The Song And The Dance

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Translated from Russian by Rosa Savary Graham and Stephen Graham

We lived at that time in the Government of Riazan, some 120 versts from the nearest railway station and even 25 versts from the large trading village of Tuma. “Tuma is iron and its people are of stone,” as the local inhabitants say of themselves. We lived on an old untenanted estate, where in 1812 an immense house of wood had been constructed to accommodate the French prisoners. The house had columns, and a park with lime trees had been made around it to remind the prisoners of Versailles.

Imagine our comical situation. There were twenty-three rooms at our disposal, but only one of them had a stove and was warmed, and even in that room it was so cold that water froze in it in the early morning and the door was frosted at the fastenings. The post came sometimes once a week, sometimes once in two months, and was brought by a chance peasant, generally an old man with the packet under his shaggy snow-strewn coat, the addresses wet and smudged, the backs unsealed and stuck again by inquisitive postmasters. Around us was an ancient pine wood where bears prowled, and whence even in broad daylight the hungry wolves sallied forth and snatched away yawning dogs from the street of the hamlet near by. The local population spoke in a dialect we did not understand, now in a singsong drawl, now coughing and hooting, and they stared at us surlily and without restraint. They were firmly convinced that the forest belonged to God and the muzhik alone, and the lazy German steward only knew how much wood they stole. There was at our service a splendid French library of the eighteenth century, though all the magnificent bindings were mouse-eaten. There was an old portrait gallery with the canvases ruined from damp, mould, and smoke.

Picture to yourself the neighbouring hamlet all overblown with snow, and the inevitable village idiot, Serozha, who goes naked even in the coldest weather; the priest who does not play “preference” on a fast day, but writes denunciations to the starosta, a stupid, artful man, diplomat and beggar, speaking in a dreadful Petersburg accent. If you see all this you understand to what a degree of boredom we attained. We grew tired of encompassing bears, of hunting hares with hounds, of shooting with pistols at a target through three rooms at a distance of twenty-five paces, of writing humorous verses in the evening. Of course we quarrelled.

Yes, and if you had asked us individually why we had come to this place I should think not one of us would have answered the question. I was painting at that time; Valerian Alexandrovitch wrote symbolical verses, and Vaska amused himself with Wagner and played Tristan and Iseult on the old, ruined, yellow-keyed clavicordia.

But about Christmas-time the village began to enliven, and in all the little clearings round about, in Tristenka, in Borodina, Breslina, Shustova, Nikiforskaya and Kosli the peasants began to brew beer—such thick beer that it stained your hands and face at the touch, like lime bark. There was so much drunkenness among the peasants, even before the festival, that in Dagileva a son broke his father's head, and in Kruglitsi an old man drank himself to death. But Christmas was a diversion for us. We started paying the customary visits and offering congratulations to all the local officials and peasants of our acquaintance. First we went to the priest, then to the psalm-singer of the church, then to the church watchman, then to the two schoolmistresses. After the schoolmistresses we fared more pleasantly. We turned up at the doctor's at Tuma, then trooped off to the district clerk, where a real banquet awaited us, then to the policeman, then to the lame apothecary, then to the local peasant tyrant who had grown rich and held a score of other peasants in his own grasp, and possessed all the cord, linen, grain, wood, whips in the neighbourhood. And we went and went on!

It must be confessed, however, that we felt a little awkward now and then. We couldn't manage to get into the tempo of the life there. We were really out of it. This life had creamed and mantled for years without number. In spite of our pleasant manners and apparent ease we were, all the same, people from another planet. Then there was a disparity in our mutual estimation of one another: we looked at them as through a microscope, they at us as through a telescope. Certainly we made attempts to accommodate ourselves, and when the psalm-singer's servant, a woman of forty, with warty hands all chocolate colour from the reins of the horse she put in the sledge when she went with a bucket to the well, sang of an evening, we did what we thought we ought to do. She would look ashamed, lower her eyes, fold her arms and sing:

"Andray Nikolaevitch

We have come to you,

We wish to trouble you.

But we have come

And please to take

The one of us you love."

Then we would boldly make to kiss her on the lips, which we did in spite of feigned resistance and screams.

And we would make a circle. One day there were a lot of us there; four students on holiday from an ecclesiastical college, the psalm-singer, a housekeeper from a neighbouring estate, the two schoolmistresses, the policeman in his uniform, the deacon, the local horse-doctor, and we three aesthetes. We went round and round in a dance, and sang, roared, swinging now this way, now that, and the lion of the company, a student named Vozdvizhensky, stood in the middle and ordered our movements, dancing himself the while and snapping his fingers over his head:

"The queen was in the town, yes, the town,

And the prince, the little prince, ran away.

Found a bride, did the prince, found a bride.

She was nice, yes she was, she was nice,

And a ring got the prince for her, a ring."

After a while the giddy whirl of the dance came to an end, and we stopped and began to sing to one another, in solemn tones:

"The royal gates were opened,

Bowed the king to the queen,

And the queen to the king,

But lower bowed the queen."

And then the horse-doctor and the psalm-singer had a competition as to who should bow

lower to the other.

Our visiting continued, and at last came to the schoolhouse at Tuma. That was inevitable, since there had been long rehearsals of an entertainment which the children were going to give entirely for our benefit—Petersburg guests. We went in. The Christmas tree was lit simultaneously by a touch-paper. As for the programme, I knew it by heart before we went in. There were several little tableaux, illustrative of songs of the countryside. It was all poorly done, but it must be confessed that one six-year-old mite playing the part of a peasant, wearing a huge cap of dogskin and his father's great leather gloves with only places for hand and thumb, was delightful, with his serious face and hoarse little bass voice—a born artist.

The remainder was very disgusting. All done in the false popular style.

I had long been familiar with the usual entertainment items: Little-Russian songs mispronounced to an impossible point; verses and silly embroidery patterns: "There's a Christmas tree, there's Petrushka, there's a horse, there's a steam-engine." The teacher, a little consumptive fellow, got up for the occasion in a long frock-coat and stiff shirt, played the fiddle in fits and starts, or beat time with his bow, or tapped a child on the head with it now and then.

The honorary guardian of the school, a notary from another town, chewed his gums all the time and stuck out his short parrot's tongue with sheer delight, feeling that the whole show had been got up in his honour.

At last the teacher got to the most important item on his programme. We had laughed up till then, our turn was coming to weep. A little girl of twelve or thirteen came out, the daughter of a watchman, her face, by the way, not at all like his horse-like profile. She was the top girl in the school and she began her little song:

"The jumping little grasshopper sang the summer through,

Never once considering how the winter would blow in his eyes."

Then a shaggy little boy of seven, in his father's felt boots, took up his part, addressing the watchman's daughter:

“That’s strange, neighbour. Didn’t you work in the summer?”

“What was there to work for? There was plenty of grass.”

Where was our famous Russian hospitality?

To the question, “What did you do in the summer?” the grasshopper could only reply, “I sang all the time.”

At this answer the teacher, Kapitonitch, waved his bow and his fiddle at one and the same time—oh, that was an effect rehearsed long before that evening!—and suddenly in a mysterious half-whisper the whole choir began to sing:

“You’ve sung your song, you call that doing,

You’ve sung all the summer, then dance all the winter,

You’ve sung your song, then dance all the winter,

Dance all the winter, dance all the winter.

You’ve sung the song, then dance the dance.”

I confess that my hair stood on end as if each individual hair were made of glass, and it seemed to me as if the eyes of the children and of the peasants packing the schoolroom were all fixed on me as if repeating that d——d phrase:

“You’ve sung the song, you call that doing,

You’ve sung the song, then dance the dance.”

I don't know how long this drone of evil boding and sinister recitation went on. But I remember clearly that during those minutes an appalling idea went through my brain. "Here we stand," thought I, "a little band of intelligentsia, face to face with an innumerable peasantry, the most enigmatical, the greatest, and the most abased people in the world. What connects us with them? Nothing. Neither language, nor religion, nor labour, nor art. Our poetry would be ridiculous to their ears, absurd, incomprehensible. Our refined painting would be simply useless and senseless smudging in their eyes. Our quest for gods and making of gods would seem to them stupidity, our music merely a tedious noise. Our science would not satisfy them. Our complex work would seem laughable or pitiful to them, the austere and patient labourers of the fields. Yes. On the dreadful day of reckoning what answer shall we give to this child, wild beast, wise man, and animal, to this many-million-headed giant?" We shall only be able to say sorrowfully, "We sang all the time. We sang our song."

And he will reply with an artful peasant smile, "Then go and dance the dance."

And I know that my companions felt as I did. We went out of the entertainment-room silent, not exchanging opinions.

Three days later we said goodbye, and since that time have been rather cold towards one another. We had been suddenly chilled in our consciences and made ashamed, as if these innocent mouths of sleepy children had pronounced death sentence upon us. And when I returned from the post of Ivan Karaulof to Goreli, and from Goreli to Koslof, and from Koslof to Zintabrof, and then further by railroad there followed me all the time that ironical, seemingly malicious phrase, "Then dance the dance."

God alone knows the destiny of the Russian people. ... Well, I suppose, if it should be necessary, we'll dance it!

I travelled a whole night to the railway station.

On the bare frosted branches of the birches sat the stars, as if the Lord Himself had with His own hands decorated the trees. And I thought, "Yes, it's beautiful." But I could not banish that ironical thought, "Then dance the dance."