"We are," replies Evstignei, straining his right shoulder to put more pressure on the pole.

"Mighty fast."

"What are ye standin' for and not pushin' off?"

"Try and push off! Can't strike bottom on the left."

"Is that so?"

"That's so!"

Evstignei gives his pole a fierce poke that almost sends him splashing into the water. Neither does his pole reach to the bottom. He pauses and says bitterly:

"You're a scoundrel, Tyulin!"

"Mind your tongue! You're no better!"

"What d'ye think you're being paid for, you knave?"

"Go on, shoot your mouth off!"

"Why don't you keep long poles?"

"I keep 'em."

"Where are they?"

"At home ... did ye expect the boy to drag fifteen-feet-long poles for you?"

"You're a mean rascal all right."

"Got more to say? Gab if ye like!"

Tyulin's composure seems to pacify the indignant Evstignei, and removing his hat he scratches his head.

"Where are we off to?" he asks. "All the way to Kozmodemyansk?"

## V

Indeed, the swift current, as though mocking and laughing at our raft, is driving the cumbersome structure farther downstream. Bursting and bubbling, the white caps overtake us. The little spot of land with the willow tree quickly rushes by before our glance. We leave far behind the house frame of fresh timber, the little cart, and the woman who is shouting and waving to us from the shore.

"We're in a bad way, in a bad way," says Evstignei dejectedly, eyeing his woman.

We are, indeed, in a fix. Even with the whole length of the pole plunged into the water, it fails to strike the river bottom.

Ignoring Evstignei's lamentations, Tyulin surveys the river around him gravely. He knows that his share of the peril will be greatest, for it will be his job to pull the raft all the way back against the current. And he has now visibly taken himself in hand; his glance has grown more sober and steady.

"Steer to the middle, Ivanko!" he orders.

This time the boy is quick to obey.

"Sit down and paddle," he tells Evstignei.

"Are you sure you've got oars?" asks the other doubtfully.

"So—you're going to gab!"

Tyulin's words are emphatic enough to make Evstignei get down from the platform unprotestingly and take up the oars which prove to be lying on the planking.

"Stranger, get ye down on the other side."

I get into position to row on the right side, just as Evstignei does on the left. We now have a full "crew" at work. His face having completely lost its former expression of snotty unconcern, Ivanko looks at his father with alert and sparkling eyes. Tyulin pokes the pole into the river and says encouragingly to the boy: "Hold

on, Ivanko, and keep a sharp eye!" My offer to replace the boy at the steering oar is utterly ignored by Tyulin. Obviously the father and son know they can rely on each other.

The raft begins to lurch and with a sudden thrust Tyulin strikes the river bottom in a shallow spot. The griphold he has gained enables him to push off about sixty feet.

"Steer against the current, Ivanko! Quick!" Tyulin commands gruffly, putting the weight of his shoulder against the knob of the pole.

Meanwhile, bracing himself with his feet, Ivanko yanks the steering oar upon himself. The raft veers, but as it does, the oar flies into the air and Ivanko is thrown back on the planking. The raft "lists". A second later Ivanko is back in his place, eyeing his father fearfully.

"Fasten the oar!" his father orders.

Ivanko binds the oar with a bit of rope. And the raft is finally on the "crossing course". We ply the oars. With one powerful prod, Tyulin pushes the raft across the current. We are promptly aware of the relaxed pressure of the water, and are going upstream.

Ivanko's eyes sparkle with glee, and Evstignei regards Tyulin with unconcealed admiration.

"Eh, man, be it not for the brandy," he remarks with a wag of his head, "ye'd be wroth your weight in gold. The brandy dulls your wits."

But the light has gone out of Tyulin's eyes, and he goes all slack again.

"Keep paddling, stranger, dip them in, don't sleep!" he says listlessly. And he himself now pokes the pole sporadically, limply, with his former look of grim apathy. By the way the raft is moving along we can tell how inconsiderable is the support our oars get from his pole. The critical moment when Tyulin rose to the height of his ferryman's talent has passed and now, with the danger over, the spark kindled in him has died out again.

We plod upstream for about two hours. But if Tyulin had not availed himself of the advantage of that last shoal, the raft might well have been swept away and set adrift in the swift-flowing current with no hope of rescue for at least two days. There being no possibility of pulling in to the bank in the usual place—the landing-stage was long ago flooded—Tyulin steers towards a steep loamy bank and ties the moorings to a willow's trunk. Evstignei and I now help to get the cart down on the raft, with Tyulin looking on idly, and the woman who long ago ran out of her stock of invective, now sits motionless in the cart, like one petrified, and avoids looking in our direction as if the very sight of us were an abomination to her. It is as though she has become frozen in her virulent contempt of menfolk— "good-for-nothings", one and all—and does not even take the trouble to get down from the cart with her child.

The horse is afraid to go down, lays back its ears and rears.

"Come on, give it the whip, the frisky one," Tyulin counsels.

The nervy horse pulls in its rear and jumps on the raft. There is a violent crash and clatter lasting for about a minute, as though the whole structure has collapsed right through the earth. With a bang, a creak and a crash—the animal almost slipping into the water after it has broken the flimsy railing—the cart is finally lodged on the shaky, quaking raft.

"Broken, ain't it?" Tyulin asks Evstignei, who is examining the cart apprehensively.

"Nay," replies the other in joyful astonishment.

The woman goes on sitting like a carved image.

Tyulin, too, is surprised. "Is that so? I was sure it would get broke."

"Could well. See how steep 'tis here."

"Sure is, and why it didn't break beats me.... Say, none's unhitched the ropes again," Tyulin utters with the same melancholy air as before and steps listlessly ashore to attend to the ropes. He calls to me: "Start paddling, stranger, don't go to sleep!"

After a half hour of strenuous padding and many shouts of encouragement and instruction we finally approach the bank we left. Perspiration is streaming from me, from the unaccustomed strain.

Seeing this, Evstignei suggests half-jokingly, "Tyulin owes you a drink, stranger."

But Tyulin does not take it as a joke. Many years spent on the banks of the desolate river, and perpetual brooding over the cause of his debilitating hangovers, apparently instilled in him a serious attitude to things. He stares long at me with his lacklustre eyes until a gleam of thought flickers up in them and he remarks cordially:

"We'll pull in—and you'll get it.... And mind you it'll be more than one drink," he adds confidentially in a lower voice. And if not pleasure, surely a momentary relief from his heavy hangover, lights up his face.

Two waggons are skidding down the rough hillside road.

"There again!" Tyulin says ruefully.

"They may not really mean to cross," I comfort him, "perhaps they have no important business."

My irony, or any irony, is lost on Tyulin, possibly because he has his own kind of humour, unsophisticated and spontaneous. He seems to share it with the curlyleafed, guileless birches, the gnarled old willows, the playful river, the wooden little church on the hilltop, the lettering on the post, and with the whole of the unaffected Vetluga landscape, beaming upon me with its enchantingly simple, as though long familiar, smile.

In any event, Tyulin makes an earnest reply to my jesting remark:

"If they've no loads, they'll wait! How can I ferry them with my head splittin'?"

## VI

The steam-boat keeps me waiting. I am told that its whistle can be heard an hour before it is due, when it ties up at one of the landing-stages higher up on the river. But when I come back to the bank three hours later, having wandered through the village and had my tea, there is still no news of the steam-boat. The river continues to play with a growing violence. Wading knee-deep in water, Tyulin lazily splashes his way through the flooded grass to his hut. He is drenched to the skin, his wide breeches stick to his shanks and impede his progress. Trailing behind him, on a tie-rope, is the old boat. True to his expectations, it has indeed been carried away by the current, and now retrieved.

"How are you keeping, Tyulin?"

"I'm all right. Not too strong though. Come, let's go across."

"What for?"

"There's trouble there. Looks to me the river'll carry away Ivakhin's timber-rafts."

"Pray, what's that got to do with you?"

"Just look! There's Ivakhin draggin' a quart o' spirits. But what's a quart! He won't grudge even a halfpail—things lookin' that bad."

A man of about forty-five, dressed in the local merchants' garb, with a shrewd and shifting glance, comes from the direction of the village and is obviously in a flurry. The wind blows open the flap of his coat, and he is carrying a bottle of vodka. As he draws up in front of us, he speaks directly to Tyulin.

"Swelling, eh?"

"Pretty bad, can't ye see?"

"Reached my rafts yet?"

"They be in water, but not afloat yet. My boat's been carried off, just caught 'er at a run behind the copse."

"Is that so?"

"See, I'm wet to the skin."

"Mighty bad," says the merchant angrily and slaps his thigh with his free hand. "Afore ye know it my rafts'll be off in the river. It'll go hard with me! Hard!" Then he addresses himself to me, "The men down here are all knaves."

"No call to yap at Christian men," says Tyulin standing up for his own. "There was a contract, I bet."

"There was!"

"To bring the timber to the sandbar?"

"To the sandbar."

"And the timber is there and no other place, isn't it?"

"Rascals, that's what you are! Can't ye see the sandbar will be under the water in no time?"

"So it will, by morning there won't be a sign of it."

"See? And those rascals find nothin' better to do than bawl their songs. Hollering and not minding the loss I'll suffer."

They fell silent—from across the river, on the bank where the new house frame stood, came the rowdy singing of the crew. Ivakhin, who was a petty lumber merchant, had contracted. The day before, when paying up, he cheated them out of some twenty rubles. And now that the swift-flowing river seemed to have taken up their cause and given them an upper hand over the merchant, it was he who had to humbly beg them to work, while they could afford to swagger instead of standing before him cap in hand.

"Not for a hundred rubles! We'll teach you how to treat a contracting crew!"

The river had gone on swelling! Ivakhin had flinched, rushed off to the village, quickly procured a quart vodka bottle and bowed to the will of the crew. He made no terms, did not say a word about the rafts, but kept bowing and pleading with the crew to forget bad feeling and do him the favour of drinking his "free treat".

"Stop hedging, you so-and-so," said the men. "You won't have your way!"

"Not for a hundred rubles will we fish them out of the water!"

"Let the river sport and play to her heart's content!"

"Let it toss your timber about—serves you right."

But they drank up the vodka all the same and struck up a song. Their voices came strident and wild from the opposite shore, mingling with the splash and splutter of the raging river.

"They sing proud!" remarked Tyulin with grudging admiration.

Ivakhin was obviously less pleased with the song. He listened uneasily with a troubled and wretched look in his eyes. There was a fierce and threatening note in the song that boded no good.

"How much did you shortpay them yesterday?" Tyulin asked bluntly.

The other scratched his head, and still looking uneasily at the bank from where the rowdy singing came, replied with the same bluntness:

"We differed over twenty rubles."

"Quite a bit! See they don't thrash your sides for you!"

Ivakhin's face showed that he did not at all think that unlikely.

"If only they would drag the rafts out," he said wistfully.

"They'll do that," Tyulin reassured him.

"Talk to them," said the merchant coaxingly. "Tell them the worst is over and by nightfall the tide will turn."

Tyulin did not reply at once; his glance was glued to the bottle, he paused and asked yearningly:

"Fetching them another quart?"

"I am!"

"You'll bring a third, too! Do we row across?"

"We do!"

The crew noticed the boat when it was midway across the river. Whereupon their singing grew louder and more rowdy, glancing off from the green wall of forest, where the rafted timber lay. In a few minutes, however, the singing ceased; it gave way to a clamour, just as loud and rowdy. Soon Ivakhin was shooting back to our bank and as quickly darting off to the other side with a fresh supply of vodka. His face bore a scowl, but his eyes had a gleam of hope.

At sundown the crew set to rolling the logs up, and now to the strains of the doleful *Song of the Boatmen* were lugging the timber ashore and hauling it up the bank slopes by hand. Soon it lay stacked on the top of the steep bank out of reach of the turbulent river.

Presently the singing started again. The drenched and tired crew were sharing their last big bottle. Perspiring, scowling, yet more than pleased, the merchant Ivakhin made his last trip to our side of the river and hurried away in the direction of the village; the wind ruffled the flaps of his coat, and his hands gripped two oversized empty bottles.

More sullen than ever, Tyulin followed him with his gaze.

"Did they beat him up?" I asked.

Shifting his gaze to me, he asked:

"Whom?"

"Ivakhin, of course!"

"No, why should they beat him?"

I gave Tyulin a surprised look, and then my mind suddenly took in what happened, for his face was swollen and he had what definitely looked like a brand-new shiner.

"Tyulin, my dear fellow!"

"What is it?"

"How did you get that black eye?"

"Can't say really."

"I dare say, Tyulin, you were beaten up!"

"And who would be beating me up?"

"The crew."

Tyulin looked straight at me and said thoughtfully:

"That may be so.... But they didn't beat me up too hard."

After a pause Tyulin shot me a questioning glance.

"Could be Parfen I caught a blow from?"

"It may well have been him," I help him again to a slow realisation of the truth.

"It be Parfen, I'd say. There's an evil fellow that's full of spite against folk...."

Thus was the matter cleared up, except that I keenly desired to know what had so unexpectedly diverted the fury of the crew from the merchant Ivakhin to the utterly neutral Tyulin. But just then someone again began calling from the opposite bank.

"Ty-yu-yuli-in!"

Without so much as turning his head, Tyulin lazily shuffled off in the direction of the hut, saying to me as he went:

"What about you taking a good run across?"

But something made him prick up his ears. He turned to look and revived. On the opposite bank, the russet shirts of the lumbermen flickered in the twilight. The men were calling to Tyulin and motioning to him most temptingly with their arms.

"They be calling me?" he exclaimed happily, and looked questioningly at me.

"They certainly are! They might want to give you another beating."

"Not on your life! Wrong you be, they want to treat me, to make it up...."

With amazing alacrity Tyulin now dashed off to the edge of the water. He tied together for some reason two boats, stern to prow, got into the first, and pushed off quickly leaving boatless this side of the bank.

## VII

I realised that this was a bit of strategy on his part, when I caught in the twilight the creaking sound of a cart coming down the hillside. Slowly the cart advanced to the bank. The horse snorted and laid back its ears, bewildered no doubt at the change that had come over the placid Vetluga.

The figure of a man detached itself from the cart. Walking up to the water's edge, the man looked around, scratched his head, and spoke to me:

"Where's the ferryman?"

"Over there...." I pointed to a bright chip already midway across the river's dark surface.

He peered into the darkness, shook his head, and after listening for a while to the singing, started backing the cart away.

"A rascal he be, the ferryman," he said rather indulgently. "And he's taken the boats, too. Nothin' will get him back, we're stuck for the night."

After he had led away the horse, he came up and greeted me.

"Passing through here?"

"Yes."

"From the lake?"

"That's right."

"Quite a bit of folk going there. There will be more tomorrow.... Oh my, how the river's rearing. Awful, it is! Supposing you and I try to work the raft? No, we won't manage.... I'll have to spend the night here. Is it the steam-boat you're waiting for?"

"Yes, the steam-boat."

"Don't expect it before dawn. You, too, will have to spend the night here." He installed the cart behind the hut and set free the hobbled horse on the slope of the bank. In a matter of minutes smoke was curling from behind the hut.

Tyulin had trained his customers to be patient.

The sun had long dipped behind the hills and woods, and a shadowy, balmy and quiet dusk settled upon the Vetluga. Our little bonfire flamed merrily, the smoke rising in a straight line. And the stillness of the night contrasted strangely with the rush and turbulence of the swelling river. The singing continued to be heard from across the river; at times I thought I caught Tyulin's voice among the general clamour. The lights of a little neighbouring village came on one after another on a hill. In the daylight I had not noticed the village; its drab houses and dark roofs had blended with the rest of the landscape. But now it stood out in a flattering spangle of lights against the sombre hilltop, with here and there the quadrangles of its roofs etched against the dark sky.

It was the village of Solovyikha. To idle away the time, my new friend told me a few rather curious particulars about its inhabitants. They were enterprising and proud folk; their neighbours considered them thieves, one and all. My new friend now told of the time he had stopped in the village of Blagoveshchenye, staying at the home of the church sexton. This was on a winter evening. And as they were sitting at the table, there came a repeated rap-rap on the window. When the sexton looked out he saw standing under the window an old man, a neighbour of his, who asked to be put up for the night. "But you've no more than a verst to go home!"

"True enough, but I have to pass Solovyikha and am afeared of the ice-hole."

It appeared that a strange sort of relationship had sprung up between this oldster and the people living in Solovyikha. Whenever the old chap came into some money he got good and drunk and took to bragging: he had in his pocket, he would say, no less than a 100-ruble bill. The Solovyikha braves would lay in wait for him as he went home, grab him when he reached the river and drag him to one of the ice-holes.

Did he want to be thrown into the ice-hole? Not at all! Well then he would have to part with his 100-ruble bill. And so he did. But again he was asked if he wanted to be thrown into the ice-hole. No, he did not.

"Then don't tell a soul about it!" He said he would not. "Will you swear to it?"

"May I drop dead on the spot, if I tell a single soul!" And he did keep mum. He was thus waylaid several times. Finally he wearied of the game and started to avoid passing Solovyikha by night, especially when drunk. He let it be known that the villagers took him to the ice-hole, but he would name no names.

This story made me regard Solovyikha with a new interest. Where—I thought—but on the banks of the Vetluga could one come across such utter lack of sophistication, innocent wile, and trusting natures ready to believe that one could "drop dead on the spot" if one went back on his word. My new friend, who himself lived on the Vetluga, assured me there was no other village like it. Now in

Maryino three years ago—counterfeit notes were about. But that was quite a different matter—otherwise you could go away for a night and day, leave your home unlocked with money in it, and on returning find none of it missing. "What about Solovyikha folk?"

"I dare say, that's their way."

Where else—it struck me again—would one find such tolerance of neighbours' ways? Blinking cordially and ingenuously at me, the lights of Solovyikha seemed to answer: "Nowhere, nowhere"....

"Tyulin has his ways, too," I remarked smiling. "True! The downright rascal he is. A curse on him! And yet he knows his business! When autumn comes around, or spring, he'll prove himself. At high-water he can manage the raft as nobody else can. That's why he's kept on the job."

"May we join you?"

"You're welcome!"

Two men with staffs and bast-bags over their shoulders approached. One of them, as he dropped down his bag, looked intently at me.

"Have we seen you before?" he asked. "I wouldn't be surprised," I said. "Were you at the Holy Lake?"

"I was."

"I suppose that's where we saw you. Did your fervour bring you, or have you taken a vow in our Lady's name?"

"My fervour. And you?"

"For the holiday Mass, and to visit our kinsfolk."

"I see—come and sit by the fire."

"We were hoping to cross the river. My home is not far, and I could reach it by morning."

"Cross the river, indeed!" broke in my latest acquaintance. "Tyulin's carried off the last boat. Could we try the raft though?"

"Nay, the river's too wild for that!"

"And there be no long poles."

The other newcomer walked with a weary step to the river's edge.

"Tyu-yu-li-in! The boat!" he called loud and long.

Across the river rolled the sounds, as though caught up by the swift current. The playful stream seemed to be carrying them aloft, tossing them from side to side betwixt the dark slumbering banks. Their reverberations drifted off into the night, dying away softly, pensively and in sooth sadly, so sadly that the man, as he heard it, dared not again to stir the distant echoes of the night.

"Nothing doing!" he said giving up and returning to the fire.

"And the man lives close enough," spoke my acquaintance again. "About four versts away—in Pesochnaya. Have you heard any stories about the folk of Pesochnaya?" he inquired, smiling archly.

"No, I've never been in these parts before."

"Well, they have their own trait. Every city has its customs, and every village its ways. The folk at Solovyikha, as I've told you, like loot, but Pesochnaya folk are good at keeping what is theirs. 'Twas about five years back that seven men from Pesochnaya went to the village of Blagoveshchenye to mend implements there—ploughshares, scythes, sickles and such like. On the way, back, they stopped at the river bank, each loaded with his bag of iron. The river was just as wild and prankish as it be today—and with a wind, to boot, stirring up the waves.

A boat was not safe in such water. 'Eh, fellows,' says one of the smiths, 'what if the boat is overturned? Our iron might sink. But if we tie the bags to our bodies, it'll be safe.' Everybody thought this a good idea. So before gettin' into the boat they tied the bags to themselves. Midway across the river, the boat filled with water and overturned. The iron, as was well tied to their backs, was not lost. It stuck to its owners—and all seven of them sank along with it. Well, man, would you say I thought it all up, eh?"

The man from Pesochnaya offered no objection. In the firelight my companions' three faces revealed the same bantering smile and the characteristic Vetluga fold, vividly recalling Tyulin to me.

"Where do you come from?" I asked the older of the two men, the one who had seen me on the shore of the Holy Lake.

"I am a rootless and homeless man, sir, once a soldier."

"But you're a native of the Vetluga, I believe?"

"Yes, of the river. Done quite a bit of fishing here in my early years, and 'ave been knocking about here, too, after my army service for more than fourteen years now."

There was little of the soldier in this elderly man, save perhaps for a certain assured manner of speech and an old grimy cap with faded piping and a big-sized frayed visor. From under the visor sparkled a pair of grey eyes and a barely perceptible smile played under the moustache. He had a very pleasant, low voice with a vibrancy in it that betrayed a one-time dashing songster, but it had grown considerably gruffer owing perhaps to old age, the river dampness, or—as likely as not—to too much drink. Whatever the case, it gave me extreme pleasure to listen to that voice with its touch of humour and see the old soldier's teasing Vetluga smile. And I now remembered that I had indeed run into him on the lake. In the heat of a fiery controversy on the subject—"with a thief and a robber, and all the more with a heretic, have nothing to do"—in which each side released upon the other a spate of passages from the Bible and set a multitude of dogmatic pitfalls, this old soldier with the frayed visor and sparkling eyes, suddenly emerged in the middle of the discourse and spoiled everything by relating a simple story from life instead of citing texts. The moral of the story produced a strong impression on most of the people, but was treated with deliberate contempt by the dogmatists. Be as it may, the debate fell through, and the crowd dispersed, carrying away with it quite a few newly-risen doubts.

"But, pray, that's just women's babble, vulgar talk," remarked one of the dogmatists to me resentfully. "Couldn't be in the Bible, could it?"

"That was Efim, wasn't it?" asked another who arrived towards the end of the debate.

"It was him."

"An empty fellow from the Vetluga, used to be a labourer of ours. He is not versed in Scripture, only read the Gospel." The speaker thus dismissed him.

Efim gave his characteristic smile, and whether it referred to the subject under discussion, the listeners or perhaps to his own self, the empty, homeless ex-soldier, it was hard to say. Whatever the case, I thought then that I saw more live sense in the story of this man from the Vetluga than in all the other talk on the lake.

Presently our conversation turned on the same topic again. We spoke of such centres of piety as Lyunda, Svetloyar and Kitez, also about the people of

Urenevsk. Among the many dissenting religious groups, assembling at Svetloyar, each with their own books, hymns and creed, the Urenevsk pietists stood out most markedly. Every year they set up their altar under the same old oak-tree, on a hillside. At a time when the Austrian minister who wore a surplice and had long side braids fronting the ears, could attract no more than an audience of ten, a sizable crowd invariably gathered around the Urenevsk oak-tree. I was struck by the stern and haughty faces of the Urenevsk pietists. Among them were women in dark convent garb, a long and lanky, sharp-featured fellow, a pock-marked young beggar, and an unkempt God's fool. They read and sang in turn in twangy, monotonous voices, and seemed to be utterly oblivious to the world. Unlike the exponents of other religious sects who willingly fell into argument, the Urenevsk preachers put on superior scornful airs, and did not deign to answer questions. They seemed to have reached a stage where they found nothing worthy of their leniency; their own islet dominated by its small group of shorn priests and resounding with their doleful refrains was to them the essence of all holiness.

"They hold themselves far too superior," said Efim. "They're sound and sober—no denying that. But they make folk like us feel uneasy."

"Why is that?"

"Their faith is so dull—ours is much jollier," the owner of the cart answered before Efim did.

At these words the man from Pesochnaya, who had kept aloof, smiled gaily.

"I been with them," he said, "they're funny folk."

"How?"

"Just like that. In the winter I hired out to them— to cart timber from the wood. The young master and me comes home at night in my own sledge. In the morning I wakes up. It's still dark, it being winter. I sees the old woman of the house light a candle 'cause she be wantin' to pray to the icons. The icons were solid, painted ones. Well, thinks I, before I go and tend to my horse, I better do a little praying, too. Softly I gets down from the bunk under the ceiling, stands behind her and starts crossing meself. Just then she turns around, sees me, starts a-flapping her arms: 'What may you be doing?' she asks. 'What indeed! I mean to do some praying.' 'Wait!' says she. 'Why wait? It's just the time!' 'No,' she says to me, 'you do it later.' So be it, I thinks, and climbs back up on my bunk. She finished praying, put out the candle and took it away. And soon after that I sees her old man get off his bunk on the stove, go to the icon stand with his own icon, and light his own candle. Down I comes. Now I can pray, too, thinks I. But just as I be bringing it up to my forehead to make the sign of the cross, the old fellow grabs my hand. 'What are you up to?' 'I was just goin' to pray!' 'Wait, it won't do!' How d'ye like that! It looked like again I'd have to go back. Let's see what happens next, thinks I. And next 'twas the young master and his wife that comes down from their sleeping place and lights a candle in the side-room. They brings a crucifix, but no icon. I joins them quickly, aimin' to cross myself. I now reckon I could pray to a crucifix."

"What, they, too, wouldn't let you?" asked one of the more curious listeners when the speaker paused.

"No, they wouldn't, I'll have you know! After they says their prayers, they calls me. Now I am free to say mine, they says. But I find nothing to pray to; they took away the crucifix. Well, I reckon, you can go and choke yourselves. What do I

want with your heathen doings? I would get on my way—and pray to the Lord's own sun."

"Three faiths under one roof!" exclaimed the old soldier in amazement.

"To be sure, three! At dinner-time they says pray, sit down and eat with us; all as it should be. But the old couple and their daughter set themselves apart from the young master and me. And again they gives him and me separate bowls. I now lost my temper. 'Let alone me, you be shunning one of your own,' I says. 'We do shun him,' replies the old woman, 'for he goes out into Russia hobnobbing with your kind, eating with sullied folk....' That's what they thinks of us, see!"

"Y-yes!" agreed the cart owner, who now lay on the ground with his arms folded under his head. "They be proud and strict, and yet they can be shameless, too. There are two brothers of that faith living not far from our village. When one of them be called up to the army, the other took his wife for himself, and that wife being with child. When the soldier returned he took unto himself his wife's own sister. That's the way two brothers made two sisters their wives, and to the little boy that was born the soldier man be both uncle and father. They are not queasy about that." The speaker now yawned and suggested: "Perhaps we could snatch some sleep, eh?"

Silence fell briefly.

"Confusion is a-roaming in Russia!" broke in the simple-hearted voice of the man from Pesochnaya.

"It's been that a long time," said the old soldier lying down. "It didn't begin yesterday."

"Course it's been long. There's also the Molokans...."

[A religious sect in Russia rejecting the official church, all its rites, and icons.]

"They're a very different kettle of fish. Go to sleep, don't throw your words about!"

But the "confusion" roaming through "holy Russia" weighed too heavily on his mind for the man to lie down just then. He sat, picking at the fire with a twig, and seeing that I, too, was awake, said with a knowing nod in Efim's direction:

"A 'kettle of fish', he says.... I should think so—he keeps company with them himself, won't pray to our gods, drinks milk on fast days. I saw it myself or I wouldn't talk...."

And now he, too, settled down to sleep on the sand.

## VIII

I rose and looked around me.

Blue dusk shrouded the river; above it the moon was slow in rising, but the stars twinkled softly and musingly above the Vetluga. The banks lay in darkness, shadowy, mysterious, and they seemed to tune their ear to the ceaseless murmur of the swelling river. Nothing relieved the darkness of the river's surface, not even the froth; only here and there the shimmering reflections of the stars gave off a brief flicker, and were instantly swallowed up by the rushing current, or a frisky wavelet would leap onto the bank and dart towards us with a flick of foam like a little animal that whisks by you in a sportive humour.

Uproar had not ceased on the opposite bank, but the crew's singing was dying down—like our own fire which was no longer fed with twigs and branches. Voices were thinning; apparently the men were only too happy to doze off in the glade or brush. Now and again there rose a louder and bolder voice, but it failed to stir the others and keep the song alive.

I lay down beside my sleeping Vetluga companions and admired the beauty of the starlit sky, now beginning to bathe, too, in the golden glow of the moon rising from behind the hills. Creaking faintly, a late cart rumbled down the hillside. Newcomers were arriving, too, and after lingering for a while at the river's edge and vainly hallooing for the ferry, resignedly joined our little group which owed its forced delay to Tyulin's stratagem.

On the hilltop the village lights had gone out one by one, and the pole with the sign now loomed in the firelight, now vanished from view in the darkness.

From the other side of the river came a nightingale's trill.

.....

"Ferry-y!"

"Ferry-y, ferry, ferr-rry!"

"Ferryman, hurry up!"

"Halloo-oo-oo-oo!"

The cries rang loud, shrill, harsh and insistent—like a reveille at dawn. They woke me up and the rest of the encampment around our fire. They seemed to pervade earth and sky, and were echoed in the peacefully slumbering creeks and coves of the Vetluga. The night travellers rubbed their eyes. The man from Pesohnaya, so abashed the night before by his own diffident cry across the sleeping river, now gave a frightened start, and asked:

"What's that, Christ Almighty! What's that?"

Day was breaking, mist mantled the river, our fire was dead. Strange groups of people loomed in the morning fog. Some were standing around us; others were near the river hallooing to the ferryman. A short distance away stood a cart to which was harnessed a sleek, well-fed horse, calmly waiting for the raft.

These new people I recognised at once as the folk from Urenevsk.... There were the women in their dark convent garb, whom I had seen two days ago, the tall, grim-faced fellow I noted, the pock-marked beggar-boy, the unkempt God's fool, and a few others of that group.

They stood around us staring brazenly and with open contempt at the sprawling figures that made up our camp. Recoiling a little in embarrassment, my companions eyed the newcomers with an unwonted timidity. Somehow I recalled the English Puritans and the Independents of Cromwell's day. Most likely they had stared just as haughtily at the poor sinners of their country, who glanced back with the same abashed meekness.

"Say, you, Vetluga toads, where is your ferryman?"

"Ferry, ferry, ferr-rry!"

It was as though a whole army had invaded the ferryman's peaceful domain. Across the river rolled the booming cries of the Urenevsk folk. And the once again creamy frothing river seemed to be rushing away in cowering haste from the tumult and the cries which echoed far and long.

Would Tyulin hold out stoically against this onslaught, I wondered.

But I needed only to cast a glance at the river: there, to my surprise, loomed Tyulin's boat in the morning mist—already midway across to our side. This philosopher of a ferryman seemed, too, to have succumbed to the spell of the stern and haughty Urenevites and was now rowing back with all his might. His face as he came ashore bore the mark of dejection and the usual hangover desolation, but that did not stop him from dashing hurriedly uphill to fetch the long poles.

Our camp was also stirred to action. Owners of the nightlong delayed carts led in the horses by their forelocks, and quickly put them in harness. Perhaps they hurried for fear that the Urenevsk folk might not wait for them and thus leave them once again at the mercy of the autocratic Tyulin.

A half-hour later the loaded raft cast off from the shore.

At the extinguished bonfire remained only Efim and myself; the old soldier rummaged in the ashes for an ember with which to light his short-stemmed pipe.

"Why didn't you go with the rest?" I inquired.

"There are folk there I've no liking for," he replied, puffing hard at his pipe. "I am not in a hurry, I'll walk through the dew. As for you it's time to get ready. Hear the steamboat coming down?"

Presently to my ears came the dull thud of the steamboat's wheels; in another quarter of an hour the ship's white flag loomed into view from behind a bend in the river, and then the *Nikolai* sailed smoothly down the midstream, with lights blinking in the morning fog, and tugging at her side a fair-sized barge.

Obligingly the soldier rowed me to the steam boat in Tyulin's boat, and almost immediately emerged from behind the stern, heading for the opposite bank where the Urenevsk folk were disembarking from the heavy raft.

Sunlight gilded the tree-tops of the forests bordering the Vetluga banks, while I sat wide-awake on the upper deck and feasted my gaze on the ever new nooks of beauty which the enchanting river, still half-veiled in blue mists, revealed so lavishly at every bend.

And I thought: why had I been so heavy of heart on the lake shore, amidst the bookish public-speaking and "highbrow" muzhiks and pietists, and felt .so light and easy upon the quiet river with the headstrong, slipshod, wanton ferryman Tyulin perpetually suffering from his hangovers. Wherefrom was this feeling of burden and disappointment on the one hand and relief on the other? Why should I, a bookish man my self, feel oppressed by *them*, so cold and alien, and find the other so akin and familiar as though indeed—

*It had all happened long before,  
But when I remember not....*

Dear Tyulin, dear gay, frolicsome, wayward river! Where and when had I set eyes on you before?

## THE RIVER PLAYS

Korolenko's Svetloyar impressions during his trip to Lake Svetloyar (Holy Lake) inspired him to write this story. It was rapturously received by Maxim Gorky who wrote Korolenko from Capri (July 14, 1913): "It is my favourite story, which I believe has helped me immensely in fathoming the 'Russian soul'...."