

Ionich

by

Anton Chekhov

Translated by G T Owen

By way of introduction.....

I suppose that our first introduction to the works of great writers, composers, artists etc frequently happen by chance. One evening, in my late teens, I happened to watch a black and white film on television called *Lady with a Little Dog*, not a title to inspire much curiosity or enthusiasm. But Heifets' film of the Chekhov short story of the same name, made in 1957, is one of the supreme masterpieces of the cinema, an opinion held by the late, distinguished film critic Dilys Powell of the Sunday Times who said it was the only film she would take with her to the mythic "desert island". I entirely agree and it sparked a life-long interest in the work of Anton Chekhov, especially the short stories, so much so that it influenced my decision to start learning Russian so that I could read these incomparable stories in Chekhov's own language. Accordingly I enrolled in evening classes throughout the Sixties and by the end of the decade I had acquired just enough Russian to stumble my way through a small selection with frequent recourse to a dictionary.

1971/3 saw me in Libya, attached to the English department of Tripoli university. Such was the chaos and disorganisation of the country in the wake of the *coup d'état* which removed King Idris from his throne that months went by without any students. To keep myself occupied I began to translate one of my favourite stories from a Soviet edition of Chekhov's works I had bought four years previously in the Russian bookshop in Vienna. It took me, on and off, over a year. I then put my typescript away – and rediscovered it 39 years later in a forgotten file. Reading it through once again, I noticed minor mistranslations and places where my style could be improved so I revised my version and corrected the errors. This version is the final result.

Ionich, the name by which the main character, Dr Startsev, is known, is a beautifully observed and compassionately described study in self-delusion leading to gradual self-knowledge. Despite the title, the main focus is on Katarina Ivanovna whom we first meet as a flighty eighteen-year old schoolgirl who dreams of being a great pianist. She scornfully rejects Startsev's marriage proposal ("to be a wife, never!") only to bitterly regret her reaction years later when she realises she will never be more than a mediocrity, one among many. Startsev, on the other hand, his proposal rejected, descends over the years into a caricature of greed, venality and moroseness. At the end, in typical Chekhovian fashion, nothing is resolved, nothing decided. We are left to live as best we can with our own little tragedies, our own regrets, our own thoughts about what our lives might have been like, if only.....

Translating Chekhov, especially this story, throws up fascinating challenges. Katarina's father, Ivan Petrovich, is given to witty sayings, obscure allusions, puns and wordplays which offer a translator knotty problems. He takes common, everyday expressions and slightly changes them for comic effect. A good example in English is the jocular transformation of "What can I do for you?" into "What can I do you for?". Or a Spoonerism whereby "conquering kings" becomes "cinquering kongs" (actually said by Dr Spooner himself). A translator must decide how to deal with such matters and, unsurprisingly, each translator comes up with different "solutions". After one of his daughter's recitals, her father exclaims "Die, Denis, you have excelled yourself". An English reader would be unlikely to pick up the allusion here. Ronald Hingley, a British authority on Chekhov, who has translated all his works into English, renders Ivan's exclamation as "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever". I find it utterly incongruous that a Russian would be quoting Keats in such a typically Russian setting so I have preferred a literal translation with a footnote to explain the allusion. In fact, my

general criticism of Hingley is of his excessive “englishing” of the text, changing the Russian names into English equivalents and making Chekhov sound like Saki or Somerset Maugham whereas I have tried to preserve the Russian flavour of the stories. However, consistency is not always possible. Take the family’s pet name for their daughter, Kotik. Kotik means kitten but to English ears (at least to my ear), “Kitten” sounds odd and inappropriate. Hingley translates Pussy which has dubious overtones. In the end I decided on Katie, thereby conceding a point to Hingley by anglicising her. I have also removed the first letter of her name, which in Russian is Ekaterina, in the interests of assonance and idiom. I am also not entirely happy with my version of Ivan Petrovich’s final words to his family as he sees them off at the station. In normal Russian one would say *Do Svidanya* (Au Revoir) but Petrovich says *Proshchaite pozhalysta*, literally, Farewell please. My “cheerio” does not capture the idiosyncratic flavour of the original but at least I think it better than Hingley’s “chin chin”. In the final analysis, all translators of literary texts should heed the old Italian saying - *traduttore – traditore*.

In the town of S-, a provincial capital, life was boring and monotonous, or so visitors always used to say. The locals, however, would disagree. On the contrary, they would say, life is good. We've got a library, a theatre, a club and there are dances. There are also, they would add, a number of interesting and intelligent families in the town whom one can get to know and in this connection they would always mention the Turkins as being by far the most accomplished and cultivated of them all.

The Turkins lived in their own house on the main street next to the Town Hall. Turkin himself, Ivan Petrovich, was a portly, dark and handsome man with sideburns who loved putting on shows and parties for Good Causes in which he used to imitate retired generals because he had the knack of coughing like them which always raised a laugh. He was a fund of jokes, charades and stories and he loved fooling around and playing practical jokes. Sometimes he kept such a straight face that you never knew whether he was joking or telling the truth. His wife, Vera Iosifovna, a slim, good-natured lady with a pince-nez, wrote stories and novels which she would willingly read out to her guests. Their young daughter, Katerina Ivanovna, played the piano. In short, each member of the family had some sort of talent and they all took great delight in displaying them to their guests. Their large stone house was spacious and cool in summer. French windows looked out onto an old, shady garden where nightingales sang in spring and while their guests were sitting in the house, preparations would be going ahead in the kitchen as the smell of fried onions wafted out in readiness for a large and appetising meal.

And so it was that when Dr Startsev took up an appointment as a country doctor in the area and settled down in Dyalizh, a village some six miles from S-, everybody said that being himself such an intelligent gentleman, he should lose no time in getting to know the Turkins. So that winter he was introduced to Ivan Petrovich in the street and they chatted for a while about the weather, what was on at the theatre and the cholera threat and before parting, Turkin invited the doctor around sometime. The following spring - it was in fact Ascension Day, a public holiday - after seeing his patients, Startsev set off for town in search of amusement and perhaps a little shopping. Not at that time having any horses, he went on foot, taking his time and humming to himself;

"When I had still not yet drunk tears from the cup of life...."

After lunching in town, he strolled around the park for a while then, remembering Turkin's invitation, he decided to pay them a visit to find out what sort of people they were.

Ivan Petrovich greeted him profusely from the doorway.

"I am delighted to welcome such a distinguished guest. Let me introduce you to my Better Half".

"Vera", he said, introducing the doctor to his wife, "Vera, I told the doctor not to sit at home doctoring his patients but to spend his free time out and about. Don't you think so, darling?"

"Do sit down" said Vera Iosifovna, gently pushing him down onto the chair next to hers.

"You may of course flirt with me. My husband is terribly jealous, just like Othello, but don't worry, we'll arrange things so he won't notice anything".

"Now, now, my naughty little Poppet" said Ivan Petrovich, sidling up to his wife and kissing her tenderly on the forehead. Then, addressing himself to his guest, he said.

"You have favoured us with your visit. As it happens, my wife has just completed a magnificent novel and today she's going to read it out to some specially invited guests".

"Jean-Jacques", said Vera to her husband, "*dites, que l'on nous donne du thé*".

Startsev was then introduced to Katerina Ivanovna, their eighteen year old daughter. He noticed that she was very much like her mother to look at. Her features and expression however

were still very much that of a child. Her waist was slender and supple and her breasts, still virgin, were exquisitely sculpted and gave promise of a mature and genuine beauty. Afterwards, tea was served with cakes, honey, sweets and some delicious meringues which melted in the mouth. Evening came and the guests began to arrive, one by one, each one greeted profusely by Ivan Petrovich.

The assembled guests seated themselves in the drawing room and assumed serious expressions as Vera Iosifovna began to read. It began thus:

“The frost crackled.....”

Through the wide open windows could be heard the chink of cutlery in the kitchen and the smell of fried onions wafted in. A fire flickered gently in the half-light of the drawing room and the deep armchairs were soft and comfortable and during that summer evening, lulled by the sound of voices and laughter drifting up from the street mingled with the scent of lilacs in the courtyard, it was difficult to imagine the frost crackling under the feet of the lone traveller setting off across the snowy plain dimly lit by the cold rays of the setting sun. For Vera read to her guests a story about how a young and beautiful countess established schools, hospitals and libraries in her village and then fell in love with an itinerant artist. Yet despite all the unlikely things that happened in the novel, it was pleasant to listen to her and one’s head teemed with all sorts of good and comforting thoughts.

“Not bad at all” said Ivan Petrovich softly to himself at one point and one of the guests, his mind far, far away and not quite catching what Ivan had said, echoed almost audibly;

“Yes.....indeed....”.

Thus two hours passed. In the nearby park a band struck up and a choir sang. When Vera finally closed her book, the guests sat still for about five minutes listening to the choir in the park sing *Luchinushku*¹. It seemed that somehow this song compensated in real life for what had been missing in the novel.

“Do you publish your work at all?” Startsev asked Vera afterwards.

“Oh no”, she replied. “I never publish. I just write them and put them away in a cupboard. Besides, what’s the point of publishing? We’re well enough off.”

At this, for some reason, everybody sighed.

“And now it’s your turn, Katie” said Ivan to his daughter. “Play us something”.

The lid of the piano was raised and the music, already lying conveniently to hand, was placed on the music-rest. Katarina Ivanovna sat down and with both hands gave the keyboard a mighty blow. Apparently not content with this, she struck it another blow with all her strength, and again and again. Her breasts and shoulders heaved with exertion as she struck over and over again at the same place and it looked as though she wasn’t going to stop until she had hammered the keyboard into the piano itself. The drawing room resounded with thunder; everything shook and rattled, the floor, the ceiling, the furniture, everything. Katarina played difficult passages which were interesting solely for their difficulty, length and monotony. Her playing reminded Startsev of rocks falling one after the other like scree down high mountain sides and he longed for her to stop the din she was making and yet at the same time there was something very pleasing about her strenuous efforts and her hair tumbling all over her forehead. After a winter spent among invalids and peasants in Dyalizh, it was a pleasant change to find himself in a drawing room contemplating such a young, elegant and refined creature producing sounds, which, although noisy and ugly, nevertheless claimed some pretensions to culture.

¹ 19th century traditional folk song.

“Well. Katie, you’ve never played better than today” said her father with tears in his eyes and he began to pay her fulsome compliments. “Die, Denis, you have excelled yourself!”²

Everybody then went up to her and congratulated her, insisting that they had not heard such a performance for a long time. Katarina acknowledged their compliments in silence, a ghost of a smile on her lips but the way she held herself betrayed the triumph she was feeling.

“Marvellous! Wonderful”.

Startsev too joined in the general adulation and enquired;

“Where did you study music? At the Conservatoire?”

“No” she replied. “I’m still studying for the entrance examination. At present I’m with Madame Zaslovska.”

“Have you finished school yet?”

“Oh no” interrupted her mother. “We have the teachers here. You see, at school she would be exposed to all sorts of evil influences. When a young girl is growing up, she must be looked after by her one and only mother”.

“But anyway, I am going to the Conservatoire” said Katarina.

“No, Katie loves her mummy. Katie wouldn’t dream of hurting her mummy and daddy”.

“No, I shall go, I shall go” said Katarina, stamping her foot capriciously.

After supper it was Ivan Petrovich’s turn to show off his talents. In his mock serious manner and his bizarre turns of phrase perfected over the years by constant practice so that it came as second nature to him, he entertained his guests with jokes and anecdotes, posed ridiculous and impossible problems and then with a straight face offered ingenious solutions to them. But this wasn’t quite all. As the guests crowded into the hallway to collect their coats and walking-sticks, they found young Pavlushka, or Pava as he was called, the 14 year old houseboy with short cropped hair and chubby cheeks hanging about expectantly.

“And now Pava, perform!” said Ivan Petrovich to him.

Pava struck a pose, flung his arms up and declaimed with great tragic force;

“Die, wretched woman!”

And everybody roared with laughter.

“Most amusing” thought Startsev going out into the street. He went back to the restaurant, ordered a beer and then set off on foot back to Dyalizh. As he walked he sang;

“Your voice is tender and languid in my ear”³

But when he had walked the six miles or so back home he wasn’t in the least bit tired and indeed could have carried on walking twice as far without any trouble at all. As was falling asleep, he remembered one of Ivan Petrovich’s phrases.

“Not bad at all” – and he smiled a little to himself.

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Startsev had every intention of going to see the Turkins again. But so much work piled up at the hospital that he was unable to get any time off and so the best part of a year went by, filled with work and solitude. Then one day a letter arrived from town in a sky-blue envelope.

For some time Vera Iosifovna had been suffering from periodic attacks of migraine but recently, as the date of Katarina’s departure for the Conservatoire drew nearer, her attacks had become more and more frequent. Every doctor in town had been called in and now it was the turn of the country doctors. Vera Iosifovna wrote him a moving letter in which she implored him to come

² The allusion is to a remark said to have been directed by Prince Potemkin to the playwright Denis Fonvizin (1745-92) after a performance of one of his plays.

³ A song by Rubinstein to words by Pushkin.

and relieve her pain. So Startsev went and gradually his visits to the Turkins became this time more and more frequent. In fact, Startsev was moderately successful in treating Vera Iosifovna's migraine, so much so that she took to telling her guests what a wonderful doctor he was. But Startsev's visits to the Turkins began to have less and less to do with Vera Iosifovna's migraine.....

One day – it was a holiday – Startsev was sitting in the drawing room with Katarina and her father. She had just finished a long and arduous practice session at the piano and they were all drinking tea together. Ivan Petrovich had just cracked a joke when the doorbell rang. Ivan Petrovich got up and went into the hall to receive some guests so Startsev, taking advantage of the momentary absence and barely able to conceal his frustration, whispered across to Katarina; "For goodness sake, you're making my life a misery. Let's go out into the garden". She shrugged, as if puzzled by his behaviour, not understanding what he wanted from her but she got up and went into the garden.

"You spend three or four hours playing that piano", he said, following her out, "and then you go and sit with mother and I never get a chance to talk to you alone. Just give me quarter of an hour, please.....".

The garden was quiet and melancholy with the approach of autumn. Dark leaves lay strewn on the path and already the evenings were drawing in.

"I haven't seen you the whole week" Startsev went on. "If only you knew what I've suffered for you. Let's sit here. Listen to me."

It was their favourite spot in the garden, a bench under an old, spreading maple tree.

"What do you want?" said Katarina in a dry, business-like tone of voice.

"I haven't seen you the whole week. I haven't heard you for such a long time. I want, I need, I thirst for the sound of your voice. Talk to me.....please.....".

It was the freshness and innocence in her eyes and cheeks that captivated him. He saw something indescribably beautiful and appealing in her simple, unsophisticated grace and even in the way she dressed. Yet at the same time, despite her tender years and lack of sophistication, she appeared to him to be intelligent and cultivated, somebody with whom he might discuss literature, art or whatever took their fancy, might exchange experiences of life, of people even though, during one of their serious conversations, she might laugh in the wrong places or without warning scuttle out of the house. Like almost all the girls in town, she read avidly - in general, the inhabitants of the town of S- read very little and it was said that if it weren't for the young girls and young Jews, the town library would have to close down – and this naturally pleased Startsev who made it a point to ask her each time what she had been reading the previous day and then listen fascinated to what she would reply.

"What have you been reading this week while I've been away?"

"I've been reading Pisemsky".⁴

"Which book?"

"A Thousand Souls" she replied. "And what a funny name he's got, Alexei Feofilaktich".

"Where are you going?" cried Startsev in alarm as she suddenly jumped up and moved towards the house. "I must speak to you. I must explain something.....just stay another five minutes.....please.....".

She paused, as though wanting to say something then awkwardly thrust a piece of paper into his hand, ran into the house and sat down again at the piano.

"Tonight at eleven o'clock", Startsev read, "be in the cemetery by Demetti's statue".

⁴ A F Pisemsky (1820-81). Novelist and dramatist. *Thousand Souls* (1858) is his best known work, a historical romance.

But that's ridiculous, said Startsev to himself. Why the cemetery? What for? Katie, it was clear, was playing the fool. What person in his right mind would arrange a meeting place in the middle of the night, miles outside the town, in a cemetery when such a thing could easily be done in the street or a park? And why play such tricks on him, a country doctor, an intelligent and respectable person, full of tender desire, receiving little notes, dragging himself to cemeteries, doing things which even schoolboys would laugh at? What was all this novelette-ish business about? What would his colleagues say if they knew? All this crossed his mind as he paced around the tables in his club and then suddenly, at half-past ten, he set off for the cemetery.

His pair of horses and his coachman, Pantaleimon in his velvet waistcoat, were waiting. It was a warm, moonlit night, but warm in an autumnal sort of way. In the distant suburbs dogs could be heard howling around the abattoir. On the edge of town, Startsev stopped his horses and, leaving them in a side street, walked the rest of the way on foot.

"For all her funny ways" thought Startsev, "and she is a peculiar girl, she might not be joking after all. Who knows?". And he thrilled at this sweet, forlorn hope which filled him with delight.

For a short while he crossed an open field. The dark shape of the cemetery loomed dimly in the distance like a wood or large garden. Gradually the white stones of the perimeter wall became visible, then the entrance gate. In the moonlight it was possible to make out the inscription above the gate; "Cometh the Hour.....". Startsev went through the wicket-gate and the first things he saw were the white crosses and statues on both sides of the broad avenue together with their dark shadows and those of the poplars. All round him he could see only blackness and whiteness and the branches of the trees seemed to droop drowsily under all this whiteness. It seemed to Startsev that it was brighter here in the cemetery than out in the countryside; maple leaves like footprints were scattered all over the yellowish gravel and gravestones and inscriptions were clearly visible. Then it struck Startsev very forcibly that here he was looking at something he had never seen before in his life nor might ever see again – a world like no other, anywhere, a world as it might have looked from his cradle, filled with the soft, benevolent light of the moon. But instead of life, here there was no trace of it. Instead, in each dark poplar and in each grave Startsev sensed the presence of a secret, a secret which held out the promise of tranquillity, beauty and eternity. The very gravestones themselves with their withered flowers together with the fragrance of the autumn leaves breathed an atmosphere of forgiveness, peace and sorrow.

There was utter silence. The stars looked humbly down on Startsev and his footsteps echoed harshly in the quietness of the cemetery, intruding into its privacy. He imagined that he too was among the dead, interred here for ever and only when the church clock started to chime did he have the feeling that somebody was looking at him and for a moments he thought that this peace and tranquillity was not that of life but some soundless void of non-existence, of bottomless despair.

Demetti's statue was in the form of a chapel crowned with an angel. Once, when a troupe of Italian opera singers had been passing through, one of them had died and had been buried here and a statue had been erected to his memory. He was no longer remembered in town but the little lamp over the entrance to the chapel reflected the moonlight and looked as though it was lit up.

There was nobody there. Who could be expected to be there at midnight anyway? But Startsev waited and, as though the moonlight were inflaming his desire, waited with growing passion, savouring the kiss, the embrace. For half an hour he sat by the statue, then got up to pace expectantly along the side of the avenue, hat in hand, his thoughts dwelling on the graves around him and all those women and young girls buried in them who were once beautiful and desirable, who loved and were loved, who were consumed with erotic passion at night and who gave

themselves freely under tender caresses. How cruel and offensive it was to be reminded of the transience and mortality of human beings.

Such were the thoughts that passed through Startsev's mind. At the same time he longed to cry out in the silence of the graveyard and proclaim his need for love, whatever the cost. Instead of slabs of marble gleaming about him in the white moonlight, he glimpsed wonderful shapes and forms shyly concealing themselves in the dark shadows of the trees and a warm flush came over him as exhaustion set in.

And then, as if a curtain had dropped, the moon disappeared behind a cloud and suddenly everything went dark. Startsev could scarcely find his way out of the cemetery for it was as dark as a normal autumnal night. Then he spent an hour and a half wandering about looking for the side street where he had left his horses.

"I'm exhausted" he told Pantaleimon, "I can hardly stand", and, sitting back in his carriage with a sigh, thought to himself;

"Well. I won't put on weight at this rate!".

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The following evening Startsev went to the Turkins with the intention of proposing to her. However, circumstances did not appear to be propitious because when he arrived, Katarina was having her hair done in preparation for a ball at the club that evening. And so, once again, he had to sit down and drink tea. Ivan Petrovich, noticing that his guest was looking distracted and a trifle bored, pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and read an amusing letter from a German Estate Manager about how everybody gets corrupted by buck-passing and modesty becomes a rare commodity.

"I expect they'll provide quite a decent dowry" Startsev was thinking absent-mindedly. After a sleepless night, he was feeling a little under the weather, as if he had just taken a sleeping pill. A sort of interior dialogue was going on between his heart, conscious of warm and joyful if rather vague sentiments and his head, cool, detached and sceptical.

"Stop before it's too late!. Are you really a match for her? She's a spoilt, capricious child, fickle to a degree while you are a sacristan's son, a country doctor....."

"Well, so what?" he thought in reply. "So be it".

"Besides, if you marry her", the other voice went on, "her family will insist you give up your country practice and live in town".

"Well, so what?" he thought again. "A town's a town. We'll get the dowry, buy furniture, settle down....".

At last Katarina appeared in her décolleté ball dress looking neat and presentable. Startsev's joy knew no bounds and he could not bring himself to utter a single word but just looked at her and smiled. She began to leave so Startsev, realising that there was no point in staying, got up, saying that he had to go, patients were waiting.

"You'll do nothing of the sort" said Ivan Petrovich, "You'll stay and take Katie to the ball".

It was drizzling outside and so dark that only Pantaleimon's wheezy coughing indicated where the horses were. They climbed into the carriage.

"I go for ego, you go for Hugo, he goes for leg-shows" said Ivan Petrovich seating his daughter in the carriage. "And now, off you go. Cheerio". And off they went.

"I went to the cemetery yesterday", Startsev began.

"You actually went to the cemetery?"

"Yes. I waited nearly two hours for you. I suffered....."

"Then suffer if you can't take a joke".

And she laughed out loud in the knowledge that although she was passionately loved, the cunning joke she had played on her lover had succeeded. Her laughter suddenly turned to squeals of fright as the horses suddenly turned sharply into the gateway of the club and the carriage swayed alarmingly. Startsev put his arm around her waist and she, still frightened, moved closer to him. Abandoning restraint, Startsev kissed her passionately on the cheeks and chin and clasped her more tightly.

"That's enough" she said curtly.

The next moment she was no longer in the carriage and the officials controlling the comings and goings around the entrance to the brightly lit club house were swearing at Pantaleimon.

"What are you waiting for, you cretin? Get a move on!"

Startsev went home but soon returned. Dressed in a borrowed tail-suit and a coarse white tie that was sticking out from under his collar, he was sitting in the club house at midnight talking passionately to Katarina.

"Oh how little of love do they know who have never loved. Nobody has yet described what true love is, nor would be able to describe this tender, joyful, agonizing experience; for whoever might just once experience it could not even begin to put it into words. But why all this fine talk? What am I leading up to?"

Startsev at last came to the point.

"My love is boundless....I implore you.....please.....be my wife!"

"Dimitri Ionich" said Katarina, with a very serious expression on her face. "Dimitri Ionich, I thank you sincerely for the honour you do me. I respect you highly, but...."

Here she stood up and remained standing.

".....but, forgive me, I cannot be your wife. Dimitri Ionich, you know that more than anything else in this world I love art and above all, music. To music I would wish to dedicate my whole life. I want to be an artist, I want success, fame, freedom.....and all you want is for me to remain in this town leading an empty, useless life which for me would be unbearable. To be a wife....never! Men and women must strive for the highest and noblest ideals and family life would hold me back for ever. Dimitri Ionich, (a very slight smile showed that "Dimitri Ionich" reminded her of "Alexei Feofilaktich") Dimitri Ionich, you are a good, noble, intelligent man, you are the best....".

Tears welled up in her eyes. "I sympathise with all my soul, but....you understand..." and so as not to cry she turned away and left the room.

The violent pounding of Startsev's heart subsided. The first thing he did when he left the club was to loosen his collar and take a deep breath. He felt a little ashamed and his self-esteem was shaken – he had not expected a refusal – and he found it hard to understand that all his dreams, suffering and hopes had brought him to this ridiculous situation, like a play performed by amateurs. And so intense was his self-pity that it seemed he would either burst out sobbing or vent his frustration by seizing his umbrella and beating Pantaleimon's broad back with all his might. For three days Startsev could not concentrate on his work. He neither ate nor slept but when news reached him that Katarina had left for Moscow to enter the Conservatoire, he began to recover and fall back into his old routine. Afterwards, when thinking back on how he had wandered around the cemetery or through town looking for a tail-suit to go to the ball, he would lazily stretch himself and mutter; "All that fuss and bother....for what?".

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Four years went by. Startsev had now built up a large practice in town. Every morning he would hurriedly attend to his village patients then set off to see his town patients, not now in a two-horse carriage but in one with three horses and sleigh bells. He would return late at night. He put on weight, became corpulent and avoided walking whenever possible because it made him short of

breath. Pantaleimon also put on weight and the fatter he got, the more bitterly he bewailed his sad fate; riding had taken over his life!

Startsev found himself in many houses and met many people but his relationships to them never became close. Their conversations, their views on life and even their appearance irritated him. Experience taught him that while he could play cards or dine with them, he would be a model of amiability and reasonableness but as soon as some controversial subject or other cropped up, politics or science for example, he would get all flustered and express such ridiculous or downright evil ideas that everybody else just shrugged and ignored him. And whenever he tried to discuss with people of a more liberal persuasion such ideas as, for example, that mankind was progressing and that one day passports and the death penalty would be abolished, they would look at him askance and say; "I see, so that means anyone can stick a knife into anyone else in broad daylight". And whenever he would argue in company that work was a necessity, that living was impossible without working, everybody took this personally and started quarrelling with him. Besides, people there did nothing, absolutely nothing and showed no interest in anything so it was impossible to think of anything to say to them. So Startsev stopped talking to them and contented himself with eating and playing vint, his favourite card game and even when he was invited out to a meal on a special occasion, he would sit and eat in silence and stare at his plate. Anything he might venture to say would be trivial or unfair or just plain stupid and even though he felt irritable and ill at ease, he kept silent and stared at his plate, so much so that eventually everybody took to calling him a "stupid, fat Pole" even though he had no Polish blood in him at all.

The theatre, concerts and other entertainments became things of the past; instead he played vint every evening for up to three hours. There was also one more treat he allowed himself, which, as time went on, became more and more enjoyable. Every evening he would take out of his pocket banknotes, yellow and green ones, smelling of vinegar, laudanum and fat, about seventy roubles worth, crammed into each of his pockets. And when he had collected a few hundred he would take it all to the Credit Bank and deposit it in his current account.

During the four years after Katarina's departure, Startsev went to the Turkins on only two occasions, both times at the request of Vera Iosifovna who was still undergoing treatment for migraine. Katarina came to visit her parents every summer but Startsev never saw her; somehow her visits never coincided with his. Then one warm, quiet morning four years later, a letter arrived at the hospital. Vera Iosifovna wrote to say she was missing him and asked if he wouldn't mind coming to relieve her pain and, besides, today was her birthday. At the bottom was a postscript. "To mother's request I add my own. K.T". Startsev thought it over and that evening he went to the Turkins.

Ivan Petrovich greeted him in his usual idiosyncratic way. "*Bonjour*". Vera Iosifovna, looking very much older, her hair now white, offered Startsev her hand, heaved a somewhat theatrical sigh and said; "Doctor, you don't want to flirt with me any more. You never come and see us. I've become too old for you, but here comes somebody younger; perhaps she'll be luckier". Katie? She had become slimmer since Startsev had last seen her, paler and more beautiful with her shapely figure. She was no longer Katie but Katarina Ivanovna – her gaucheness and childish innocence had vanished. But there was something new about her in her look and manner, a sort of apprehension, almost guilt as if here in her parent's house she no longer felt at home. "What a long time it's been" she said, offering Startsev her hand. It was evident that her heart was beating violently but, gazing intently into his face, she went on; "How you've put on weight! You've caught the sun, look more distinguished but apart from that you haven't changed much".

Even now he found himself still liking her but there was something missing, some essential ingredient in their relationship which he could not pin down but whatever it was he could not recapture the sentiments he had once cherished for her. At first it was her pallor, her look, her somewhat contrived smile, her voice. Then a little later it was her dress, the chair she was sitting on, something about that time long ago when he nearly married her. He thought of his love, his dreams and hopes which had overwhelmed him four years previously – and he felt embarrassed.

They drank tea with sweet cakes. Then Vera Iosifovna read out her latest novel, as implausible and far-fetched as ever but Startsev listened and gazed at her handsome, greying head and waited for her to finish

“Rubbish”, he thought. “Not only can she not write, she hasn’t even got the sense to burn what she does write.”

“Not bad at all” said Ivan Petrovich.

Then Katarina spent a long time loudly playing the piano and when she had finished everybody spent an equally long time thanking and praising her.

“Good thing I didn’t marry her” thought Startsev.

She looked across at him, clearly waiting for him to suggest they go into the garden but he made no move.

“Come, let’s talk” she said, going up to him. “How are you keeping? What have you been doing with yourself? I’ve been thinking a lot about you lately,” she went on, somewhat ill at ease. “I wanted to write to you, to come and visit you in Dyalizh.....in fact, I’d decided to come then changed my mind, heaven knows how you would have received me. I just can’t tell you how I’ve been feeling all day waiting for you to arrive. Come, let’s go into the garden.”

They went into the garden and sat down on the bench under the maple tree where they had sat four years before. It was dark.

“Do tell me, how are you?” asked Katarina.

“Not too bad. Doing alright” answered Startsev and then could think of nothing more to say. They fell silent. Then Katarina covered her face with her hands.

“I’m so eaten up inside me but you don’t seem to notice. Being home is nice, I’m so happy to see everybody again, but it’s all so strange. What memories! I thought we would be talking and talking until the early hours”.

Now that he was sitting close to her in the dark and could see her face and shining eyes, it struck him that she looked younger than she had done indoors and it seemed that her old, childish expression had come back to her. At the same time, she too was looking into his eyes with her wide-eyed curiosity, as if seeking to understand the man who had once loved her so passionately, so tenderly and so unhappily. And in her eyes Startsev read gratitude for that love. Then everything came back to him, every little detail, how he had wandered around the cemetery and how, towards midnight, utterly exhausted, he had returned home. Sadness and regret for the past suddenly overwhelmed him. Little sparks of memory began to gleam.

“Do you remember that evening I took you to the ball?” he said. “It was dark and wet...”. The memory came flooding back to him with bitter regret. He sighed.

“You ask me how I’m keeping. Just like everybody else; getting older, putting on weight, slowly going to bits. The days drag by, life goes on, dull as ditchwater, nothing happens, every day the same, every evening in the club playing cards with drunkards and loud-mouthed fools who bore me stiff”.

“But you have your work, a noble aim in life. You love talking about your hospital. I was such a fool in those days, thinking myself to be a great pianist. Nowadays every little girl plays the piano and I was just another of them. I am no more a pianist than mother is a writer. And besides, in those days I was young and immature but later, in Moscow, I thought a lot about you and about the happiness of being a country doctor, helping those in need and serving the people. What happiness!” said

Katarina with conviction. "And when I thought of you in Moscow, it was about your idealism and your integrity.....".

Startsev suddenly remembered it was time to count his money again which he always looked forward to every evening and all thoughts of the past disappeared. He got up to go home. She took his hand.

"You are the finest man I have ever met in my life. We will see each other and talk to each other again, won't we? Promise me? I deluded myself into thinking I was a pianist and I shall never play or talk about music in front of you ever again".

As they were going back into the house, Startsev caught a glimpse in the evening light of her face, her sad, grateful and imploring eyes fastened on him but he felt uncomfortable and thought to himself; "Good thing I didn't marry her".

He began to take his leave.

"Doctoring your diet by leaving without supper, doctor?" remarked Ivan Petrovich, seeing him to the door. "Highly perpendicular of you! And now, Pava, perform!".

Pava, no longer a boy but a young man with a moustache, struck a pose, flung up his arms and declaimed with great tragic force;

"Die, wretched woman!"

All this irritated Startsev beyond measure. Sitting in his carriage and looking back at the dark outline of the house and garden, visits to which he had once looked forward to for weeks and weeks, he recalled everything he had experienced there – Vera Iosifovna's novels, Katie's noisy playing, Ivan Petrovich's witticisms and thought that if such was the level of people who were supposed to be the most accomplished in town, then that didn't say much for the others.

Three days later, Pava brought him a letter from Katarina.

"You haven't come to see us. Why not?" she wrote. "Something tells me that you have changed towards us and this thought terrifies me. Set my mind at rest. Come and tell us everything is alright. I badly need to talk to you. Your K T".

Startsev read the letter, thought it over for a while then said to Pava;

"Say I can't come today. I'm very busy. Say I'll come in about three days."

But three days passed, then a week but still he didn't go. Later when passing the Turkin's house he would remember what he had said and that a visit would only take a minute or two but he would think it over.....and pass by.

He never went to the Turkin's again.

*

And so the years went by. Startsev put on even more weight, got fatter and shorter of breath and began to walk with his head drawn back as if gasping for air. Whenever the pink and plump figure used to travel in his troika with sleigh bells, Pantaleimon, also pink and plump, would be sitting on the driver's seat, his neck wreathed in thick folds of flabby flesh, thrusting his arms stiffly out and shouting at anyone in the way "Keep right!!". It was an awe-inspiring sight, more fitting for the passage of a pagan prince than a normal human being. His practice in town had grown to enormous proportions and absorbed all his time and energy. He already owned two houses in town and was now choosing for himself a third with an eye to a quick profit. Whenever his bank manager or anybody else at the Credit Bank told him of a house for sale, he would go straight there, barge in without permission and tramp through all the rooms ignoring the women and children in various stages of undress who stared at him with fear and amazement. He would bang on each door with his stick and say;

“Is this the study? Is this the bedroom? What’s this then?”.

All the time he would be breathing heavily and beads of sweat would stand out on his brow.

Although he sometimes found his work getting on top of him, he never contemplated retirement. His greed got the better of him so he forced himself on. In Dyalizh and in town he was known simply as Ionich. “Where’s old Ionich going?” they’d ask, “Didn’t you call Ionich in?”.

Probably as a result of his thickening neck, his voice changed, becoming shriller and harsher. His character also changed and he became more irritable and short-tempered. When seeing patients, he would sometimes lose his temper and, beating the floor with his stick, he would screech;

“Don’t waste my time! Just answer my questions!”.

He never married and life often became tedious, especially as he had no outside interests. All this time during which he lived in Dyalizh, his love for Katie was his only solace, his only source of happiness, very probably the last he ever had. He would spend his evenings in the club playing vint and afterwards he would dine alone at a large table. Ivan, the oldest and most deferential waiter would serve him, bringing him Chateau Lafitte No. 17 and everybody from the senior members of the club right down to the cooks and waiters knew his likes and dislikes and went to great lengths to satisfy him for if they didn’t, they would soon know about it by his rage and his habit of pounding the floor with his stick. Now and again while dining, he would turn round and interrupt a conversation going on nearby.

“What was that about? Eh? Who?”.

And when, as it happened from time to time, the Turkin’s name would crop up during a conversation at an adjacent table, he would lean over and ask;

“Which Turkins are those you’re talking about? The ones whose daughter plays the piano?”.

And that was as far as it went.

And the Turkins; what happened to them? Ivan Petrovich never got older and didn’t even change but went on cracking jokes and telling stories as he had always done. Vera Iosifovna carried on reading her novels to her guests with enthusiasm and naive innocence as she had always done. And Katie carried on playing the piano every day for about four hours. But she grew visibly older and was often in poor health and every autumn she would go with her mother down to the Crimea to recuperate. Ivan Petrovich would take them to the station and as the train pulled out, he would wipe away a tear and call out;

“Cheerio”

And he would wave his handkerchief.

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