

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

## AT-DAVAN

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### I

"W-well! Of all the r-roads!" exclaimed Mikhailo Ivanovich Kopylenkov, my travelling companion. "The damnest ice-track, the worst possible! Do I speak the truth or not?"

Sadly enough, Mikhailo Ivanovich spoke the undeniable truth. We were driving down the Lena. Across the full breadth of the river jutted in every direction huge ice hummocks which in the autumn the swift-flowing, infuriated river had disgorged in her battle against the bitter Siberian frost. At long last the frost scored victory. The river froze, and the formidable hummocks, a chaos of icebergs, piled up in disarray, jammed in at the base, or tossed high up in some inexplicable way, remained a mute reminder of the titanic straggle; then, too, here and there gaped strips of never freezing water in which rushing sprays swirled and bubbled. Over these ice-holes hovered ponderous clouds of vapour as though indeed hot water gushed underneath.

Lording over this whimsical chaos of ice, on either side of the river, stood the mute and towering Lena Mountains. Sparsely growing larches clung with their spreading roots to the hillsides. But the rock would not let them grow and the slopes were strewn with fallen trees. At a close distance you could see the dead snow-powdered trees lying with their convulsively twisted roots just as they had been wrenched from the soil. But farther up the hillsides such particulars were blurred to view. The slopes near the summits lay mantled in a meshwork of fallen wood. The trees looked like hosts of pine needles as on the needle-matted ground of a pine grove. Among them rose the still living trees, the same erect, slender and pathetic larches, now testing their own chance of survival above the corpses of their forbears. It was only on the hill-crests, flat as though the crowns had been sliced off, that the woods at once thickened into a dense forest stretching in a long band of mourning over the white slopes below.

And so for hundreds upon hundreds of versts. All week long the measly little speck of our sleigh had been bobbing in between the hummocks, like a skiff in a rough sea. All week long I had been gazing at the strip of pale sky overhead hemmed in between the black-rimmed snow slopes, at the gorge openings that mysteriously crept in from the Tungus wastes, at the cold mists drifting without end, entwining and unfolding, nestling in the clustering cliffs at the bends, and then being soundlessly drawn into the gorge openings, like a phantom army dispersing to its winter billets. There was a dismal stillness. Only at rare intervals was it broken by a sudden burst of moaning from the river. This was when the ice cracks—with the hiss of a flying cannon ball and an echo as loud as a cannon shot; the reverberations rolled back swiftly down the Lena's meandering course and took a long time to die out, frightening the imagination with weird moans, suddenly breaking out in the distance.

I felt melancholy. My companion fretted and chafed. Our sleigh lurched and rocked from side to side and had already turned over several times; to the chagrin of Mikhailo Ivanovich it was invariably he who found himself underneath. It left him exceedingly disgruntled although it seemed natural enough for the weight to be greatest on his side. Were I to find myself underneath him, I would have been in grave danger, all the more so that Mikhailo Ivanovich took not the least trouble to lift himself up. He merely grunted and said matter-of-factly to the coachman:

"Get us up!"

This the coachman did, though it was a far from easy job, and we continued on our journey.

A month now seemed to separate me from Yakutsk, which we had left but six days before, and a whole lifetime to lie between me and the destination of my travels—Irkutsk which was more than two thousand versts away.

We made poor time, first held up by the bitter raging snowstorms, and now by Mikhailo Ivanovich. The days were short, but the nights were quite light, with the full moon breaking through the frosty haze, and moreover the horses could be depended upon not to stray from the hard-beaten ice-track bounded off by the hummocks. But no sooner would we cover two or three stages than my companion, a beefy and flabby merchant, on arriving at the next station, would start throwing off his things in front of a fireplace or stove, derobing himself unceremoniously of what he needed and what he needed not to remove.

On such occasions I tried to protest: "Mikhailo Ivanovich, surely we could make yet another stage?"

"What's the hurry?" he retorted. "We need to drink some tea, and to catch some sleep, too."

Eating, drinking tea, and sleeping—all this Mikhailo Ivanovich could perform in inordinate proportions, with remarkable zest that reached almost to the point of reverence.

Besides, he had other considerations.

"The people around here," he would say with a mysterious air, "are terribly greedy for money. They're a desperate lot—because gold has spoiled them."

"Oh, but gold is miles away, you don't even hear anything bad about these parts."

"Just wait till we're robbed; you'll hear plenty then, but it'll be too late. You're a funny bloke," he added working himself up. "Can't you see what these parts are

like? That's not Russia for you! It's hill and dip, ice-trap and waste—a hell of a hole!"

And indeed Mikhailo Ivanovich entertained nothing but contempt and aversion for "these parts"; he ran down most captiously everything, from the gloomy landscape and people to the dumb beasts. The one allowance he made was that if you got a "break" you could get rich quick here ("in a day you could be made"). And it was just on the lookout for that "break", that he had been living in the region for quite a number of years, having set himself a certain "ceiling" which he hoped to attain and after which he planned to return to his "own" parts, somewhere around Tomsk. In this respect he reminded one of a man offered a certain reward if he dared run naked in a severe frost. Mikhailo Ivanovich agreed and now seemed to be racing, moaning and shivering, towards the desired goal. His one thought was to get there, to grab the spoils—and then let the whole damned region go to the dogs, Mikhailo Ivanovich could not care less.

The impression was that at the moment he was well advanced towards his goal and perhaps for this reason was particularly on edge: what if somebody robbed him of the spoils? Mikhailo Ivanovich, about whose early career here I had heard many stories, and whose enterprising talents, bordering on audacity, were most glowingly commended to me, had now become as panicky as a woman. And owing to this, I was compelled to spend the most tedious evenings and long nights in these dismal posthouses on the banks of the desolate Lena River.

## II

On one such frosty evening, I was awakened by a frightened exclamation from Mikhailo Ivanovich. It turned out that both of us had fallen asleep in our sleigh. And there we were on the ice with the rocky banks rising above us, utterly forsaken, the bell not tinkling, the sleigh motionless, the horses and the coachman gone. Mikhailo Ivanovich was rubbing his eyes in fright and disbelief.

Our bewilderment, however, was soon dispelled. After peering hard at the even line of bank above our heads which receded in a long wall of cliff far into the distance and was bathed in the shimmering light of a full moon, I saw a little path that disappeared uphill in between the clefts in the rock, and directly overhead the high cross of a Yakut grave. It was not at all unusual in these regions to see a grave up on a river bank, even if it were a desolate spot, for the Yakuts were wont to choose high places for their burial grounds, close to bodies of water, with wide vistas and open space. And yet I recognised the spot: we had reached the At-Davan station which I had noted on my first journey on the river. There was the ruddy shale I had already seen, fancifully interlaced as though bearing some occult writing, the sheer unbelievably smooth bank, the sparse larches, the Yakut grave with the cross and blockhouse around it, and finally the grey trailing curtain of smoke softly overhanging the river from the bank. At this point the track grew so narrow and the ascent was so steep that sleighs would be left behind on the ice for the new relays of horses to be brought directly to the frozen river. When he realised this, Mikhailo Ivanovich's mind, too, was set at ease, and the blinking lights over the footpath cheered him.

Before we knew it we had climbed the path and reached the posthouse of At-Davan.

It was warm as toast in the small quarters of the posthouse where a red-hot stove blazed with dry heat. In the light of two tallow candles, guttered in the heat, were revealed the tawdry surroundings of this half-Yakut structure converted into a posthouse. Pictures of generals and dazzling beauties alternated on the walls with postal notices and framed, fly-speckled charters. The place bore an air of expectation: preparations were afoot for important visitors that we could not ascribe to ourselves.

"It's just dandy here, old chap!" Mikhailo Ivanovich ejaculated gleefully, already busying himself with his saddle-bags which were bursting with provisions for the road. "It's marvellously warm. That settles it, we'll stay the night!... Anybody there?" he called. "Get us a samovar and have water boiling for pelmeny!" [Siberian meat dumplings.— *Tr.*]

I tried to object: "Look here, Mikhailo Ivanovich, there's still time to go on to N.; we could spend the night there."

Just then I heard behind me a cackling, obsequious and rather frightened voice: "There are no horses to be had, sir."

I turned my head and saw a chubby little man of indeterminate age sidle into the room. He was dressed outlandishly in a skimpy frock-coat, checked drawers, pique vest, a shirt with fancy cuffs and old-fashioned trimming, as well as a bright necktie of a gold and green pattern. The outfit had a faded but genteel look, and seemed to have been put on specially for an occasion, was reminiscent of long bygone days. On his feet he wore the clumsy local felt boots, making his old suit of German cut look all the more ludicrous. Unaware of the strange figure he cut, the little man marched in foppishly with short mincing steps.

There was the same shoddy, faded and slightly crumpled look about the face and whole appearance of this man, though it also seemed to have been primped and spruced up for the occasion. In the smile, grey eyes and tone of voice lurked a certain pretence to good breeding. The little man seemed to want to show that he had seen better days, knew the "civilities", and were he more favoured by circumstances could meet us on an equal footing. But for all that, he seemed to cower all the time as if he had all too often been snubbed, and feared similar treatment from us, too.

"Why do you say there are no horses?" I objected after taking a look in the ledger which seemed to have been put in a conspicuous place on purpose. "There should be two troikas available."

"That is so," he conceded humbly, "there *should be*, but... how can I explain it to you, sir..." he faltered. But then, lapsing into a plaintive tone, beseeched with great humility: "Have mercy, good sirs, and do not make your demands."

"Pray, why?" I asked surprised.

"You are one! Really!" Mikhailo Ivanovich, who had already managed to partially disrobe himself, broke in petulantly. "Why and why!" he mimicked. "What's your hurry? Is your house on fire? Can't you see, man, we are being begged on bended knees, so there must be a reason."

"Quite true," said the other eagerly turning to Mikhailo Ivanovich with a beaming smile, and tugging at his coat tails, "quite true, without a reason for it I would never think of holding up travelling gentlemen. N-never!"

The last word he pronounced with dignity, squaring himself and giving his coat tails another tug.

"Very well!" I said resignedly as I realised the futility of trying to coax Mikhailo Ivanovich, who" went on quickly disrobing himself, out of the warm room and into the severe evening frost. "But surely you could give us the reason, if it's not a secret."

The little man's face broke up into smiles. He saw that he had gained his point, and seemed quite ready to favour me with a reply, when above the crackle of the fire there came the sound of a bell's tinkle from the direction of the river, and he started.

The door opened and the village Elder, a half-Yakut judging from his appearance, walked in gingerly and shut the door tightly behind him.

"*Kelle (the mail)*, Vassili Spiridonovich," he said.

"Oh, the mail!" echoed the little clerk with relief. "Well, *barantakh (go)*, be quick about it!... Excuse me, gentlemen, I have to go, too...."

Off he went. The posthouse now became alive with movement. Doors slammed, steps creaked, the cabmen dragged portmanteaus and mail bags. Every time the door opened it brought to our ears the hurried tinkle of bells—horses were being led away to be harnessed on the frozen river. The cabmen yelled to one another in Yakut, but cursed in pure Russian thereby leaving no doubt as to their origin....

### III

A few minutes later there burst into the room a man of short stature in a threadbare grey greatcoat, a Yakut fur hat and with a scarf wound round his throat. He tumbled in with such haste as though he were being chased and made a beeline for the hot stove.

Slipping off his greatcoat, he remained standing in a flimsy fur coat of sorts that looked like a lady's jacket, and when he removed that, too, underneath was a postal employee's shabby uniform ripped at the armpits.

This was indeed the postman, running for his life from the frost which in the course of the long journey from the last posthouse must have scored off considerably against him. The miserable man was now peeling off all his chilled garments as though they were swarming with bees, and even before he removed the cap and the scarf he threw off the *valenki* and set them up with their soles to the stove. Taking off the cap and scarf was a longer business. Yakuts and half-Buryats, may it be known, avoided wearing beards or moustaches, ostensibly for reasons of beauty, but really owing to the harsh winters. The poor postman apparently took pride in these attributes of vanity, and now his scant little beard and just as scant moustache, which he might have used to charm a visiting marriageable young lady of well-to-do parents somewhere in Kirensk, turned into one big icicle tightly joining his head with the cap and scarf. It was a long time before this postal official, who practically poked his head into the flames, and clawed with his frozen fingers at the icicle of beard and moustache, finally appeared before us in his true aspect: a young but considerably bloated face,

restless yet lacklustre eyes, a dismayed and flustered look about the whole figure, a skimpy, too tight uniform and hareskin socks on his feet.

"*Che!*" he shook himself. "*Tymny bert, moroz ulakhan* (very cold, a great frost)!" he said in Yakut. "May I have a drink, gentlemen?"

"Help yourself!" Mikhailo Ivanovich replied genially. "You damn unlucky chap!"

Fright looked out from the young man's blinking eyes. The merchant's tepid sympathy recalled all the more painfully to him the rigours of the road, and the drink he gulped down did not warm him at all. This made him pour out another and sent it right down after the first. It was only then that the poor fellow's face lost some of its look of panic.

"It's a dog's life all right," he agreed. "And look how bitter the frosts are! Incredible!"

"Poor clothing you're wearing," said Mikhailo Ivanovich. "Not proper for the season."

"It's as good as you can expect. For eight rubles a month you can't do yourself proud...."

Once a week the mail-coach passed along this great big route. In the winter the three-thousand-verst journey is covered in nineteen days; in the summer it takes longer. In the autumn or spring, before the Lena is frozen or when boats are imperiled by the ice-floes, the mails are carried in saddle-bags on horseback. A whole caravan of heavily laden horses picks its way along the narrow path between the river and the mountains, now negotiating a dangerously jutting cliff, the horses wading belly-deep in the water, now scrambling up the rocky paths or appearing briefly somewhere on the mountain tops, right up in the clouds. It is difficult to imagine an occupation requiring greater hardihood, presence of mind, patience and robust health.... Three thousand versts! Nor do the cabmen have an easy time of it! But they have long returned home for a respite, waiting for a rare fare to come along or for the next mails, while the postman jolts along in the saddle, is pitched and rocked by the violent waves of the vast river, or freezes huddling in between the leather cases in his sleigh. And that for the postman's meagre salary....

True, the postman invents ways of earning little extras. In Irkutsk he gets hold of a keg of cheap vodka which he sells to the posthouse clerks or cabmen, buys new calendars for the same purpose, or takes a batch of picture prints to peddle for a commission. Thus the many works of art that adorn the walls of the posthouses owe their presence in these remote regions to none other than the postman. He might be said to cultivate the aesthetic taste of the half-Yakut station masters with his pictures of beauty contest winners. He, too, promotes the popularity of generals, and he also dethrones them by replacing old idols with the latest ones. But his own wretched lot is little improved by the good he accomplishes, and if he manages to survive the rigours of the winter in his scanty apparel, this is to be ascribed mainly and perhaps exclusively to vodka of which he drinks enormous quantities at every posthouse, and without any visible consequences. It is a good thing that he gets it cheap and that it is even a source of additional income to him—an innocent source under the circumstances, it must be said.

And again it is mainly he who carries the news of what goes on in the outside world along this sparsely inhabited three-thousand-verst tract of land.

It was just such a zealot of the postal services that now stood at the iron stove, with toes tucked under from the cold, hands extended to the flame, and cast hungry glances at our bottles.

"Is that cognac you have there? I'd like a drop," he proclaimed with diffident familiarity, darted to the table, poured and tossed off a drink and then returned hurriedly to the open fire with the same chilled and flustered look.

"Say, you mail fellow, what about joining us for tea," Mikhailo Ivanovich offered.

"Impossible, I am in too great a hurry, gentlemen." And he addressed himself to the clerk who entered at that moment. "Look, man, take care! He's on his way...."

The old clerk sighed.

"We're all in God's hands! If he'd only come sooner—we've waited long enough!"

"He'll be here any moment now! Got to be off before I bump into him. Though he'll catch up—hope it'll be on the track."

"What's it to you?"

"Just to avoid trouble if I can. D'ye know he got wind of the complaints?"

"So what?"

"Just that he's furious, they say. That's bad!"

"The Lord is merciful! We didn't complain...."

"Pray, whom are you talking about?"

"Arabin, the courier ... he's on his way back from Verkhoyansk!"

"I see! That's why you have no horses for us. So you feared we might take your last ones...."

"Quite right.... Judge for yourselves: he comes and I tell him there are no horses! And what then ... why, then he would stay overnight...."

Mikhailo Ivanovich broke into laughter.

"Oh I see, and in one night he'll gobble you up together with that fancy frockcoat of yours!"

The postman laughed, too, convulsively, with his head thrown back. More out of courtesy than anything else, the elderly clerk forced a smile, but there was a worried and anxious look in his eyes.

"God knows, God knows.... The good Lord preserved us the last time—and yet he managed to call me a swine."

"He did?"

"Yes, and considering that I used to be a civil servant of the tenth rank I could take offence. But in my present humble position I'm obliged to submit.... You've asked for a samovar?" he remembered suddenly. "Goodness, and I've kept you waiting. Just a moment, and you'll have it. We keep two samovars. In case Arabin arrives, there'll be one for him, too.... Just a moment...."

#### IV

Presently a woman not yet past her bloom and still rather comely brought in a samovar and began setting up the tea things. At her entrance the postman again laughed in the same convulsive manner, but the old clerk seemed to have become

even graver. We invited the clerk and the postman to join us at the table. The latter refused, and just as quickly as he had shed them was now pulling on his half-dry clothes. The clerk, too, refused at first, for propriety's sake, but when the invitation was repeated accepted, obviously flattered.

"I'll be delighted to join your company," he said. Then buttoning his frockcoat straight up, and placing his hand theatrically on the back of the chair, announced:

"This being the case, allow me to introduce myself— Kruglikov, Vassili Spiridonovich, ex-collegiate secretary. Glad to make your acquaintance."

"So, you were in the civil service?"

"Yes, at the Naval Commissariat."

Now fully clad, the postman shook our hands in parting and said: "Is that spirits you've got? I'll have a go at that, too." And so he did, and then out he dashed into the cold. I put on my coat and followed him outdoors.

You had to walk to the edge of the cliff where the grave with the leaning cross was to watch the mail-coach depart.

Bristling with the white hummocks, the river scintillated in the faint silvery glow of the moon which hung high above the mountains. From the opposite bank, about four versts across, were cast dark oblique shadows. Their outlines blurred, the forest-clad hills receded farther and farther away as they followed the gentle bends of the Lena.... And more than ever the big frozen expanse of the river was a sad and eerie sight to behold.

As their three troikas of the mail started out, the bells, as though to spur one another, broke into a loud discordant tinkle just below my feet. Three black specks that might have been fantastic, multi-bodied animals, heaved across the snow, flickered in between the hummocks, steadily shrinking in size. Even after they had long vanished from view, the tinkle of the bells lingered on clear as ever in the glassy air. Every bell played its own distinct tune, the force of the sound but not its clarity diminished by the distance. Then abruptly everything ceased, only the hummocks sparkled in their weird chaos; the hills slumbered in sombre shadow, and strange phantoms drifted low beneath the distant banks.

Practically all the people of the station had come out to see the mail go off. At godforsaken At-Davan tucked away in the foothills of the Lena the coming and going of the mails was a momentous occasion.

But now At-Davan throbbed feverishly with the expectation of yet another event.

As soon as the mail sledges departed and the tinkle of their bells died away, the group of cabmen that had stood around it, climbed slowly back to the top of the bank and trooped past me, chatting in Yakut. Though their soft-spoken vernacular was unintelligible to me, I surmised that they spoke of the expected person rather than the departing ones, of the man due to arrive from the upper reaches of the river. I had indeed once or twice caught the name "Arabin" and the word "*toyon*" added to it.

Unable to cast off the spell of the river's enchanting sadness I lingered for yet a while on the bank. The air was still, with a gentle, crystalline clarity, undisturbed by a single sound, and yet pregnant with timorous anticipation. It needed but the crack of an ice-hummock to send a shudder and a moan through the icy stillness of the night. Or should a boulder fall from under my feet, the gentle silence would explode in a succession of crackling and strident echoes....

The frost nipped harder. The station building, half yurta and only half Russian loghouse, was ablaze with light. Sparks clustered into the air from the yurta chimney. Thick white smoke rose upwards and then curled in the direction of the Lena, drifting afar, to the very middle of the river. The blocks of ice that served as windows now seemed to come ablaze and glow with the rainbow hues of the flaming fire. With a last glance at the melancholy but tantalising scene before me, I walked back to the posthouse.

## V

At the cabmen's quarters a fire blazed in the huge hearth sturdily laid out of clay, gaping like the fiery maw\_ of a fairytale monster, and boisterously rising upwards in a river of flames into the outlet of the chimney. The pinnacled walls of the yurta seemed now to draw together and be bathed in a russet glow, now to move apart and sink into gloom, giving the yurta the appearance of a big, sombre, vaultlike cave. A group of flame-etched figures, looking as though they had been freshly cast in molten metal, formed a half-circle around the fire. In the centre of the group, peering pensively into the fire, his chin resting on his hands, sat a man of that cast of face that betrayed mixed Russian and Yakut ancestry and was peculiar to the inhabitants of the middle reaches of the Lena. Mingled with the hiss and crackle of the fire, from his throat issued strange sounds—now long-drawn, now shrilly rasping—of an improvised Yakut song, in which only an accustomed ear could detect evidence of a peculiar harmony. "Goodness!" I mused. "How differently human emotion is expressed!" But since beauty is in the sentiment itself, there must have been a beauty of its own kind in that jarring, rasping, guttural shrieking, now resembling a wail, now the howl of the wind in a wild gorge. It needed but a glance at the bronzed faces of the At-Davan cabmen to become aware of a spiritual light in the cheerless squalor of the yurta.

As the young man sang, the rest listened, now and then encouraging the singer with short, shrill outcries. We have our songs, recorded, made into sheet music, in which more sophisticated feelings have been crystallised into an enduring form. And the wild taiga, the rocky paths above the Lena and grim, forsaken At-Davan have their songs as well. They are unrecorded, unpolished, unharmonic and obviously crude. And yet for all their unrefinement, these songs, like the Aeolian harp, are attuned to every gust of mountain wind, every stir of rigorous nature, every tremor of the miserably tedious life. The young man sang of the growing frost, of the crackle of ice from the Lena, and the horses huddling under a cliff. He sang that a fire blazed bright in the hearth, that they were ten cabmen gathered around the fire, and six of their horses stood at the tethering post, and that At-Davan expected the arrival of Arabin, the *toyon*, which meant that a storm was approaching from the great city in the north and At-Davan trembled and quailed....

Yakut song language is as different from the vernacular as Old Slavonic from the Russian spoken today. Its origins may be traced to the far interior of Central Asia, where out of the great melting pot of nations, the chip of-a tribe was tossed into the remote north. And thither it brought and preserved the southern florid images and colours. To the north, on the other hand, to the tingling frosty air, where the crackle of ice rang with the force of a cannon shot and the fall of a stone

thundered like an avalanche, Yakut song owed its apprehensive penchant for staggering hyperbola and bewildering exaggeration. By and large this must explain why Er-Sogotokh, the Yakut counterpart of the Russian simple-minded fairy-tale hero Ivanushka, comes up in the course of his wanderings against such hefty stalwarts, the smallest of which has calves with the girth of a larch trunk and eyes of five pounds weight each.

Unobserved, I stood in the shadow, listening to the song about Arabin, the *toyon*. Arabin? Surely the name was familiar? It was by considerably straining the memory that I managed to free my mind of the fairy-tale associations and bring forth the image of a real person. I now recalled having met a couple of times—and they were only fleeting encounters—a junior Cossack cavalry officer by that name at a home I visited in Irkutsk. I remembered that he was in no way remarkable, a taciturn fellow, somewhat shy, perhaps with that kind of shyness that marks morbidly sensitive people. I hardly noticed him at the time, but gathered later that he had attracted the attention of the Governor-General and was charged with "special missions". Could he be the man I kept hearing about all along my journey—when in Irkutsk he was just a face in the crowd?... This was his third courier's lightning journey down the Lena, and each time he passed the desolate river reverberated with talk about him for a long time afterwards. He behaved at the posthouses where he stopped like a man whose single efforts alone were expected to put down a rebellious area. He stormed in, raged, struck panic into all hearts, threatened with his gun—and "forgot" to pay for services. In all likelihood, it was these methods that enabled him to execute his missions with such quick dispatch that even the most seasoned officials could only gasp and wonder, while he himself won more and more favour with his superiors. "Courier" was now a name that stuck to him and he accepted the courier duties as almost a full-time job. In the city of Irkutsk he was bashful and restrained but he turned into another man when he started on a trip. The genuine conviction that power carried far more weight than law, and the knowledge that for weeks on end he alone could hold the whipland of authority over a vast territory, meeting not with the least resistance anywhere, could have turned a stronger head than that of a junior Cossack cavalry officer.

Indeed, his head had been turned—and to such an extent that on his last journey he swept through the few scarce towns of the area (Kirensk, Verkholsk and Olekma), standing in his sledge and waving a red flag. This must have been a fantastic sight—two troikas careering along, the mortally frightened coachman frozen in his seat with the reins in his hand, and the "courier" standing up and waving his flag with a mad light in his eyes. The town leaders looked on disapprovingly and the townspeople took to their heels. On this last journey, Arabin's path was marked by such a great number of fallen horses, outcries and grievances which finally burst forth, that the postal authorities deemed it necessary to interfere. Getting a little ahead of my story, I can only say that Arabin was the cause of a quarrel between two government departments, that his immediate superiors were compelled to dispense with his services, but that being supplied with excellent references he got himself transferred farther eastward, to the banks of the Amur, and rounded off his career by shooting dead a postmaster. This made him famous in European Russia, too. However, he was never brought to trial, for it turned out that the great "courier" was mad as a hatter.

Such was to be the subsequent story of this much dreaded ill-starred *toyon* whose arrival was awaited at the remote little station of At-Davan that night, and about whom the Yakut sang his dolorous ditty in the cabmen's quarters of the posthouse.

## VI

Mikhailo Ivanovich sat at the table in the posthouse reception room with nothing on save his underclothes. Across him, surprisingly relaxed, slumped Vassili Spiridonovich Kruglikov, the posthouse clerk. Judging by Mikhailo Ivanovich's animation and the frank glint of greed in his eyes, he must have managed to steer the conversation on to his favourite topic which revolved around stories of how people got rich quick. It flattered this worthy's cupidity to know who, where and in what manner amassed a fortune. Mikhailo Ivanovich greatly savoured all particulars of such fortune-hunting dramas. And Kruglikov gladly supplied them with the cool assurance of a disinterested bystander.

"You say he lost his money?" asked Mikhailo Ivanovich leaning all the way across the table.

"Every bit of it!" replied Kruglikov blowing at the tea in his saucer. "May I say, sir, that all he had left to his name was the shirt on his back, and even that did not belong to him."

"Goodness, my dear fellow, what a man to be ruined!"

"Ruined? Not at all! Why should a man like that be ruined? In this part of the country and with a head like his?"

"Lucky rascal! So he mended his affairs?"

"That he did as never before!"

"Well, well, what did he turn to?"

Kruglikov put down his saucer and crooked a finger.

"First, he married his second wife, a widow of means, but not much to speak of..."

"Hold your horses! His second wife? What about the first? She died?"

"She is indeed very much alive! But that's nothing!"

"Ah-ah-ah! We-e-ell? Go on with the story!"

"He started little by little selling spirits at a mining town."

"Spirits? You make me laugh! Spirits won't get you far, more likely landing you a prison term than making you rich. Times are changed!"

"Don't say that ... not if the liquor business is a cover for buying gold on the sly from the prospectors."

"There is something in that! If you're a shrewd fellow."

"And that one was shrewd. He knew how to play his advantages and he ended up with a pile of money."

Mikhailo Ivanovich slapped his knee.

"My, what a head! What a head!... Have more tea!" he offered cordially when he saw Kruglikov replace his empty glass on the saucer as a sign that he was well pleased but would not mind having another glass if pressed (a flat refusal required putting the glass bottom up on the saucer and crowning it with the remaining bit of the sugar lump). "Help yourself! And don't fret about getting a position. I'll get

you a good one. I like a chatty man. But let's have the truth—are you a heavy drinker?"

Looking him squarely into the eyes, Kruglikov replied:

"I take a drop, but I don't regard myself as a drunkard. And if I drink it's owing to my present wretched state after my former comfortable life. Ivan Alexandrovich, too—you've surely heard of him for he owned rich mines— would ask: 'Why do you drink, Kruglikov? With a brain like yours, you've no business drinking. You comport yourself well, write a fine hand, are neat in dress.... You're cut out for a fine job—if only you kept away from the bottle.' And all I answer: 'My heart won't let me, Ivan Alexandrovich....'"

Kruglikov became greatly agitated. He seemed to forget to whom his outpourings were addressed or what occasioned them and, beating his breast, he continued confusedly:

"Ivan Alexandrovich, my benefactor, do not judge me too harshly. Good Lord! I'd even drink tar, boiling tar, to get just a little relief, to forget. Tar! Oh God! What have I done to deserve being stuck away in this godforsaken place, where a pood of grain costs four and a half rubles and of beef eight rubles, and where you can have neither peace nor sustenance!"

"True enough," agreed Mikhailo Ivanovich, "provisions are expensive here."

"It's not that!" The little clerk spoke with sudden anguish. It rang poignantly in his voice, flitted in a shadow across his face, and worked a change in his entire ludicrous figure. "It's the rage in my heart and the thoughts that rankle...."

"You're not given to contemplation?" interrupted Mikhailo Ivanovich, horrified yet sympathetic.

"Sometimes!" Kruglikov confessed ruefully.

"Snap out of it, man. It's a bad business. I was given to it, too, as a young man, but my late parent beat it out of me. Even after I got married I'd have fits of depression—making me feel sick with the world. A nasty business!"

"The worst there is! There are times when I wake up in the middle of the night with a start. 'Where were you born, Vassili Spiridonovich, and where did your youth pass?' I ask myself. 'And look what a wretched existence you are dragging out now....' It may be a night filled with the crack of frost or the howling of a blizzard. I go to the window, forgetting that it is a solid block of ice—and then draw away and pour myself a drink in a hurry...."

"It brings relief?"

"It goes to the head, dopes you, befuddles, because I brew and hop up my brandy—yet there is no actual relief."

"A fine mess! Give up drinking then, and get taken up with something worthwhile—that'll go to your head no worse than alcohol. But what have you done, I'd like to know, to get yourself dispatched to a place like this?"

Posed with such sudden brusqueness, the question sent a shudder through Kruglikov. Once again he seemed transformed, his figure losing its comicalness. It was as though a spark suddenly came through to the surface of a long extinguished but still smouldering heap of ashes.

He started, cast down his eyes, and in a somewhat hollow tone of voice asked permission to pour himself a drink.

"May I?"

"Help yourself!"

He poured himself a drink, peered at the tumbler against the light as though searching in it for an answer to the awkward question, emptied it at a gulp and blurted out:

"I loved!"

Mikhailo Ivanovich gave a gasp of surprise. I, too, eyed the clerk with amazement, so unexpected was this brief and frank reply. Nor was Kruglikov unaware of the sensation his answer produced.

Recovering from his surprise, Mikhailo Ivanovich said vexedly: "Can't you give a proper answer!"

"It's the truth," replied Kruglikov. "My love for a certain young lady is responsible for my having fired two pistol shots at my superior, Councillor of State Latkin."

We were now quite flabbergasted.

Mikhailo Ivanovich could only stare in blank stupefaction at our interlocutor. He recalled a traveller who, after having conversed for an hour or two with a most affable casually met companion by whom he is enchanted, suddenly discovers that the person before him is none other than the celebrated Rinaldo-Rinaldini.

"Pistol?" he inquired unbelievably. "Not really? You don't mean to say you fired out of a pistol?"

"Most assuredly, a real pistol."

"You fired?"

"I did—twice."

"What a thing to do, man, a thing that's almost political...."

"It was done! You may judge me as you will.... I was in love."

"Won't you tell us, Vassili Spiridonovich, how it all came about?" I said.

"Do tell us, man!" Mikhailo Ivanovich upheld my suggestion. "Do! Why not? It is most amazing!"

## VII

After swallowing his last gulp of tea, Kruglikov turned over the glass, crowned it with the remaining piece of sugar, and moved it aside. Having done with tea, he poured himself a drink and again examined it against the light. At the moment I regretted I was not a painter. For I would have liked to put on canvas the various emotions I saw playing in the candlelight on the now quite striking face of the At-Davan posthouse clerk. There was the round face, ash-blond neatly combed hair with the suggestion of a forelock, the potato-shaped sidewhiskers and the clean-shaven jowl. The grey eyes peering at the cognac held against the light and revealing a speaker's pleasurable thrill and pride in having roused his listeners' eager interest and at the same time the bitter regrets and searing memories of a shattered life. With a backward toss of his head, he emptied the glass of cognac, put it down on the table, brushed his worn foulard kerchief against his lips, and only then applied himself to the story.

"The story of my life, esteemed gentlemen, is extremely sad.... A person of sensibility will be aware of it—but there are those who laugh at me. Well, it's all one...."

He smiled a bitter smile, still maintaining a pose, but then inquired:

"Have any of you, esteemed gentlemen, ever been in Kronstadt?"

"Where is that?" asked Mikhailo Ivanovich.

"Close to Petersburg, about two hours' ride by boat. Kronstadt is a port."

"I was there," escaped from my lips.

"You were? In Kronstadt itself?"

Briskly Kruglikov turned towards me with an animated gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, and moreover I lived there for a few months."

"Kronstadt is magnificent—the harbour and the fortress! A stronghold and a lookout into Europe! A capital place, a part of St. Petersburg."

"Yes, it's a fine town."

"Oh my, it's more than that. Goodness, where will you find another like it? And I've gathered from a passing officer that Catherine Street has been paved with metal slab. Is that a fact?"

"It is."

"How beautiful it must look! The landing-stages, the wharf, Fort Paul, Fort Constantine...."

And as he waxed enthusiastic, my thoughts, too, momentarily transported me from the dismal Lena to Kronstadt where as a student I had spent a few happy months. As it was with Kruglikov, memories assailed me—the sea waves splashing and merging with the Neva, a ship hooting, the long dike resounding with the click of horses' hoofs as the newly landed passengers were driven off in cabs, plying launches and patrol boats, puffing steamers.... I saw in my mind's eye white skiffs flashing their oars in unison, ponderous cruisers, the German church spire, streets cut across by the dock canals, where amidst the houses, like whales mysteriously tugged into the middle of a city, lay the great hulks of warships with their towering masts. There were mansions, boulevards and barracks, and there was the high life and glamour of a metropolitan offshoot.... And again a forest of masts against the blue sky, the wharf, a spit sloping into the sea and the tumult of the tide.... The azure sea, the sparkle of the waves and the massive forts jutting out into the water. I could see clouds, white-winged seagulls, a lightweight launch with a listing sail, a Finnish sail-boat churning the waves with a creaking and moaning, and the smoke of a steamer from afar, from behind the Tolbukhin lighthouse, sailing off westward, into European seas!...

The illusion was swept away by a new crack on the frozen river—the night's frost was setting in with a vengeance. Though muffled a little, the sound penetrated through the walls of the posthouse. It was as though some monstrous bird cut a swift passage across the river with a wailing cry that grew louder with its advance, thundered past, and then, with the fainter fluttering of the giant wings, died away in the distance.

Mikhailo Ivanovich gave a nervous start and then with annoyance, as it often happens after fright, turned upon Kruglikov.

"Well," he said impatiently, "is it that you were born in that town or something? Get on with the story!"

"Yes, I was born there," Kruglikov proudly cut him short. "I first saw the light of day in Saidashnaya Street. Do you know Saidashnaya Street, sir? My father had a house he owned in that street and for all I know it may still be standing there. Although he started out as a tax-collector, my father held quite a lucrative position and naturally did his best for his son. He did not give me much of an education, just the rudiments of it and seeing that I develop a good hand, but being a

dependable young person, proficient in my work, and somewhat in the eye of my superiors owing to my father, I could say my prospects were of the brightest.... Yes, the beginning of my service held quite different promise from the position I have been reduced to today. A bright beginning and a sad eclipse."

"Don't grumble!" Mikhailo Ivanovich chid him. "And so ... I said, my dear sirs, that my father had a house of his own in Saidashnaya Street. And in the same street, just about across the way, lived a colleague of my father's, risen from a tax-collector's job, too, and who owing to longer service held an even more lucrative post."

"What post?" Mikhailo Ivanovich could not help inquiring. "At the naval dry dock—where the salaries' were nothing to boast of but the chances of adding to them plenty and quite simple. You'll get my meaning if I tell you there was hardly a day that an official left the dock without rolling a length around himself."

"Just what is that?" asked Mikhailo Ivanovich perplexedly, for much as he knew of all the devious ways of making money this particular form baffled him.

"You see, it's like that. A naval vessel is not one of your cargo boats. Let alone its smart appearance, the lashing, shrouds, spars and so on, the interior furnishings are done in fine luxury materials. There's got to be splendour and gloss and one might say comfort, too.... Well, let me tell you, that the warehouses were bursting with these materials—velvets from Lyons, silks from England, mountains of them! And now imagine an official going home at the end of the day: he removes his frockcoat, takes quite a bit of silk, rolls it round and round himself, dons his frockcoat over it and leaves the warehouse. Then on coming home his wife unrolls the silk from him like from a spool—and they are that much richer."

"A clever trick! But isn't he frisked on his way out?"

"Oh no! The workers are, of course, at the gates, but the gentlemen officials are treated different, on the basis of trust."

"I see the possibilities. But you need to be smart. A greedy man hogging everything would land in the lock-up. After all you have to do with the Treasury!"

Seeing how carried away Mikhailo Ivanovich was getting, I interrupted in my turn, "Do continue, please!"

"Yes, of course, that's not the point. But that it was all simple is quite true. Simple! You can't get away from it—there was very little education and a lot of corruption. To this I owe the cross I now bear. In short, my father's fellow official had a daughter two years my junior— going on for eighteen. A beautiful girl, and bright, too, so that her doting father, eager to humour her, had at her request even engaged a student to give her lessons. The student was clever and learned and charged a small fee—so why not give the girl a chance to learn!"

"A foolish thing!" put in Mikhailo Ivanovich. "The best way to spoil a girl!"

"To go on with the story, I was affianced to this girl, to Raisa Pavlovna. Our parents were good friends and we had practically grown up together. That we should marry had been settled between our fathers. Moreover we were very fond of each other. At first we were good friends and playmates but later the relationship grew more serious and with no obstacles put in the way by our parents we saw a good deal of one another."

"And sinned?" Mikhailo Ivanovich tried to anticipate events.

"Nothing of the kind," Kruglikov cut him short coldly. "Never entered our thoughts. We were two innocents. Reading was Raya's favourite pastime and I shared it with her. At first there were stories about all kinds of knights, about

Francis of Venice, then ones that touched the heart, nothing serious, but they appealed to us—like reading about the margravine of Brandenburg, the princess of Bavaria, and along with them about the stern *seraskier*.... Most of the reading was about high-minded individuals exposed to all sorts of vicissitudes because of the loves and fidelities with which they were perpetually preoccupied. Just the thing for our young heads! I was busy at my clerkship, but Raya after attending to the household snatched every free minute to indulge in reading. Retiring to her room, she would get up with her feet on the sofa, and settle down with a book, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. After my working hours we went promenading arm in arm—usually, as did everybody in Kronstadt, along the rampart, or up at the wharves where we could look at the sea. Raya told me what she had read during the day. Sometimes she would stop to think and then ask:

"...See, Vasya dear, what true love means. What about us? Could we be like that? Would you remain true to me, for example, if difficulties arose? Supposing some cruel *seraskier* was after my hand?..."

"And I would say:

"I would, yes, but there is no need. We have our parents' blessing and can walk up the church aisle any day we please..."

"I made light of her words, for I knew more of the world, going to the office every day as I did. But she persisted:

"Can you see that sail passing near the lighthouse?"

"Yes, there's a brig sailing from across the border."

"What if there is a pirate on that boat who descends on the town, sets it on fire, strikes you down with a spear and takes me captive?..."

"And as she said this she shuddered with fright and clung closer to me. I tried my best to reassure her:

"Have no fear, darling! That's just a Dutch or English merchant vessel coming with bales of cotton. And look at all the English walking in our streets today. To be sure there are those who get rowdy sometimes, but then they land up in the police station."

"Yes, ours is a very different life," she said. "Dmitri Orestovich, my student tutor, too, makes light of everything."

But I could do with some excitement," she concluded with a sigh.

"When it was time to think of our wedding, our fathers began to talk business. My father did not think that there should be any delay in setting the wedding date. 'My son will get six thousand from me,' he declared, 'what about your daughter?'"

"To which Raya's father replied: 'Til make it the same amount so it adds up to twelve thousand. Surely they wouldn't want any more?'"

"That won't do," says my Dad. "Figure it out for yourself: my son will be promoted and get on in the world, while your daughter will remain just as she is save for getting old. You shouldn't really grudge them any less than ten thousand..."

"One word followed another and soon they were all worked up. Raya's father was a hot-headed man, and my father's back was up so that he wouldn't concede an inch. Whereupon the other lost his temper."

"If you value your young pup four thousand rubles above my daughter," he said, "then the bargain is off. My daughter will marry a general who is surely a cut above your milksop."

"So it was diamond cutting diamond," Mikhailo Ivanovich chuckled.

Vaguely aware of the interruption, Kruglikov shot him a perplexed glance. Then he continued:

"Good grief! That set the ball rolling. At this point I ought to tell you that it was my superior who had been favouring Raya with sweet looks. He was not a full general by a long shot but at the board we never addressed him as anything else but 'excellency'. This was on his own insistence. 'In the eye of outsiders,' he would say, 'I may rank less than a colonel, but to my subordinates I'm no less than God Almighty and the tsar!'"

"Very true, I dare say!" Mikhailo Ivanovich cut in again. "God Almighty is high above and the tsar far away, but your superior is there on the spot ready to get at you. Very true, indeed!"

"The colonel was an elderly childless widower. Somehow, hard as he tried, he failed to get himself a bride in his own circle. He was very ill-favoured in looks. Then Raya caught his eye; she herself was entirely unaware of this, all the more so that I was already her avowed fiance. It's all the past—but I was rather personable, though shortish; I had a moustache, my hair was well pomaded, and I was something of a dandy.... At the beginning Raya's father showed pity for his only child. But now, touched on the raw, he bristled up and forbade me the house. The general's attentions were encouraged—and soon there was his carriage parading in our street...."

At this point Kruglikov's eyes moistened—and the spark from under the lashes burst with a bright flash — only to be extinguished by yet another drink of brandy which he raised to his mouth with a violently quivering hand, so that the brandy spilled and trickled down his pique vest.

"He started coming more often, on foot, too, and with presents. I dared not even approach her door, for fear that if I ventured in I might run into the general. I felt quite wretched.... One day when going home from the office and passing the lodgings of Raya's student tutor—he lived in a small annex writing a book there and making stuffed animals—I caught sight of him sitting on the doorstep. He was sucking his pipe. Even now when I am told he has become a person of importance in his field he never lets that pipe out of his mouth. Well, learned men are bound to be a bit queer, as you know."

Kruglikov now got up from the table, smiling gently, went into his dark little cubby-hole, and after rummaging in a chest, brought back with him an old volume for us to see.

"Take a look at this," he said.

A whiff of the past came to me from this volume. It proved to be an 1860 edition dealing with natural science in a general way and was part and parcel of that movement of thought whereby our early probing of nature set out proudly to conquer the world. Though it did not achieve the spectacular success it hoped for, the fresh wave of thought yielded many young shoots, and quite a few noted names rose from the movement. One of the names, though perhaps not of the most illustrious ones, was on the cover of the book.

"Dmitri Orestovich is the author of this book," Kruglikov asserted. He carefully wrapped the book in some of the post-office forms. It was apparent that he cherished it dearly, perhaps as a proud memento of his sad past.

"When the student saw me," Kruglikov resumed his story, "he called out:

"I want a word with you, Sir Knight!"

"As I approached and greeted him, he continued in the same bantering tone:

"Surely you have not completely abandoned your margravine of Brandenburg who is pining away for you?"

"Looking me up and down he continued: 'And who wouldn't be pining away for a knight so gallant?'"

"Though he was now poking fun at me, I knew him to be the kindest of men, and Raya, too, while fearing him at the beginning for his jesting and short temper, later thought the world of him. Not the least offended, I begged:

"Do tell me what to do, Dmitri Orestovich!"

"Don't you know what to do?"

"No!"

"Neither do I! However, I have a message for you from Raisa Pavlovna. She would like you to call after dusk this evening. Her father will be out and that horrid *seraskier* who is after her hand is away in the town of Tambov. Well, good-bye!"

"Advise me what to do, Dmitri Orestovich!"

"On such a matter I cannot give advice! I did try to tell Raisa Pavlovna to throw overboard all her *seraskiers*, along with her Sir Knight, but she refused to take my counsel. So would you, I presume...!"

"I felt as sad as could be, and now grew somewhat resentful of his banter. Was I worse than any other young lover to be laughed at like that? It was indeed my hard luck that my superior had his eye on my girl—but was I to blame for that? However, the thought that I was going to see Raya that evening cheered me up.

"After it grew dark, I stole into the house, Raya flung her arms around my neck and burst into tears. I could hardly recognise her. She was pale and wan, and there was a new look in her big eyes. But her beauty—it was breathtaking! My heart stood still. I was puzzled by the change in Raya.

'Vasya, darling,' she was saying, 'dear heart, how good of you to come. You've not for-forgotten, not aban-abandoned me?'"

Kruglikov's eyes suddenly filled with tears. He choked and gasped for breath. Getting up from his seat, he retreated to the wall and stood there facing some sort of postal notices.

When my glance fell on Mikhailo Ivanovich I noted with amazement that the flaccid features of that none too sentimental worthy had drooped and his eyes blinked.

"What a story! It goes to the heart!" he exclaimed, and then addressing himself to Kruglikov continued, "Come, poor chap, take another swig of the brandy. What can you do about it all? Oh our life! A vale of tears!"

Shamefacedly Kruglikov returned to the table, poured himself a drink, gulped it down, and mopped his face with his kerchief.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen, it's too painful.... Well, that was the last time I held Raya in my arms. From then on she became Raisa Pavlovna to me, out of reach ... a memory, sacred.... And I unworthy...."

"Now, now," Mikhailo Ivanovich interrupted quickly to prevent a fresh gush of feeling. "Why don't you get on with the story, brother, instead of going to pieces?"

"Well, we spent that evening together, and Raya cheered up a little.

"Why are we so heartbroken,' she said. 'It's not as though one of us is dead! It looks like our own time has come, if you recall our talk at the rampart. It's come about just as I said: the cruel *seraskier* has turned up, and he's none other than Latkin himself.'

"She laughed and I joined in. It was often this way: Raya to me was like sunshine breaking through the clouds, and I basked in that sunshine....

"'Courage, Vasya, let us show the true worth of our love,' she continued. 'We must not surrender. I know I shan't. Let me show you what I bought the other day....'

"From her chest of drawers she took out a pistol and showed it to me. It was rather small, but a real one. My heart stood still, but on leaving her house I picked up the pistol and slipped it into my inside pocket. Then I forgot about it, nor did Raya seem to miss it. The following day I went to see my father. I found him in his room sitting over some blueprints for a new vessel which was then under construction. He turned his head towards me, but kept his eyes averted, for he must have known then that he was killing me with his pride. But it might have been just my fate.

"'What brings you here?' he asked.

"I fell on my knees pleading but he wouldn't listen. Then I rose and proclaimed: 'If this is the case—I am of age and will marry Raya without a dowry.'

"My late father, I must say, knew how to control his temper. He had a short thick neck—and the doctor warned him that undue excitement could bring on a stroke. Therefore he refrained from shouting or violent scolding. Anger could make the blood rush to his face, but it never affected his voice.

"'You're a dolt, Vasya,' he declared quietly, 'a dolt. This is empty talk—you won't do what you say. But when I say something I mean it. And mind—be you of age or not—I'll thrash the life out of you if you disobey me.'

"'You won't dare! I'm a civil servant!'

"'So, you doubt my word?'

"Off he went to the window, opened it, and beckoned with his finger to two brothers living in a little detached house in our yard. They were a pair of ruddy-faced hefty bullies with huge moustaches—retired artillerymen who turned to cobbling. They mended or resoled shoes, made new ones, but mostly went in for brandy swilling. When they came in, they paused in the doorway, wiggling beetlelike their bristling moustaches and waiting to be offered a drink. This my father did promptly.

"'Here, gentlemen of the artillery,' he said, 'to start with is a bit of *schnapps*. And now take a look at this young fellow. Would you be willing to chastise him as with my parental hand?'

"The younger exchanged a glance with the elder brother and replied:

"'Certainly—for with the parental hand it's within the law.'

"'Bear it in mind for the future. When I give the signal, take him in tow, lay him flat and load him with lashes! And now off you go, the three of you!'

"On the following day at the office I was told to report to the general. I found him seated in his armchair, drumming on his desk with his fingers. He greeted me with a scowl, said nothing and still scowling beckoned to me to approach.

"'You've been dilly-dallying, I believe, young man,' he said.

"'No, Your Excellency, my mind is on my work. I'm never dallying, for I dare not....'

"'Oh, you needn't address me as Excellency,' he said. 'Have no fear, young man, I hold it to be quite the fashion nowadays to have no regard for one's superiors. You are contemplating marriage, I believe?'

"Isn't it a lawful intention, Your Excellency, in a man of my age, moreover if he had his superior's permission."

"I see, and have you a certain young lady in mind?"

"I hesitated to reply and he wagged a finger at me."

"See, Kruglikov, your conscience is not clear where your superior is concerned. You're hedging.... Well, you had better put that young lady completely out of your mind. There are better prospects for her. Run along!"

"I walked out of his office with tears flowing from my eyes. The people working with me were surprised, thinking I had made some blunder in the lists I drew up. The lists go hang! I was wretched: here I had my superior, at home there were the retired artillerymen, who ran out of their house every time they saw me coming and kept their eyes on the window waiting for a signal from my father. I did not know what to do, had nobody to turn to, and saw no way out. I was wasting away. My father had noticed this and forbade the two brothers to molest me; once they had so frightened me when they jumped out of the house in the hope of my father signalling to them that I dropped on the ground in convulsions frothing at the mouth. Thus realising that he had gone too far with his iron-hand rule, my father ordered that I be left alone and himself became more considerate. However, he couldn't conquer his pride ... may he rest in peace! Out here I used to receive letters from him three times a year, money too.... Before he died he sent me a missive: 'Will you ever forgive me, my son, for ruining your life?' The Lord, I thought, would forgive him. But me—I have been shown no clemency...."

"Well?" Mikhailo Ivanovich once again broke the brief, depressing pause. Kruglikov resumed his story.

"My adversary saw I had become weak and pressed his advantage. In about a week's time or so he summoned me, and met me gravely."

"Put on your coat," he said. "Remember, Kruglikov, that above all I expect loyalty from my subordinates, and will not tolerate anyone who does not show it."

"That's clear!" Mikhailo Ivanovich approved heartily.

Kruglikov again ignored the interruption.

"Soon we were on our way, in his carriage," he continued. "And do you know, my dear sirs, where we were going? To Saidashnaya Street, to Raisa Pavlovna herself!"

"Whatever for?" broke from my lips.

Kruglikov looked at me with an expression in which added to the memory of his old sorrow was a touch of vanity.

"As a matchmaker," he replied somewhat proudly.

"Goodness knows what you're talking about, Vassili Spiridonovich!"

"Not goodness knows what, but the actual truth.... It was indeed at Raisa Pavlovna's request that I went. She had said to my superior: 'If he has given me up as you claim he has, then have him come here as your matchmaker.'"

"Oh, what a wench! A sharp one!" Mikhailo Ivanovich cut in again.

"And you went?" I inquired not without reproach.

"He made me go...," replied the narrator shyly and then turned with sudden brusqueness to Mikhailo Ivanovich. "You, my dear sir, have not understood anything in the least, and your remark shows utter lack of feeling."

"I have no need to understand such as you!" my puzzled merchant friend parried this unexpected sally.

"Then keep s-s-silent," Kruglikov cut him short in a strangely shrill voice, and again turned to me.

"Yes, dear sir, as you have justly remarked, I did go with the general. And mind you, when later I was taken to hear sentence pronounced on me in front of the crowds in a public square—I suffered less. Yet I went, and people saw the two of us alight from the carriage in Saidashnaya Street. The general frowned darkly and I looked terrible. But all the same, dear sir, I had gone along—and I leave it to you to judge of me as you see fit.... That's how it was! As we stepped into the hall we bumped into Dmitri Orestovich, the student. He was on his way out of the house. Stopping for a moment he took one look at me and said: 'Just as I thought! My Prince of Venice! You're a fine one!' And to the general: 'And there I believe is the cruel seraskier!'"

Kruglikov inhaled deeply and smiled.

"Dmitri Orestovich had a brusque tongue and was also fearless by nature. His words made the general turn livid. Til have you know, young man, that I'm his Majesty's civil servant, a Councillor of State, and no *seraskier*....' The student shrugged and said: 'No matter who you are, but you're wasting your time in this house, and that's a fact.' With these words he walked right out and let the general vent his anger on me: Til never forgive you this, never....' Now, dear sir, what justice is there in this world that I should be made answerable for another's rudeness?"

"Presently, we entered the drawing-room, and there was Raisa Pavlovna, my own Raya and now the general's bride-to-be, sitting on a couch. She fixed me with a stare of her great big, tear-stained eyes. I lowered my gaze. Was this really my darling, I asked myself. No! For she was as far removed from me as if she were perched on the highest mountain. I paused in the doorway. The general walked right up to her and took her hand. 'My queen,' he said, 'doubt no more, for the young man has come.'

"She rose and leaned with her hands against the table, looking as though she did not know me. The general, too, turned to me, both of them now eyeing me while I went on standing in the doorway. 'Vasenska....' Raya's lips seemed to frame ... but then she fell back on the couch in a fit of laughter.

"'Why not make the man your flunkey?' I heard her say. Pleased, the general replied: 'If my queen desires it....'

"'Yes, I do, and don't grudge him a decent wage....'"

Kruglikov paused as though a lump had stuck in his throat.

And he dropped his head on his chest to hide his face. A silence settled on the room. And so thick was the air with the smarting memory of the deep humiliation he must have suffered that even Mikhailo Ivanovich now gazing at the little posthouse clerk with wide-open, half-bewildered eyes dared not break this silence.

Finally Kruglikov caught his breath and cast at me a leaden glance.

"At this point," he said in a measured tone of voice, "at this precise moment, it was as though something hit me on the head—like waking with a start. I looked around the familiar room in which Raya and I had spent so many evenings together. And now there she was sitting on the couch, her face buried in her hands, and the general fussing over her. My eye fell on the very bureau which had contained the pistol and I remembered all of a sudden that I had the pistol with me. It was in my overcoat pocket. I turned on my heels and quietly went out into

the hall. The pistol was in my pocket—as though waiting for me to take it out. This I now did, and even laughed, if I remember right.

"I hurried back—must get there, I thought, before the general turns and faces the door. What followed most likely would not have happened if he had turned. But no! There was Raisa Pavlovna, weeping, hiding her face, and the general drawing her hands away from it. When I stepped into the room Raisa Pavlovna released her hand, glanced at me, and froze. I took one and then another step ... only let him not turn, I thought ... and fired at him from behind...."

"You killed him?" Mikhailo Ivanovich started in horror.

"No." Kruglikov heaved a sigh of relief as though the whole thing had weighed upon him like an oppressive burden. By the Lord's mercy, the shots lacked force and merely grazed the flesh of his hind parts. All the same the general dropped to the floor with a cry and lay there writhing and shrieking. Raisa Pavlovna rushed to him, but seeing that the injury was slight walked away. She made a move in my direction—'Vasya, poor Vasya, what have you gone and done?'—but then shrank back and throwing herself into an armchair broke into tears.

"Good God!" she said. 'Why did you sneak up from behind like that? Get out, both of you!' She was half-crying and half-laughing, working herself into a fit of hysterics. People ran in, and, naturally enough, I was put under arrest."

"Let's have a drink," said Mikhailo Ivanovich. "Is that the end of the story? It makes my flesh creep. Say, man, it's quite a story. What dare-devils you all are!... How can you?"

"To make it short, I was tried by the old law by which no leniency was due to me. Had it all happened at a later date the court might have made allowances for my sufferings. But then guilt was the essential thing. I was deported. In a year, my father aged terribly, his health was undermined and he lost his position, and I have been wasting my life away in these parts ever since."

"What about Raisa Pavlovna?"

Kruglikov rose, stepped into his little cubby-hole, where he removed from the wall a picture in a fanciful frame, designed with obvious assiduity by some skilful exile, and showed it to us. It was a faded family picture in which I saw a good-looking young matron, a man of a striking, well-defined cast of face and an intelligent gleam in his bespectacled eyes, and two children.

"Could that be...?"

"Yes—Raisa Pavlovna," said Kruglikov with respect. "And that is Dmitri Orestovich, her husband. They keep in touch with me. I am now expecting a letter from them for the New Year. It is in answer to my humble request that they sent this picture, and I get an occasional money order, too...."

He spoke with deference as though not at all of the Raya with whom he had once read about the princesses of the Rhine and the Prince of Venice. However, when he pointed out to us the elder of the two daughters, a slim, fair-haired girl with big pensive eyes, his voice quivered.

"She is the spit and image of her mother," he said.

Quickly he drew the picture away when Mikhailo Ivanovich reached out curiously for it, replaced it in the cubby-hole, and paused there for a while, standing with his face to the wall as he did before in front of the postal notices.

A tremor passed through his whole figure in its skimpy little frockcoat.

## VIII

After the story was told conversation flagged. Firewood was brought in by the posthouse keeper. Logs, too, were piled up in the huge hearth in the cabmen's yurta, because the fire is made to last the night. The fire blazed and crackled. And through the half-open door by the firelight were visible the figures of the cabmen reclining on the benches around the hearth.

At-Davan had settled down for the night.

Kruglikov set us up in the adjoining room where Mikhailo Ivanovich immediately fell asleep. The main posthouse room remained unoccupied.

"Keeping it for Arabin?" I asked.

"Yes," Kruglikov replied most gloomily.

The woman who had waited on us was apparently long asleep and for this reason Kruglikov attended to things by himself: he filled the samovar with chopped ice, threw in the charcoal, and put it down near the fireplace to be handy. This done, he proceeded to clear the table, and in arranging the bottles did not fail to toss off a drink of something. He grew more and more sullen—and was decidedly wide-awake.

At last silence settled on At-Davan. It would be broken now and then by the crackling of frost outdoors, or the gentle patter of felt boots in the darkened rooms, filled now only with the reddish gleam of the flame, or again by the soft tinkle of a wine-glass and the sound of pouring liquid. The old memories that had been stirred up in him apparently kept Kruglikov awake; dolefully he wandered about the post-house, sighing, praying or mumbling under his breath.

I dozed off ..... I awoke in the dead of night, but it was to find At-Davan once again bustling with activity. A din came from the yard, doors slammed, cabmen hustled, snorting horses, the snow crunching under their hoofs, were being led away, shaft-bow bells tinkled alarmingly; all these noises erupted in a steady flow of traffic from the station to the river.

In the big room Kruglikov was unhurriedly lighting the candles, the pallid bluish flame of the sulphur match suddenly flaring bright and illuminating the whole premises.

Kruglikov raised the match to the lamp, lighted the candle in it, and turned to face a new figure standing a few steps away. This was a man in a snow-powdered deerskin coat and hood. From under the hood there gazed a pair of black slanting eyes above a pale hatchet face with dark drooping moustaches, and I recognised Arabin, the *toyon* whose arrival has been anticipated with a good deal of fear and misgivings at the station of At-Davan for several days, but who to me was merely the shy, unimportant Cossack cavalry junior officer I happened to run into at Irkutsk.

From the look of things, Arabin's visit had not started out too bad. He seemed greatly wearied—either from the road or from playing the part of the formidable *toyon*. The impression therefore was that he merely wished to relax, drink some tea, and perhaps catch a little sleep. He stood there slouching, sleepy-looking, as he waited for the room to be lit, with only a rare flicker of impatience breaking through his glazed glance. But it was Kruglikov who seemed to have undergone a strange change. He was no longer the funny, pathetic-looking man who only yesterday pleaded to have mercy on him and demand no horses. He looked sullen,

grave, and restrained, with a grim resolve in his desultory movements. He even seemed to have grown in stature. It appeared that the relating of his story, the large amount of brandy he drank, the fumes that were passing through his head, already disturbed by the stirring up of old memories, and the sleepless night had quite an effect on him.

"Damn it!" Arabin ejaculated impatiently. "Get a move on!"

Kruglikov retorted calmly, "Not so loud, please, there are travellers asleep...."

Arabin was removing his cap and when it was off a flash of astonishment showed in his dark eyes. But he still seemed eager to keep his temper under control.

"Hurry up with the samovar," he snapped discarding his deerskin and sitting down at the table.

"The samovar's ready."

"Get the horses!"

"Your travelling coupons, please?"

Arabin jerked his close-cropped head with the ears protruding slightly in Mongol fashion. His eyes now flashed with more than mere astonishment. Rising to his feet he repeated:

"Get the horses! Quick!"

"Travelling coupons, please," Kruglikov cut him short with a kind of defiant composure.

There was a stir of movement. Mikhailo Ivanovich had woken up and, now sitting up in bed, was trying to pull on some article of clothing without making a noise and with a wary look, as though the station were on fire or overrun by an enemy. He craned his neck and in the half-gloom his artlessly cunning eyes glinted with fear and curiosity.

"Well, well," he whispered leaning towards me. "Some business. That Kruglikov is a dare-devil.... Remember, old chap, we haven't seen a thing. The last thing we want is to be called in as witnesses...."

Not until I heard these words did I grasp the situation. To demand of Arabin, the dreaded *toyon*, to pay for his horses, and moreover in so resolute a tone was on the part of humble At-Davan nestling beneath the rugged Lena mountains, an unheard-of impertinence. Arabin jumped to his feet, reached out for his pouch, snatched a paper out of it and angrily thrust it at Kruglikov. It was quite obvious that fatigued and overwrought as he was, he wished to keep within certain bounds, and that the part of the dreaded *toyon* was too strenuous and irksome for him to play at that late hour in pleasantly warm and brightly lit At-Davan. But neither did he want to pay for the horses, all the more so that the ways of the quiet and meek Lena were well known to him. It would be a blow to his prestige to pay for his horses in At-Davan. The news of it would spread like wildfire from place to place, the cabmen saying that Arabin, the great *toyon*, had been made to pay up. And all along his path, the money would be claimed. Most likely he hoped that Kruglikov had forgotten who he was and the paper he handed him would remind him; but it only made matters worse.

Unhurriedly Kruglikov unfolded the paper, and after reading it through carefully, his eye lingering on every line, remarked:

"It says here: '...to be given four horses for the established charge.' And you demand six for two carriages and pay nothing. It's unlawful...."

He said this in a calm enough voice and yet his words seemed to sweep through At-Davan. The loud din that had filled the station subsided, the cabmen crowded with timid interest round the doors leading from their quarters into the main room. Mikhailo Ivanovich held his breath.

Arabin roused himself. He glared round the posthouse, straightened up and brought his fist down on the table with a furious scowl.

"Silence!" he shouted. "What's this? A rebellion?"

"No rebellion whatever, only what the law demands, by order of His Imperial Majesty. And it's high time the law were...."

Kruglikov did not finish the sentence. A violent blow knocked him off his feet; Arabin was about to advance on the prone figure....

I rushed into the room—and stopped. Arabin now stood facing me, surprised at my sudden intrusion which, I believe, delivered both Kruglikov and Arabin himself from the further consequences of his fury. Arabin's pallid face twitched and there was something wild and morbid in his rolling eyes. This junior Cossack cavalry officer, who forgot his low rank and imagined himself truly a mighty *toyon*, holding his head as high as the Lena summits, was suddenly brought back to reality by my presence—to Irkutsk, to the low-ceilinged room where his head hardly reached any higher than dozens of other unremarkable heads.

But whatever confusion he experienced and whatever feelings now stirred in Arabin's breast, were lost on the men of At-Davan. They saw only the blow, and the clerk's sprawling form. The door from the yurt was slammed, bustling was renewed in the yard. From the room where we had slept came the sound of Mikhailo Ivanovich's obviously feigned snoring.

The rebellion had been put down, and Arabin to the men of At-Davan had remained the same all-powerful *toyon* about whom they had chanted their song.

Presently Kruglikov picked himself up. Our eyes met and I involuntarily turned away. There was something so pathetic in his glance that it wrung my heart—a look that only people in Russia have.... He rose, walked to the wall, leaned with his shoulder against it and buried his face in his hands. His figure was just as we saw it yesterday, only even more crushed, humiliated and pathetic-looking.

The servant hastily carried in the samovar, casting a sidelong glance of pity at her master.... Arabin, panting, sat down in front of the samovar.

"I'll show you how to rebel!" he snarled. Whatever words followed were hardly intelligible, except for the suggestion that "witnesses" could go to the devil, the mention of an officer's honour, and the like.

## IX

Meanwhile, in the half-gloom of the room where we had slept, Mikhailo Ivanovich was completing his toilet. A few minutes later he appeared in the doorway, fully dressed, buttoning the last of his buttons, clearing his throat, and wreathing his face into the most affable smile.

Arabin eyed this new intruder with a fretful and uncomprehending look, wondering apparently what this smiling and bowing stranger advancing towards him with a tripping gait might want from him. However, his puzzlement at the

friendly smiles and curtsies, prevented a fresh outburst of his still smouldering fury. With a hand that shook he brought the saucer of hot tea up to his lips and watched gloomily out of the corner of his eye Mikhailo Ivanovich's manoeuvrings.

"What do you want?" he finally snapped, putting his saucer down on the table.

Mikhailo Ivanovich winced a trifle, but then resumed his disgustingly fawning air.

"Nothing really, just to present my respects ... apparently you do not recognize me... We met at Lev Stepanovich's, the *ispravnik*, had a talk, and even ... negotiated a bit of business...."

"Oh yes, I now recall it," Arabin said absently and turned his attention back to his tea.

"Precisely," Mikhailo Ivanovich exclaimed joyously. "And may I ask what mission brings you here?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Fair enough," Mikhailo Ivanovich agreed meekly, "for it may be secret...."

Poor Mikhailo Ivanovich could not understand that the mere mention of Irkutsk, the *ispravnik* and other down-to-earth matters rubbed Arabin the wrong way, shattering the illusion of the grand and epic world in which he still dwelt.

"F-fair," Mikhailo Ivanovich repeated musingly and to keep the point of vantage he gained added confidentially: "I don't blame you for flying off the handle as you did a short while ago. Even an angel would lose his temper in these parts!"

Casting a sidelong glance in the direction of Kruglikov, Mikhailo Ivanovich said with a sigh:

"Boorishness!"

But the ice was not broken. Arabin ignored Mikhailo Ivanovich. Finishing his tea, he took out a pad, jotted down something in it, hastily donned his clothes and hurried to the door. But then as though having weighed something in his mind and arrived at a sudden decision he stopped and, making sure that he was unobserved by any of the cabmen, he threw down angrily some money. Two bills flashed through the air while the silver coins rolled clinking on the floor. A moment later he was outside and soon we heard the wild tinkling of his sleigh bells coming from the river under the high cliff of the bank.

It was all so unexpected and performed so quickly that we three silent witnesses of the scene did not at once grasp its meaning. As always in money matters, Mikhailo Ivanovich was the first to comprehend.

"He paid," he ejaculated in astonishment. "Do you hear, Kruglikov, he's paid for the horses. Can you beat that?"

None of the cabmen had witnessed this concession on the part of the dreaded *toyon*.

## X

Late that morning we were again getting settled into our sleigh. The frost had not abated. From behind the mountains, looming blue in the wintry haze, streamed in the first pale bars of sunlight. The frozen horses struggled to get free and it was with difficulty that the cabmen restrained our troika.

At-Davan had sunk into a bleak and cheerless quiet. Shaken by the night's misadventure, depressed and humiliated, Kruglikov saw us to the sleigh, shuddering with old, the effects of liquor and sorrow. It was with a strange servility that he now helped Mikhailo Ivanovich into the sleigh, tucked his feet under the rug and drew the warm covers around him.

"Mikhailo Ivanovich, be my benefactor," he entreated. "Bear in mind about a position for me. I won't be able to stay on here after what happened last night...."

"All right, I'll see about it," Mikhailo Ivanovich replied half-heartedly.

Just then the cabmen jumped aside releasing the horses and our troika darted off down the ice-track. Fast behind us receded the steep bank. And the misty mountains that had seemed mysterious and fantastic in the moonlight now advanced towards us, grim and bleak.

"Well, Mikhailo Ivanovich, will you secure him a position?" I asked when our horses had settled into a steady trot.

"No," he replied flatly. "Why, pray?"

"He's a harmful and most dangerous man. Y-yes.... See what *you* can make of his actions. He seemed ready to comply with his superior's request there in Kronstadt—and comply he ought! He'd have been happy for the rest of his life if he'd given up that girl of his. Surely there's no dearth of brides. He'd give up one and take another. Bother them! And in return he'd get a promotion. But look how he'd served his superior—by shooting him out of a pistol. Now, however you judge it—who would like it? What sort of behaviour is it? Today he'll treat you like that and tomorrow me."

"But that was long ago. He's a different person now."

"Don't be too sure. You heard the way he talked to Arabin last night?"

"I did, but he merely claimed what was his right to claim."

Mikhailo Ivanovich turned impatiently towards me.

"You're an intelligent fellow and yet you don't understand a simple thing. Claim indeed! Was he the only one whom Arabin did not pay? No, he must have covered thousands of versts without paying anywhere. So who did he think he was to claim the money!"

"Arabin was obliged to pay."

"Obliged? Who obliged him—you and your Kruglikov, I dare say!"

"The law, Mikhailo Ivanovich."

"Law indeed!... He, too, harped on it yesterday—the law. And does he know what kind of word it is—'law'?"

"Pray, what?"

"It's that kind of a word—you may speak it once, but ten times you must keep mum about it, until you're asked. The law, by law'," he mimicked. "You're a dolt with your law! Who did he think he was to instruct his superiors in the law!"

Seeing how inordinately worked up Mikhailo Ivanovich was getting, and fearing lest I completely spoil Kruglikov's chances I now tried to intercede for him by merely reminding Mikhailo Ivanovich that he promised to help him.

"What of it?" he replied. "I only promised out of pity...."

"Get us up!" Mikhailo Ivanovich suddenly roared, as our sleigh in negotiating a sharp incline had overturned and he found himself again crushed beneath my weight.

We were compelled to climb out. And it struck me that in this particular spot the river had fought against the frost with the greatest ferocity, for here the huge

white hummocks closed in on all sides obscuring the vista ahead of us. The rugged mountains alone, formidable and awe-inspiring, stood out from the mists on either side and, far away, above the chaotic mass of hummocks a wreath of curling smoke was faintly traced against the sky....

That was the last we saw of At-Davan.

*1880*

## AT-DAVAN

At-Davan is the name of a station on the banks of the Lena River lying at a distance of 300 kilometres from the town of Yakutsk. The story and its pivotal character, the courier Arabin, are derived from fact. Korolenko had heard a great deal about Arabin in 1881 from the coachmen and station masters along the Lena route while going to his exile in Yakutia. Korolenko tried writing in the press about Arabin's acts of violence, right after his return from exile in 1855, demanding that he be brought to trial, and later in 1887, after learning about Arabin having killed a station master. The articles, however, were not passed by the censorship. In 1892, when the story "At-Davan" was published, it turned out that Arabin was still alive, and instead of being locked up in a lunatic asylum or in prison, was at large in St. Petersburg; moreover he appeared with threats at the office of the magazine which published the story, demanding a refutation.