The Jewess

Aleksandr I. Kuprin

Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

“We’ve passed it, pa-assed it,” a child’s feeble voice rang pitifully. “Right!” shouted an angry bass behind. “To the right, right, r-r-right,” gaily and swiftly sounded a chorus in front. Someone ground his teeth, someone whistled piercingly. … A band of dogs broke into a thin bark, at once angry and joyful. “O-o-o! Ha-ha-ha!” the whole crowd laughed and groaned alternately.

The sledge was tossed up and plunged into a hollow of the road. Kashintzev opened his eyes.

“What’s this?” he asked, with a start.

But the road remained deserted and voiceless. The frosty night was silent above the endless dead white fields. The full moon was in the middle of the sky and a fully outlined dark blue shadow sliding along the sledge, broken by the open snowdrifts, seemed squat and monstrous. The dry, elastic snow squeaked, like india-rubber, beneath the runners.

“Ah, but that’s the snow squeaking,” Kashintzev thought. “How odd!” he said aloud.

At the sound of his voice the driver turned round. His dark face, the beard and moustache whitened under the frost, looked like the mask of some rough wild animal plastered over with cotton wool.

“What? Two more versts, nothing much,” said the driver.

“This is snow,” Kashintzev was thinking, once more yielding to drowsiness. “It’s only snow. How strange!”

“Strange, strange,” lisped one of the little sledge-bells restlessly and distinctly. “Strange, stra-ange, stra-ange. …”

“Oh, oh, oh, just look!” a woman shouted in front of the sledge. The crowd that was coming in a mass to meet him all started talking at once, crying and singing. Once more, as though roused to fury, the dogs barked.

Somewhere in the distance a locomotive droned. … And immediately, in spite of his drowsiness, Kashintzev recalled with extraordinary vividness the station buffet, with its pitiful, dusty display —clusters of electric burners under a dirty ceiling, the soiled walls broken by enormous

windows, artificial palms on the tables, stiffly-folded napkins, electroplate vases, bouquets of dry, feathery grass, pyramids of bottles, pink and green liqueur glasses.

All that was last night. His medical colleagues were seeing him off. Kashintzev had just been appointed to a new post—that of junior doctor in a far-off infantry regiment. They were a party of five, and they dragged the heavy station chairs round to the doctors' usual little table in the corner. They drank beer and talked with a forced heartiness and assumed animation, as if they were acting a seeing-off scene on the stage. The handsome and self-assured Ruhl, his eyes flashing in an exaggerated way, glancing round for applause and talking so that strangers could hear him, said in his familiar, affected voice:

"That's it, old man. Our whole life from birth to death consists only of meeting and seeing one another off. You can write this down as a souvenir in your notebook: 'Evening aphorisms and maxims of Dr. von Ruhl.' "

He had scarcely finished speaking when the fat railway official, with the face of an angry bulldog, showed himself at the door, shaking his bell and shouting in a singsong voice, with abrupt stops and chokes:

"Fi-irst bell. Kiev, Jmerinka, Odess. ... The tra-ain is on the second platform."

And now, squatting uncomfortably on the low scat of the tugging sledge, Kashintzev laughed aloud from pleasure—so very bright and clear were these recollections. But immediately the tiring, relentless impression of the endlessness of this dreary road returned to him. From the moment when, in the morning, he had alighted at the small railway station to get into this post sledge only six or seven hours had elapsed, but he seemed to have been driving like this for whole weeks, or months; he seemed to have had time to change, to grow older, duller and more indifferent to everything since the day before. Somewhere on the way he had met a beggar, drunk and in rags, with a broken nose and a shoulder naked to the frost; somewhere he had seen a long thin horse with an arched neck and a chocolate-coloured, thick velvety coat plunging and refusing to be harnessed; someone, it seemed, had said pleasantly a long, long time ago: "The road is good today, your honour; you'll be there before you have time to look round." Kashintzev at that moment had been contemplating the snow-plain which was reddened by the evening sunset. But now all this was muddled and had receded into a kind of troubled, unreal distance, so that it was impossible to remember where, when, and in what order it had all happened. From time to time a light sleep would close his eyes, and then to his befogged senses there would become audible strange shrieks, grindings, barks, shouts, laughs, and mumblings. But he would open his eyes and the fantastic sounds would transform themselves into the simple squeaks of the sledge-runners and the tinkling of the sledge-bells, while to right and left the sleeping white fields extended, now as always, and in front of him protruded the black bent back of the driver, and still the horse's haunches moved regularly as they swished to right and left

their knotted tails.

“Where shall I take you, your honour; to the post office or to the shelter?” the driver asked.

Kashintzev raised his head. He was driving now along a straight street in a village. The beaten-down road in front gleamed in the moonlight like burnished blue steel. On both sides of the road dark, piteous little houses, overladen by their heavy snow hats, peeped out of the deep white drifts. The village seemed to have died out of existence; not a dog barked, there were no lights in the windows, no one could be seen on the road. There was something terrible and sad in this numbness of human habitations that, lost in the deep snow, appear to nestle fearfully against each other.

“Where’s that—the shelter?” Kashintzev asked.

“Your honour doesn’t know? Movsha Khatzkel’s shelter. Gentlemen always stop there. You can get tea, eggs, a snack of some kind. One can spend the night there, too; there are five rooms.”

“Well, all right, let’s go to the shelter.”

Now for the first time at the thought of food and warm lodgings Kashintzev realised how very cold and hungry he had become. And the low, blind little houses, buried in the snow, were still coming to meet him and still receding, and it seemed that there would be no end to them.

“When shall we get there?” Kashintzev asked impatiently.

“Very soon. It’s a long village, a verst and a half. Now, young ones,” the driver shouted ferociously at the horses in his raucous voice, and, raising himself slightly, he whirled his knout over his head and tugged at the reins.

In the distance a red spot of light was discernible and began to grow, now hidden by some unseen obstacle, now flashing out again. At last the horses, like toys whose windings had run down, stopped of their own accord at the travellers’ house and at once weakly lowered their heads to the ground. The vaulted, semicircular entrance formed an enormous gaping corridor through the whole house, but further on, in the yard, brightly lit up by the moon, one could see carts with their shafts raised, straw strewn on the snow, and the silhouettes of horses under the flat sheds. On each side of the yard entrance two windows, covered with snow, shone with a warm, inviting light.

Someone opened the door, which squeaked piercingly on its hinges, and Kashintzev entered

a room. White clouds of frosty air, which apparently had been waiting just for this, rushed behind him in a mad whirl. At first Kashintzev could distinguish nothing; his spectacles were immediately covered with vapour and he could see in front of him only two shiny, blurred rainbow circles.

The driver who had followed him shouted:

“Listen, Movsha, here’s a gentleman for you. Where are you?”

From somewhere or other there emerged a short, thickset, light-bearded Jew in a high cap and a knitted tobacco-coloured waistcoat. As he came he munched something and wiped his mouth hurriedly with his hand. “Good evening, your honour, good evening,” he said amicably, and at once, with an air of compassion, he shook his head and smacked his lips: “*Tze, tze, tze!* How frozen your honour is, good gracious! Just let me take your coat, I’ll hang it on a nail. Will your honour order tea? Perhaps something to eat? Oh, how frozen your honour is!”

“Thank you, yes,” Kashintzev ejaculated. His lips were so shrivelled from cold that he moved them with difficulty; his chin had become motionless as though it didn’t belong to him, and his feet seemed to him soft, weak, and sensitive as if in cotton wool.

When his spectacles had quite thawed, he looked round. It was a large room with crooked windows and an earthen floor, plastered with pale blue lime which, here and there, had fallen out in large chunks, leaving the wooden shingles bare. Along the walls narrow benches were stretched and wet slanting tables, greasy from age. Almost under the very ceiling a lamp was burning. The smaller back part of the room was partitioned off by a many-coloured chintz curtain, from which there emanated the odour of dirty beds, children’s clothes, and some sort of acrid food. In front of the curtain a wooden counter extended.

At one of the tables opposite Kashintzev sat a peasant in a brown Ukrainian overcoat and a sheepskin cap, his untidy head leaning on his sprawling elbows. He was drunk with a heavy, helpless drunkenness, and he rolled his head on the table, hiccupping and blubbering out something incomprehensible in a hoarse, soaked, bubbling voice.

“What are you going to give me to eat?” Kashintzev asked. “I feel very hungry.”

Khatzkel hunched his shoulders up, spread his hands apart, winked with his left eye, and remained in this position for several seconds.

“What am I going to give his honour to eat?” he repeated, with a sly penetrating air. “And what does his honour want? One can get everything. One can put the samovar on, one can

cook eggs, one can get milk. Well, you understand yourself, your honour, what is to be got in such a scabby village. One can cook a chicken, but that will take a very long time."

"Give me eggs and milk. And what else?"

"What e-else?" Khatzkel seemed surprised. "I could offer your honour a stuffed Jewish fish. But perhaps your honour doesn't like Jewish cooking? You know, an ordinary Jewish fish which my wife prepares on the Sabbath."

"Give me fish, too. And a liqueur-glass of vodka, please."

The Jew closed both his eyes, shook his head, and smacked his lips with an air of consternation.

"No vodka," he whispered. "You know yourself how strict they are nowadays. Are you going far, your honour?"

"To Goussiatine."

"May I ask if your honour is in the police service?"

"No, I'm a doctor, an army doctor."

"Ah, his honour is a doctor. That's very nice. On my conscience, I'm very sorry that I can't got you any vodka. Still ... Etlia," he shouted, moving away from the table, "Etlia!"

He disappeared behind the curtain and spoke rapidly in Yiddish as though he were angry. After this he kept on appearing and disappearing, and apparently bustled about a great deal. By this time the peasant who was sprawling at the table, raised his head and, with his wet mouth wide open and his eyes glassy, began to sing hoarsely, with a snapping gurgling in his throat.

Khatzkel rushed up to him and shook him, by the shoulder.

"Trokhim, listen, Trokhim. ... I have asked you again and again not to yell like this. His honour there is getting angry. ... Well, you've had a drink and all is well. God give you happiness, and just you go quietly home, Trokhim."

"Sheenies," the peasant suddenly howled in a terrible voice, and he banged his fist on the table with all his might. "Sheenies, you devil's spawn! I'll k-kill ..."

He fell heavily face forward on the table, still jabbering.

Khatzkel, with a pale face, sprang away from the table. His lips grimaced in a scornful but at the same time troubled and helpless smile.

“You see, your honour, what my bread’s like,” he said bitterly, addressing Kashintzev. “Tell me what I can do with a fellow like that? What can I do? Etlia!” he shouted in the direction of the curtain. “When are you going to serve his honour?”

Once more he dived into the curtained part of the room and immediately returned with a dish on which lay a fish, cut in thin slices and covered with a dark sauce. He also brought back a large white loaf with a thick solid crust speckled with black grains of some aromatic seasoning.

“Your honour,” Khatzkel said mysteriously, “my wife in there has found some vodka. Taste it; it’s a good fruit vodka. We drink it at our Easter and it’s called Easter vodka. There!”

He drew from his waistcoat a tiny narrow-necked decanter and a liqueur glass which he placed in front of Kashintzev. The vodka was of a yellowish colour and had a slight smell of cognac, but when the doctor had swallowed a glass it seemed to him that all his mouth and throat had been filled with some burning, scented gas. He felt at once in his stomach a sensation of cold, and then of a gentle warmth, and he was seized with a terrific appetite. The fish proved to be extremely good and so spiced that it made his tongue smart. How do they prepare it? The cautious thought flashed through his brain, and then and there he laughed aloud as he recalled one of Dr. von Ruhl’s familiar evening aphorisms: “One must never think about what one eats or whom one loves.”

Khatzkel was standing at a little distance, his hands folded behind his back. Apparently guessing the train of Kashintzev’s thoughts, he said with an obliging and kind expression:

“Perhaps your honour imagines that this is prepared in some dirty way? No such thing. … Our Jewish women do everything according to the holy books, and everything is written there: how to clean, how to cut it, and when to wash one’s hands. And if it isn’t done just like that, it is considered a sin. Your honour must eat his fill. Etlia, bring in more fish.”

From behind the curtain a woman appeared and stood at the counter covering her head with a large grey shawl. When Kashintzev turned towards her he had the impression of receiving an invisible blow in the chest and of a cold hand squeezing his palpitating heart. Not only had he never seen such a dazzling, superb, perfect beauty, but he had not even dared to dream that there existed such in the world. Before, when he happened to see the little heads of beautiful women in the pictures of well-known artists, he was inwardly convinced that these regular, faultless features had no existence in nature, but were the mere fictions of a creative imagination. All the more surprising and unreal, then, was this

dazzling, beautiful face which he now beheld in a dirty lodging-house, reeking with the odours of unclean habitation, in this bare, empty, cold room, behind the counter, close to a drunken, snoring peasant who hiccupped in his sleep.

“Who is this?” Kashintzev asked in a whisper. “There, this …” he was on the point of saying “Sheeny” from habit, but he checked himself and substituted “this woman?”

“Who? That?” Khatzkel asked negligently, with a nod in her direction. “That, your honour, is my wife.”

“How beautiful she is!”

Khatzkel gave a short laugh and shrugged his shoulders scornfully.

“Your honour is mocking me?” he asked reproachfully. “What is she? A poor, ordinary Jewess and nothing else. Hasn’t your honour seen really beautiful women in great cities? Etlia!” he turned to his wife and said something rapidly in Yiddish, at which she suddenly burst out laughing, her white regular teeth gleaming, and she moved one shoulder so high that she seemed to want to rub her cheek against it.

“Is your honour a bachelor or married?” Khatzkel asked with wheedling prudence.

“No, I’m a bachelor. Why do you ask?”

“No, it’s just like this. … So your honour is a bachelor? And how is it, your honour, that a solid, learned man like you wouldn’t marry?”

“Oh, that’s a long story. … For many reasons. Still, I don’t think it’s too late even now, I’m not so old, am I?”

Khatzkel suddenly moved up close to the doctor, glanced round the room with a frightened air, and said, lowering his voice mysteriously:

“And perhaps your honour will spend the night here? Don’t be afraid, please; the best gentlemen always stop here; yes, the best gentlemen and the officers.”

“No, I must hurry on. There’s no time.”

But Khatzkel, with a cunning, penetrating, and tempting air, half closed one eye after the other and continued to insist:

“It would be better, on my word, to stay, your honour. How can your honour go in such cold

as this? May God strike me dead if I'm not speaking the truth. … Just listen to what I'm going to tell you, your honour. … There's a retired governess here. …"

A swift, mad thought flashed through Kashintzev's head. He took a stealthy glance at Etlia, who, indifferently, as though not understanding what the talk was about between her husband and his guest, was gazing out through the powdered white window; the next instant he felt ashamed.

"Leave me alone; get out," curtly ordered Kashintzev.

It was not so much through Khatzkel's words as through his expression that he understood his drift. But he could not get angry as probably he would have considered it his duty to get angry under other circumstances. The warmth of the room, after a long cold journey, had made his body soft and tender. His head was swimming quietly and gently from the vodka; his face was burning pleasantly. He was inclined to sit still without moving; he experienced a languid sensation of satiety, warmth, and a slight drunkenness. He refused to think of the fact that in a few minutes he must again enter the sledge and continue his dull, endless, frosty route.

And in this curious, happy, lightheaded condition it gave him an inexpressible pleasure, from time to time, as if by chance, as if deceiving himself, to rest his eyes on the beautiful face of the Jewess and think about her, not merely vaguely but in formulated words, as though he were talking with some invisible person.

"Can one describe this face to anyone?" he asked himself. "Can one transmit in ordinary, pale, everyday language those amazing features, those tender, bright colours? Now she is almost facing me. How pure, how astoundingly delicate is the line that goes from the temple to the ear and then downward to the chin, marking the contour of the cheek! The forehead is low, with fine, downy hair on each side. How charming, and feminine, and effective this is! The dark eyes are enormous, so black and enormous that they appear made up, and in them, close to the pupils, living, transparent, golden dots shine like spots of light in a yellow topaz. The eyes are surrounded by a dark, scarcely-defined shadow, and it is impossible to trace this dark shadow, which gives the glance such a lazy and passionate expression, into the tawny, deep colour of the cheeks. The lips are red and full, and, though they are closed just now, they have the appearance of being open, of offering themselves. On the slightly shaded upper lip there is a pretty mole just at the corner of the mouth. What a straight, noble nose and what fine, proud nostrils! My dear, beautiful one!" Kashintzev kept repeating to himself, and so overcome was he that he wanted to cry from the ecstasy and tenderness which had seized hold of him, compressing his chest and tickling his eyes.

Above the bright, tawny colour of the cheeks brown stripes of dried dirt were visible, but to Kashintzev it seemed that no kind of negligence could disfigure this triumphant, blossoming

beauty. He also noticed, when she came out from behind the counter, that the hem of her short, pink chintz skirt was wet and dirty, flapping heavily at every step. On her feet were enormous worn-out boots, with flaps sticking out at each side. He noticed that sometimes, when talking to her husband, she quickly pulled the tip of her nose with two fingers, making, as she did so, a snorting noise, and then, just as quickly, passed her index finger under her nose. For all that, nothing vulgar, or funny, or pitiful could spoil her beauty.

"What does happiness consist of?" Kashintzev asked himself, and answered immediately: "The unique happiness is to possess a woman like this, to know that this divine beauty is yours. Hum ... it's a trivial, army word—'to possess'—but what compared to this is all the rest of life—a career, ambition, philosophy, celebrity, convictions, social questions? In a year or two, or three, perhaps, I shall marry. My wife will be from a noble family, a lean girl with light eyebrows and curls on her forehead, educated and hysterical, with narrow hips and a cold, bluish figure, pimpled all over like a plucked hen. She will play the piano, talk on current questions, and suffer from feminine maladies, and both of us, mere male and female, will feel towards each other indifference if not disgust. And perhaps the whole goal, the whole purpose, the whole joy of my life, consists, by any means, true or untrue, in taking possession of a woman like this, stealing her, taking her away, seducing her—what does it matter? Even if she is dirty, ignorant, undeveloped, greedy, God in heaven! what trifles these are compared with her miraculous beauty."

Khatzkel approached Kashintzev once more, thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets and sighed:

"Do you happen to have read the papers?" he asked with hesitating politeness. "Is there anything new about the war?"

"Everything is just the same. We retreat, we are being beaten. However, I haven't read the papers today," Kashintzev answered.

"Your honour hasn't read them! What a pity! We here, you know, live in the steppes and learn nothing of what is going on in the world. They've been writing, too, about the Zionists. Has your honour heard that there has been a congress of them in Paris?"

"Certainly, of course."

Kashintzev looked at him more closely. Under his external cunning one detected something starved and puny which spoke of poverty, humiliation, and bad food. His long neck, above his worsted scarf, was thin and of a dirty yellow colour. On it two long strained veins, with an indentation between them, stuck out on each side of his throat.

"What is your ordinary occupation here?" Kashintzev asked, seized with a sense of guilty

pity.

“We-ell!” Khatzkel shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and scornfully. “What can a poor Jew do within the pale? We scratch a living somehow or other. We buy and sell when there’s a market. We fight each other for the last little morsel of bread. Eh! what can one say? Is anyone interested in knowing how we suffer here?”

He waved his hand wearily and withdrew behind the curtain, while Kashintzev resumed once more his interrupted thoughts. These thoughts were like the moving, multicoloured images which come to one in the morning when one is on the border between sleep and awakening—thoughts which, before one wakes up completely, seem so fantastically malleable and at the same time full of such deep importance.

Kashintzev had never experienced such pleasure in dreaming as he did now, mollified by the warmth and the sense of satiety, leaning with his back against the wall and stretching his legs straight in front of him. In this pleasure, a sort of not very well-defined spot in the design of the many-coloured curtain had a great significance. He had unfailingly to find it with his eyes, stop at it, after which his thoughts of their own accord began to flow evenly, freely, and harmoniously, without any obstruction of the brain-cells—thoughts that leave no trace behind them and bring with them a kind of quiet, caressing joy. And then everything would disappear in a pale, bluish, hesitating fog—the papered walls of the lodging-house, its crooked tables, its dirty counter. There would remain only the beautiful face which Kashintzev saw and even felt, in spite of the fact that he was looking not at it, but at the vague, indistinguishable spot in the curtain.

What an extraordinary, unattainable race these Jews are, he was thinking. What is the Jew fated to experience in the future? He has gone through decades of centuries, without mixing with anyone else, disdainfully isolating himself from all other nations, hiding in his heart the old sorrow and the old flame of the centuries. The vast, varied life of Rome, of Greece, of Egypt, had long ago become the possession of museums, had become a delirium of history, a far-off fairytale. But this mysterious type, which was already a patriarch when these others were infants, not only continues to exist, but has kept his strong, ardent, southern individuality, has kept his faith with its great hopes and its trivial rites, has kept the holy language of his inspired divine books, has kept his mystical alphabet from the very form of which there vibrates the spell of thousands of years ago. What has the Jew experienced in the days of his youth? With whom has he traded and signed treaties? Against whom has he fought? Nowhere has a trace been left of his enigmatic enemies from all those Philistines, Amalakites, Moabites, and other half mythical people, while he, supple and undying, still lives on, as though, indeed, fulfilling someone’s supernatural prediction. His history is permeated by tragic awe and is stained throughout by his own blood: centuries of prison, violence, hatred, slavery, torture, the funeral pyre, deportation, the denial of all human rights—how could he remain alive? Or have the fates of a people indeed their own

incomprehensible goals that are forever hidden from us? How can we know? Perhaps it pleased some Higher Force that the Jews, having lost their own country, should play the role of a perpetual leaven in the gigantic fermentation of the world.

There stands this woman whose face reflects a divine beauty, that inculcates a holy enthusiasm. For how many thousands of years must her people have refrained from mixing with any other race to preserve these amazing biblical features? With the same plain fichu on the head, with the same deep eyes and sorrowful line near the lips, they paint the Mother of Jesus Christ. With the same pure charm shone the gloomy Judith, the sweet Ruth, the tender Leah, the beautiful Rachel and Hagar and Sarah. Looking at her, you believe, feel, and almost see how this people reverts in its stupendous genealogy back to Moses, to Abraham, and higher, still higher—straight back to the great, terrible, avenging biblical God.

"With whom was I discussing not long ago?" Kashintzev suddenly remembered. "I was discussing the Jews, I think with a staff colonel in the train. No, it was with the town doctor from Stepany. He was saying: 'The Jews have grown decrepit, the Jews have lost their nationality and their country. The Jewish people must degenerate because it is penetrated by no drop of fresh blood. There are only two courses left to it—either to become fused with other nationalities, renewing its sap in them, or perish.' Yes, then I could find no reply, but now I should bring him up to this woman behind the counter and say: 'There it is, just look at the security for the immortality of the Jewish people! Khatzkel may be puny, pitiful, and sickly. I admit that the eternal struggle for life has stamped upon his face the cruel traces of cheating, cowardice, and distrust. For thousands of years he has been "scratching a living" somehow or other, has been stifling in different ghettos. But the Jewish woman guards ever the type and spirit of the race, carries carefully through streams of blood under the yoke of violence, the holy fire of the national genius, and will never allow it to be extinguished.' As I look at her there I feel the black abyss of centuries opening itself behind her. There is a miracle, a divine mystery here. Oh, what am I in her eyes—I, the barbarian of yesterday, the intellectual of today—what am I in her eyes? What am I in comparison with this living enigma, perhaps the most inexplicable and the greatest in the history of humanity?"

Suddenly Kashintzev came to himself. There was a certain agitation in the lodging-house. Khatzkel was running from one window to another and, with his palms pressed against his temples, was trying to distinguish something in the darkness outside, Etlia, disgusted and angry, was pulling the collar of the drunken peasant, who still kept lifting and lowering his red, senseless face, swollen with sleep, with pouches under the lids, while he snorted savagely.

"Trokhim, listen—well, Trokhi-im. I say to you, get up!" the Jewess was urging impatiently, murdering the Ukrainian language.

“Hush! The police inspector,” Khatzkel muttered in a frightened whisper. He smacked his lips repeatedly, shook his head in despair, rushed impetuously to the door, and threw it open exactly at the moment when a tall police official, freeing himself from the collar of his thick sheepskin coat, was in the act of entering the room.

“But listen, Trokhim, get up,” Etlia said in a tragic whisper.

The peasant raised his bloodshot face and, twisting his mouth, began to yell.

“What’s this?” the inspector roared fiercely, with rolling eyes. Indignantly he threw his sheepskin coat into the hands of Khatzkel, who had run up to him. Then, puffing his chest out like a wheel, he strutted a few steps forward with the magnificent air of an opera colonel.

The peasant got up, staggering and flopping against the table with his hands, his body, and his feet. Something like conscious fear flashed into his bluish, swollen face.

“Your high … honour,” he muttered, shambling helplessly where he stood.

“Out,” suddenly thundered the inspector, in such a terrible voice that the nervous Kashintzev started and huddled himself up behind his table. “Out with you at once.”

The peasant swung forward and feebly stretched his hands out so as to clutch and kiss authority’s right hand, but Khatzkel was already dragging him away to the door, by the back of his collar.

“You,” shouted the inspector, fiercely flashing his eyes on Etlia, “deal in vodka? Without a licence? You receive horse-stealers? Be ca-areful. I’ll have you run in.”

The woman raised her shoulders in an ugly way, bent her head sideways and, with a pitiful and submissive expression, closed her eyes as if she were expecting a blow from above. Kashintzev felt that the chain of his light, agreeable, and important thoughts had suddenly broken and could not be mended; he felt awkward, ashamed of these thoughts, ashamed in his own eyes.

“May God punish me, Colonel, your honour,” Etlia was swearing with passionate conviction. “May God strike me blind and not let me see tomorrow’s daylight and my own children! His honour, the colonel, knows himself what can I do if a drunken peasant will turn in here? My husband is a sick man and I am a poor weak woman.”

“All right.” The inspector stopped her severely. “That’s enough.”

At that moment he noticed Kashintzev, and then and there tossing his head back with the air of a conqueror, he puffed his chest out and flourished his immaculate light whiskers to right and left. But suddenly a smile showed itself on his face.

“Basil Basilitch! Old crocodile! This is a bit of luck,” he exclaimed, with theatrical joviality. “The deuce knows how long it is since we’ve seen each other. I beg your pardon.” The inspector stopped abruptly at the table. “I believe I have made a mistake.”

He brought his hand up smartly to the peak of his cap. Kashintzev, half rising, did the same rather awkwardly.

“Be magnanimous and forgive. I took you for my colleague the Poitchanov inspector. What an absurd mistake! Once more—I beg your pardon. However, you know the uniforms are so alike that … In any case, allow me to introduce myself: the local inspector and, so to speak, the God of Thunder—Irissov, Pavel Afinogenytch.”

Kashintzev rose once more and gave his name.

“As everything is so unusual, permit me to sit near you,” Irissov said and again he smartly touched his cap and clicked his heels. “Very pleased to meet you. You there, Khatzkel, bring me the leather case in my sledge; it’s underneath the seat. Forgive me, are you going far, doctor?”

“To Goussiatine. I’ve just been posted there.”

“Ah, in an infantry regiment? There are some devilish good fellows among the officers, though they drink like horses. It’s a scabby little town, but, as localities go, it’s residential in a way. So, we’ll meet each other? Delighted. … And you’ve just been … ha, ha … a witness of the paternal reprimand that I was giving.”

“Yes—partly.” Kashintzev forced himself to smile.

“What’s to be done? … What’s to be done? That’s my character. I like to be a little severe. … You know I’m no lover of all sorts of faultfinding and complaints and other absurdities of the kind. I do my own punishing myself.”

The inspector was representative, as provincial ladies say—a tall, handsome man, with smart whiskers, growing sideways à la Skobeleff, and a high, white, tranquil forehead. His eyes were of a beautiful blue, with a constant expression of languor, a sort of immodest, unmanly, capricious fatigue; his whole face had a delicate, even porcelain pink hue, and his raspberry-coloured, supple lips kept moving coquettishly and stretching themselves like two red, mobile worms. One could see by every indication that Inspector Irissov was the local

beau, dandy, and lady-killer, an ex-cavalry man, probably a gambler and a hard liver, who could go three days running without sleep and who never got drunk. He spoke quickly and distinctly, had the air of paying an exaggerated attention to the words of his interlocutor, but apparently listened only to himself.

"I'm a father to them all, but a strict father," the inspector went on, raising his linger impressively. "Put the case here on the table, Khatzkel. I'm strict, that's true. I won't allow myself to be sat on, as the others do, but then I know everyone of my ... he-he-he! ... subjects, so to speak, by heart. You saw that little peasant just now? He's Trokhim, a peasant from Oriekh, and his nickname is Khvost. Do you think that I don't know that he's a horse-stealer? I know perfectly well. But until the right time I keep silent and one fine May morning—Trokhim Khvost will have disappeared from circulation. Then just look at this very Khatzkel. Isn't he a scabby little Jew? And, believe me, I know how the rascal lives. What? Am I not telling the truth, Khatzkel?"

"Oh, my God, can his honour the inspector say what is untrue?" Khatzkel exclaimed in servile reproach. "Every one of us, poor unhappy little Jews, prays constantly to God for his honour the inspector. We always say among ourselves: 'What do we want with a real father when our good, beloved inspector is better to us than our own father?' "

"You see?" the inspector said carelessly, with a significant twinkle in his eyes, as he pointed at Khatzkel over his shoulder. "That's the voice of the people. Don't worry, that's how I hold them. What? Wasn't I telling the truth?"

"What can I say to that?" Khatzkel had shrivelled, he was squatting almost on his heels, stretching out his hands as though pushing away from him a sort of monstrous, unjust accusation. "We haven't time to think of anything that his honour the inspector doesn't know already beforehand."

"You hear him?" the inspector said curtly. " 'Help yourself,' said Sobakievitch, to quote Gogol." He pointed to the open case. "Won't you have some roast duck? Ripping duck. Here is vodka. These are patties with fish and onions. Here's some rum. No, don't be suspicious; it's real Jamaica rum and even has the real smell of bugs about it. And this—please don't laugh at me—this is chocolate, a dainty for the ladies, so to speak. I recommend it to you; it's the most nourishing thing when one's travelling. I've learned that from sad experience on my ungrateful service. Please help yourself. ..."

Kashintzev politely declined the invitation, but the inspector would take no refusal. There was nothing for it but to drink a glass of rum, which smelled of anything but rum. Kashintzev felt ill at ease, awkward and melancholy. He glanced stealthily from time to time at Etlia, who was talking in an animated whisper with her husband behind the counter. Her fantastic charm seemed to have left her. Something pitiful, humiliated, terrible in its very

ordinariness, was now stamped on her face, but, all the same, it was poignantly beautiful as before.

“Ha, ha, that’s your game, is it?” the inspector exclaimed suddenly, munching some chicken and noisily moving his moist, supple lips. “A pretty little Jewess, what?”

“Extraordinarily beautiful. Charming,” came involuntarily from Kashintzev.

“Ye-es. … Fine game. But …” The inspector waved his hands, sighed artificially, and closed his eyes for a second. “But there’s nothing doing there. It’s been tried. It simply isn’t possible. It’s impossible, I tell you. Though the eyes see … But there, if you don’t believe me, I’ll ask him at once. Eh, Khatzkel?”

“For God’s sake, I entreat you,” Kashintzev stretched his hand out imploringly and rose from the bench, “I implore you not to do this.”

“Oh, rubbish! … Khatzkel.”

At this minute the door opened and the new driver, with his whip in his hand, and his cap, like the national Polish headgear, on his head, came into the room.

“For which of you two gentlemen are the horses for Goussiatine?” he asked. But recognising the inspector he hastily pulled off his cap and shouted in a military way: “We wish you health, your very high honour.”

“Good day, Iourko,” the inspector answered condescendingly. “But you ought to stay a little longer,” he said regretfully to the doctor. “When shall I get another chance of a chat with an intellectual man like you?”

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t time,” Kashintzev said as he hurriedly buttoned his coat. “You know what it is yourself, the service! How much do I owe?”

He paid, and shivering in advance at the thought of the cold, the night and the fatiguing journey, he went to the door. From a naive habit, that he had kept since childhood, of guessing the future by trifles, he thought as he grasped the handle of the door: “If she looks at me it will come to pass.” What was to come to pass he did not know himself, any more than he knew the name of this dullness, this fatigue, this sense of undefined disillusion which oppressed him. But the Jewess did not look round. She was standing with her miraculous, ancient profile, illumined by the lamplight, turned towards him, and was busy with lowered eyes over something on the counter.

“Goodbye,” said Kashintzev, as he opened the door.

Elastic clouds of vapour rushed in from the street, veiling the beautiful face and inundating the doctor with a dry cold. In front of the steps stood the post horses, their heads hanging dejectedly.

They passed another village, crossed a little river over the ice and once more the long, melancholy road stretched itself out with its dead white fields to right and left. Kashintzev dozed. Immediately the strange, misleading sounds in front and behind and on both sides of the sledge, began to speak and sing. The band of dogs broke out into barks and yelps, the human crowd murmured, the children's silvery laughter rang out, the little bells chattered madly, pronouncing distinct words: "One's first duty—severity, severity," shouted the inspector's voice.

Kashintzev knocked his elbow against the side of the sledge and returned to consciousness.

On both sides of the road were running to meet him the tall, dark trunks of the pines, stretching out over the road their snow-laden branches, like enormous white paws. Among them, a long way off, in front, there seemed to gleam stately, slender columns, official walls and balconies, high white walls with black gothic windows, fantastic outlines of some sleeping, enchanted castle. But the sledge turned with the winding of the road and the phantom castle transformed itself into black files of trees and arches shaped by their snowy branches.

"Where am I? Where am I driving to?" Kashintzev asked himself in perplexity and fear. "What has just happened to me? Something so big, so joyful, so important?"

In his memory there swam out, with amazing clearness, a charming feminine face, a delicate outline of cheeks and chin, liquid, tranquilly passionate eyes, a beautiful curve in the blossoming lips. And suddenly the whole of his life—all that had passed and all that lay in front—outlined itself to him in a sad loneliness, like this night journey with its boredom, cold, emptiness, and isolation, with its enervating, dreamy delusions.

In passing, the superb beauty of this unknown woman had lit up and warmed his soul, had filled it with happiness, with beautiful thoughts, with a sweet unrest. But this strip of life had already run away from him, disappearing behind him, and from it there was left only a memory, like the light in a chance station that disappears in the distance. And in front one sees no other light; the horses continue their regular trot, and the indifferent driver—Time—dozes indifferently on his seat.