

THE ENCHANTED WANDERER

NIKOLAI
LESKOV

THE ART OF THE NOVELLA

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TRANSLATED BY IAN DREIBLATT

 MELVILLE HOUSE
BROOKLYN • LONDON

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I

We sailed across Lake Ladoga from Konevets Island to Valaam, stopping by Korela Harbor for maintenance. A wanderlust washed over the ship, and we rode some little Finnish horses into the desolate village and back. It was not long before the captain had finished his business, and we set off again.

After the stopover in Korela, it was only natural that our talk turned to that poor – though venerable – Holyrussian village, than which it is hard to imagine anyplace more desolate. Everyone on board was of one mind about it, and one of us, a man disposed to philosophical prattle and political pretensions, told us all about how he had never for the life of him understood why the authorities off in Petersburg saw fit year after year to send undesirables to far-off regions, more or less remote, and always at public expense, when just east of the capital there was Lake Ladoga, dotted with little ports like Korela, where no free thought and no *joie de vivre* could possibly survive the ignorance of the locals and the horrendously dull local landscape.

“I am quite certain,” he declared, “that the situation can be blamed on bureaucratic inertia, or, if nothing else, a lack of thorough investigation.”

Someone else, a regular traveler through the area, answered that it had at various times been home to outcasts of all sorts, but had failed to hold any of them for long.

“One young man, a seminarian, was sent off here as punishment,” he told us, “for a discourtesy he had shown as a deacon (a punishment I’ve never been able to understand). After arriving, he bore up reasonably well, strengthened by the hope that his fortunes would soon turn up; but then he took to drink, and drank and drank until finally he’d been driven fully out of his mind and filed a formal petition that he ‘be shot, or conscripted into the army, or hanged for general incapacity.’”

“Well, what was the decision?”

“Well, in truth there’s. . . no way to say. You see, he didn’t wait for any kind of a response: he hanged himself on his own authority.”

“I’d say he resolved things beautifully!” the philosopher responded.

“Beautifully?” asked the storyteller, a merchant by the look of him, sober and religious.

“Why not? At least he put his miseries to an end.”

“An end to his miseries? Fine thought! And what of his soul, in the next life? You know, there are whole centuries of special torment lying in wait for suicides. It is even forbidden the living to pray for them!”

The philosopher grinned venomously and said nothing. But then a new voice entered the fray, taking neither side. Surprisingly, this man took the position that the deacon had executed justice on his own, and merely spared the authorities the burden of his case.

This was a new passenger; none of us had noticed him embarking at Konevets. He had been silent until this, no one paying him any mind, but now we all turned to him in shared wonderment: how had such a man possibly gone among us till now without comment? He was, for one thing, enormously tall, with darkish skin, an openness in his expression, and thick, curly hair the color of lead, a graying mane that poured forth

in a terribly strange way. He was dressed in a short cassock, with the wide leather belt of a monk, and, in black cotton, a high ecclesiastical hat. He might have been a novice or tonsured in an order – it was impossible to say, because the monks around Lake Ladoga do not always wear skullcaps when they travel, or even when going about their business on the islands; instead, in their rustic simplicity, they often limit themselves to these tall ecclesiastical hats. Our new passenger, a man we would soon be fascinated by, seemed at least fifty; and from the looks of him, he was in every sense a bogatyr, and at that a humble, kindly Russian bogatyr, the sort one might imagine, recalling Ilya Muromets as he appears in Vereshchagin’s masterly painting, or is limned in the poetry of Count Alexei Tolstoy. It seemed he would be at home not traipsing around in a cassock but rather sitting on the “dappled steed” of an adventure story, thundering through a wood in jute shoes, and taking in “the scents of the sap and the strawberries wafting through the pine.”

But for all his unassuming good nature, one did not have to look too closely to see that he, as they say, had *been around*. He carried himself bravely, possessed self-assurance without any vain swagger, and when he spoke out it was in warm, well-practiced bass:

“Doesn’t mean a thing,” he began, letting one word after another drip softly, lazily, from under his thick, gray mustache, which curled upward after the Hussar fashion. “I don’t agree with you about suicides, saying they can never be forgiven. And as for there being no one to pray for them – well, that’s rubbish too, because I know someone who, very simply, can set their situation to right, with the lightest touch.”

We asked him, who was this man, who settled the affairs of suicides already dead?

“The man you’re asking about,” the Hero in Black began, “is a little priestling in a little village near Moscow. A terrible drunk, almost defrocked even – he works it out for them.”

“And how did you come to know about it?”

“My goodness, gentlemen – it’s not just me who knows about it, but everyone in the Moscow diocese. Especially since the involvement of His High Excellency, Metropolitan Filaret.”

There was a brief quiet, and then someone pointed out how fishy it all sounded.

The Black Cassock answered, without a hint of offense: “Oh, sure, at first glance it’s a little doubtful. And we shouldn’t be surprised – even His High Excellency didn’t believe it for a long time. Finally, seeing the evidence, he realized there was no way *not* to believe it. Had to be true.”

The passengers began to dog the monk to tell them the whole, wondrous story, and he didn’t refuse. It went like this:

Well, it seems that one day a deacon wrote to His Eminence the bishop, to say, well, so-and-so, that little priest out there? He’s an outrageous drunk, swilling wine constantly, a black mark on the parish. Truth be told, this wasn’t unjustified. The bishop sent for the little priest to appear before him in Moscow. When they got a look at him, it was plain as day – priestling was a real sot, and they decided to strip him of his appointment. The little priest was devastated, even stopped drinking, went soft and would weep constantly. ‘Oh what have I come to!’ he thought. ‘Is there anything left

for me but to do myself in? That's it – at least then the bishop will take pity on my poor family and marry off my daughters, find someone who can take my place and keep bread on the table.' So he'd decided to do himself in, and then the appointed day finally dawned and he thought to himself – he'd always been a gentle spirit – *Okay, let's say, I die. I'm not an animal, not without a soul – what's to become of my immortal soul, after I do this?* And then he began to stew about it. He stewed and stewed, and meanwhile the bishop – the one who had stripped him of his position – he lay down on the couch with a book after a big meal one day and drifted off to sleep. Drifted off or passed out, but no sooner is His Eminence sawing wood than the door to his cell starts opening. He shouts, 'Who's there?' thinking it's probably his assistant come to tell him of a visitor. No, not the assistant: in walks an old man, on his face a kindness beyond kindness, and His Grace recognizes him immediately as the Right Reverend Sergius!

The bishop says, "Can it be you, Holy Father Sergius?"

And the holyman answers, "It is, Filaret, ye servant of God."

The bishop asks, "What could it be that you, Immaculate One, desire of me, unworthy as I am?"

And Saint Sergius answers: "It's mercy that I want."

"And to whom would you have me show it?"

And so the saint named that little priest, the drunk everyone had forgotten. And then the bishop woke up, and thought to himself, *What's it all driving at? An ordinary dream, or one that took a flight of fancy, or a vision sent by spirits?* And he began to mull it over, a man known the world around for his intellect, and finally decided on ordinary dream – after all, how likely was it that Saint Sergius, famous for his fasting, for the good and strict life he led, would come around for that weak soul, like a field overgrown with weeds? Having worked this out, His Eminence resolved to leave the whole business to its natural conclusion, as he'd been planning at first, and when his bedtime rolled around, he went off to sleep as usual. But no sooner had he laid him down than another vision came, and it terrified him. Just you picture this: a thundering. . . oh, such a terrible thundering that there's no way to describe it. . . Then, a galloping. . . horsemen beyond number. . . they surge in green chain mail, breastplates, feathers, the warhorses like so many lions, like ravens, and in front of them their proud commander, dressed the same, and wherever he waves his dark standard, they surge, and on the standard a serpent. The bishop doesn't know what's happening, and just then the captain roars out an order: "Slice them to pieces: there's no prayers for them!" And he gallops off. And behind the captain fly his soldiers, and after them, a procession of weary shades walks by like a skinny flock of springtime geese, nodding at His Grace one by one, crying pitifully, entreating him softly between sobs, "Let him go! He's the only one who prays for us." As soon as he wakes up, the bishop calls for the drunken little priest and starts peppering him with questions: How does he pray, and for whom? And the priest, as weak a spirit as ever, was flummoxed by the great man's presence, and could only say: "Your Grace, I perfect my duties exactly as prescribed." It took great force to drag the truth out of him. "I'm guilty of one sin," he said. "Being weak in spirit myself, and having once been driven by despair to make designs on my own life, at Holy Mass each week I say an extra prayer for those who die by their own hands in want of absolution. . ." The bishop understood

at once who those shades had been that drifted before him like skinny geese in his vision, and, not wanting to make those murderous demons glad, he gave the little priest his blessing. "Go on," he said, "but in fear of sin no longer. And whoever you were praying for, pray for them still." And the priestling was restored to his former office, always around to lend a hand to those who find life too burdensome to go on, unshaking in his duty. And he will always hassle his Creator on their behalf, Who will be required to forgive them.

"What do you mean, *required*?"

"Because, 'Knock and it shall be opened.' That's the word of the Lord Himself, and that cannot be changed."

"Well, tell us, please, is there anyone else who prays for suicides, beside that Moscow priest?"

"Well now, I really don't know quite what to say to that. They say you mustn't pray God for them, that they follow their own law instead of His, but I bet that some people misunderstand this and pray for them anyway. And there's one day, I think it's on Trinity Sunday, or maybe Pentecost Monday, when everyone's allowed to pray for them. And what special prayers they read that day! Miraculous prayers, soul-melting – I could listen to them forever."

"And you're not allowed to read them other days?"

"I wouldn't know. Only an educated man would know. And as for me – I'm not interested. I've never debated it with anyone."

"But have you ever noticed hearing those prayers repeated at services?"

"No, I haven't, but don't take my word for it – I rarely make it to church."

"Well, why's that?"

"I'm very busy. I don't have the time."

"Well, are you a hieromonk? A hierodeacon?"

"No, for now I'm just wearing this monk's habit."

"But that must mean you're a monk of some kind, yes?"

"Well. . . yes. At least, I tend to be seen as one."

"You're seen however you're seen," the merchant replied to this, "but I've seen men in monks' habits thrown into the army!"

The bogatyr in the Black Cassock gave no sign of offense at all. He just sat in thought for a minute and then said, "Yes, I think it could probably happen, or at least people say it does. Except that I'm pretty old already, fifty-three now, and besides no stranger to army life."

"You served in the armed forces?"

"I did."

"Well, then you must have been a non-commissioned officer, I presume?" the merchant asked.

"No, not a non-commissioned officer."

"So what were you? A watchman, a quartermaster, what? Animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"No, it's not like that at all. I was a true military man; I've been involved in regimental affairs almost since I was a little boy."

"Okay then, you must be a cantonist?" the merchant said, really starting to heat up.

“Not that either.”

“Well alright, the devil take you! Who are you already?”

“I’m a *connoisseur*.”

“A whaa-aat?”

“I’m a connoisseur. You might just say I’m smart with horses. Army officers had me on, acting as their advisor.”

“Well, that’s something!”

“I won’t say it isn’t – I’ve chosen and broken at least a few thousand. Why, I’ve trained wild ones that used to rear up and fall back, crushing the rider under the saddlebow. Oh, they kicked, sure, but none of them could throw me.”

“How would you deal with those?”

“For me it’s always been easy. I was born with a feeling for horses. Why, I’d no sooner mount one than I’d grip his left ear and yank it with all my strength, while landing a blow with my right fist right between his ears – all faster than the poor beast had a chance to get his bearings – and I’d grind my teeth awfully, and such a gush from his nostrils that you’d look for brains in it. That calms ’em down, boy.”

“Well, alright, but after that?”

“After that, you hop off, look him over, let him look *you* over so he gets a good impression, one that’ll last, and then you hop back on and ride him away.”

“And the horse becomes obedient, after this?”

“Oh, sir, it breaks him! You see, a horse is a clever animal; he can tell what kind of a man he’s dealing with. In my case, every horse I’ve ridden loved me and feared me. I remember one courser at an equestrian school in Moscow that was throwing off every rider that tried him. The fiend had even learned a trick where he bit through a rider’s knee – right to the marrow! This devil would just get his huge teeth around the kneecap and chomp right in! He’d caused a lot of deaths. Around that time an Englishman by the name of Rarey – they called him “the Wild Tamer” – came to Moscow, and this hangdog mongrel beast gave him no small bite! Shamed him completely. They say he only got away with his life because he wore a steel kneeguard, so the blasted thing couldn’t bite through and tossed him off instead. But for that, another victim would’ve fallen to the creature. But I taught him some manners.”

“Well, please, friend, tell us how you did it!”

“I did it through God’s will, because, I’ll remind you, I have a divine gift for it. This Mister Rarey, this so called Wild Tamer, and all the others who’d tried to break him, they all thought in conquering the courser’s temper the trick would be to hold on to the reins so that he couldn’t move that watermelon of a head to either side! So just as soon as Rarey declared he’d have nothing more to do with the thing, then I say, ‘Oh, what a fuss.’ I say, “there’s nothing to it! He’s a fine steed, he’s just got the devil in his spirit. This Brit doesn’t get it, but I do – let me help.” The academy’s directors agreed at once. So then I said, “Take him out behind the Drogomilovsky guardpost!” They took him. We led him by the bridle to a hollow in the Fillies, where the gentry have their summer dachas. And right away I see: here’s a spacious, comfortable place, let’s get going. I jump right on him, that man-eater, bare-chested, no shoes, nothing but a pair of wide britches and a cap. And twisted around my naked torso a braided cotton cincture, consecrated to the brave and holy Prince Vsevolod-Gabriel of Novgorod,

trusted protector, doer of great deeds, whom I've admired since my youth, and emblazoned on it the motto: *My honor I shall surrender to none*. No special tools, except in one hand a strong Tatar whip with a lead handle, no more than two pounds altogether, and, in the other, an ordinary crock of thin dough. While I was sitting up there, four different attendants pulled on his muzzle in four different directions, to keep those awful teeth from gnashing into any of them. And he, that monstrous horse, he begins to see that we're turning the tables on him, he starts neighing and squealing and breaking a sweat, writhing in fury, I can see he wants to gobble me whole. So I shout to the stableman, "Hurry up," I tell him, "unbridle the demon!" Well, they couldn't believe their ears, never expected me to say such a thing! And they just stood there, giving me the hairy eyeball.

So then I say, Well what are you standing around for! Can't you hear me? Do as I tell you, immediately! But they responded, "What's got into you, Ivan Severyanych – my name in the world used to be Ivan Severyanych, or more formally Flyagin – how is it even possible, they asked, that you want us to take off the bridle!?" I began to get really angry with them, because I could sense and even feel with my legs that that horse was going feral with rage, so I dug into him real good with my knees and I shrieked the order again, "Take it off!" They had something else to say, but now I really lost it and ground my teeth together till they squealed, so that they finally yanked the bridle off and scattered like mad in every direction. Well, as soon as it was off I became the first one to give that vile horse a real surprise: smashed that crock right into the crown of his head, smashed it and shattered it so the dough dripped down all over his eyes and up into his nostrils. Now he got scared: "What's going on here?!" But before he could even think I took my cap off and began rubbing the dough into his eyes with it, while with my other hand I smashed the whip across his right side. Oh boy, did he give a run! I keep on rubbing the dough in his eyes and bringing that whip down on him, and we ride on and on and I show him no mercy, not a second to breathe, keeping his eyes blocked, the whip crashing down over him, first one side then the other, making sure he got the message that I wasn't messing around. . . And understand it he did, as you could tell, because he didn't linger in one place for a second, but kept charging off for all he was worth! He bore me on and on, the pitiful beast, bore me while I thrashed and thrashed him, and the faster he charged the more ferociously I beat him, until finally we both began to get tired: my shoulder started aching and my arm was too fatigued to raise the whip, while he had stopped looking around and his tongue was hanging out. I could see he was ready to give, so I jumped down, wiped off his eyes, grabbed him by a tuft of mane, and said, "Is that enough for you, you rotten lump of meat, you monster?!" And I yanked his hair so hard that he collapsed onto his knees in front of me, and from that day forward he was such a lamb. You couldn't ask for a tamer animal: he'd let anyone mount and ride him. Only he wasn't long for this world."

"Kicked the bucket, eh?"

"You might say so. Such a proud creature, and even if forced to be gentle, it seems his spirit couldn't surrender. And that gentleman Rarey, when he heard the whole story, immediately invited me to come work for him."

"And did you?"

"No."

“How come?”

“Oh, what can I tell you! First of all, because I’m a connoisseur, and more accustomed to that end of things – to choosing horses, I mean, rather than breaking them in, which had to be what it was he wanted from me, and second of all, because, for all I knew, he was really planning to get the better of me somehow.”

“Get the better of you? How do you mean?”

“He wanted me to turn over my secret.”

“But would you have given it to him?”

“Oh, I would have, for a price.”

“So what got in the way of things?”

“Well. . . it must have been when he became afraid of me.”

“Afraid of you? You can’t stop now – tell us the story behind that.”

“Nothing to tell, really. One day he just said to me, ‘Tell me your secret, brother, I’ll pay well for it and hire you as my connoisseur.’ But since it’s just not in me to swindle anyone, all I could think to say was, ‘What secret? Don’t be silly.’ But he was a typical Englishman, thinking everything a point to be learned, and he didn’t believe me. So then he says, ‘If you won’t open up to me now, let’s have a spot of rum together!’ So the two of us drank rum till his face went red and, doing his best, he said, ‘Come on now, out with it – tell me what you did to that courser!’”

So I answer, “Alright, here’s what. . .” and flash him the evilest look I can, and I start grinding my teeth, and since I don’t have a crock of dough I grab a glass from the table and fake like I’m going to smash him with it – this is just for a demonstration, mind you – but no sooner does he get a look at it all than he dives under the table and bolts for the door. That’s the last time I saw him. He’s never crossed my path again.”

“And that’s why you didn’t end up with the job?”

“That’s why. I mean, how could I even tell him I wanted the job if he was too afraid to meet up with me? Now, understand – I would’ve loved to run into him somewhere. I really got to like him during our little rum-drinking contest. But you know how it is, you can’t outrun destiny, and my path was leading another way. . .”

“So, did you find a calling for yourself?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t quite know how to put it. . . I’ve traveled all over, I’ve ridden on horses and under them, I’ve been a prisoner and a soldier, beaten other men and been beaten by them, sometimes so badly that I barely survived.”

“And when did you take your vows at the monastery?”

“Just recently, only a few years after all these adventures ended.”

“And I suppose you must have felt you’d found your true calling then?”

“Well, um, I. . . I don’t know how to explain it. But then, it seems that I must have.”

“Why do you say it like that? How can you be so unsure about it?”

“I can’t speak surely about it any more than I can embrace having my own vitality sapped.”

“Sapped? By what?”

“By the other men whose wills I acted on, rather than my own.”

“What? Whose?”

“It all goes back to a vow made by my mother and father.”

“A vow? What kind of vow?”

“A vow that I would live all my life on the very brink of death, and never actually manage to die.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s exactly so, sir.”

“Well then, please sir, tell us the story of your life.”

“Alright, but the only thing is, I can only remember it all if I start from my very earliest beginnings. If you’ll indulge me. . .”

“Certainly – tell us everything. That’ll be more interesting, anyway.”

“I’m afraid I can’t say much for how interesting it’ll be, but kindly listen in and I’ll tell you everything.”

II

Here is how the former connoisseur Ivan Severyanych – this Mister Flyagin – began his tale:

I was born a serf among the people of Count K, of the Orlovsky Region. The titles to these lands must have been divided by now among the younger gentry, but in the old Count's day they were considerable. In the little town of G, where the Count himself had chosen to live, he had a colossal, rich mansion, with a little annex on it for guests, its own theater, a special bowling alley, a kennel, a whole menagerie of live bears, gardens, his own choir to give concerts, his own actors to stage scenes for him, even his own textile workshops, with workers skilled enough to make the most esoteric patterns; but more than anything else, it was his stud farm that captured his attentions. Each division had its own people allocated to run it, and the stables always got the most attention – just like army conscripts who know their sons'll be cantonists, a driver knew his boy'd grow to be a driver, every stableman's son a stableboy looking after horses, and if you're the poor guy lugging fodder up from the thresher to the stalls, well, your boy's a little fodderer too then. My father was Severyan, a driver, and though he wasn't one of the head coachmen – we had a great many – he still drove a carriage-and-six, and once on a visit from the Tsar he rode in the seventh rank and was presented with a navy-blue bank note, an ancient one. As for my mother – I was born an orphan, as it were, since I was my mother's *prayer-son*. Barren a long time, she had prayed and pestered God so badly that finally, after many years, she died bringing me into this world, died bearing this big old head of mine, and that's also why no one ever called me Flyagin, but instead just "The Head." Living alongside my old father in the coachmen's quarters, I took to the mysteries of this great animal; you might even say that I became a lover of horses. As a baby I'd crawled around between their feet, and by the time I'd grown to a man I knew everything there was to know about a horse. The stud farm was its own world, the stables too, and we groomsmen didn't worry ourselves about the stud farm – just got horses from them, and broke them. Each driver and his outrider had six horses, all of different breeds: Vyatka horses, Kazan horses, Kalmyks, Bityugans, Don purebreds – all of these picked up at various fairs. Most of our horses, of course, came from the stud farm, but it hardly makes sense to talk about those: horses off stud farms are always weak in character and spirit, without the joyful mischief of dreams. These wild ones, though? Pure animals. The Count used to buy them, a whole drove at a time, at a great price, eight rubles a head, or maybe ten, and just as soon as we'd get them home he'd start training them. They resisted horribly! Some of 'em chose death over submitting. Half of 'em, sometimes. You'd see them out in the yard, shying away from even the walls, eyes slicing the sky like birds. Can't help pitying 'em, when you see them like that, aching, desperate for a pair of wings to fly away on. . . then they can't lower themselves to slop oats and water from a trough, and they start wasting away, wasting away, till they split in two. Yes, sometimes this was the fate of half the horses we bought, especially when we bought Kirghiz ones. They miss the freedom of the steppe. But of the horses who did submit, more than a few got maimed badly during their training. There's only one way to train

a horse, and that's strictly. But the ones who made it through the training! Oh, such splendid beasts! No factory stud could ever compare.

My old father, Severyan Ivanych, drove a carriage with six Kirghiz horses, and when I grew up I started sitting as his outrider. The horses were cruel, not like those lambs you see cavalry officers trotting around on today. "Little courtiers" we used to call them, since there was no pleasure in riding something even an officer could ride; but my father's horses, these were monsters, vipers, basilisks, all in one: just a glance into their eyes, teeth, manes, flanks, was enough to terrify you. They knew no fatigue; you could drive them eighty versts, or a hundred, a hundred and fifteen versts from the manor all the way out to Oryol and back again, without a break, to these horses it was nothing. Once they got going, if you so much as blinked they'd leave you in the dust. Now when I first started outriding I was just eleven, and I had just the kind of voice that you'd expect, in those days, from the outrider of a nobleman: piercing and shrill, and so powerful I could shout *diditiooo* at the top of my lungs and drag out it for a half an hour. But I wasn't strong enough to keep myself in the saddle for long, and so on journeys I'd have them tie me to the horse – that is, to the saddle and the girth, and bind everything snugly, so that I couldn't possibly fall out. I'd be getting smashed to death, and more than once I lost feeling and went limp, but the bracing held me upright on the saddle, and after a while I got a good bump and came to. It happened like that more than once on the road – you pass out, you wake up – and afterward they'd have to crane me out of the saddle like a corpse, and then fetch some horseradish from the garden to stick under my nose and wake me; but after a while I got used to it, and I could take anything in stride. Sometimes you ride along just hoping you'll see a peasant so you can tear his shirt off with your whip as you pass – this is an old pastime of outriders.

One time we were driving the Count for a visit. It was a gorgeous summer day, and the Count was sitting with his dog in the open carriage, my poppa driving the four horses, me streaking up in front. We had to get off the turnpike at a crossroads and spend fifteen versts on the road to the P. Hermitage. It was a little roadway the monks had built, to make their monastery more inviting. It made fine sense – the highway was overgrown and wrecked, trees poking out at grotesque angles like knobby canes, while the monks' little road was clean and tidy, with a wall of hand-planted birches on either side, and those trees of such a shade and a fragrance, their road opening in the distance into an expanse of huge fields. In a word, it was beautiful, and I wanted to cry out – which was forbidden, of course, without good reason. So I kept it together, galloping along; but just then, three or four versts short of the monastery gate, I suddenly took a plunge, and right ahead of me I saw a little black spot. . . something walking along the road, like a little hedgehog. Well, this really got me going, and I called out as loud as I could *diditiooo*, and I shouted it for a whole verst until finally I overcame a farm cart pulled by two horses, that's who I'd been yelling at, and I stood myself up in the stirrups so I could see that someone was lying asleep on some hay in the wagon. There he lay, in another world, the sun warming him, peaceful as anything, the sleep so heavy on him, face down with his hands splayed out on either side, like he was trying to give the cart a big hug. But when I see he's not yielding, I pull over to one side of the road, and then, once I overtake him, standing in the reins, I start grinding my teeth and bring that whip down across his back with a terrible smack. The

horses just bolted down the hillside, and the old man gave an awful start, wearing just the kind of ecclesiastical hat I've got on now, his face, oh just so *pitiful*, like some old hag's, and with such a fright come over it that he was weeping, and starting to flail around in the hay, like a gudgeon in a pan, and then reaching around for the edge of the hay – he was still half-asleep – he misjudged and tumbled out, mangling himself under the cartwheel, and his feet got tangled in the reins, dragging him along through the dust. . . At first I and my old man, and even the Count himself, thought it was pretty funny, how the old man had somersaulted along. But now I looked down and saw that the cart had been snagged on a branch just short of a bridge at the bottom of the hill, but the old monk didn't stand or stir. When we rode up a little closer, I saw that he was all covered in gray, and of his face not even the nose was left – just a horrible gash and blood pouring out of it. The Count had us stop, stepped out, looked him over, and said, "Dead." He said he should have me whipped and ordered that I hurry to the monastery. From there, some people were sent to the bridge, and the Count had a conversation with the Father Superior, and throughout the fall a parade of gifts was sent off to the monastery: a load of oats, then one of flour, then dried carp, and when we got to the monastery my father took me out behind the shed and gave me a whipping. It wasn't a terrible beating, though, because I had my duties and needed to get right back in the saddle again. And that was the end of it, except that that night the monk appeared to me in a dream, that one I'd throttled to death, and again, like a sad old woman, he was crying. So I say, "What do you want from me? Get lost!"

And then *he* says, "You," he says, "you did me in without a chance at repentance!"

"That's a tough break," I answer, "but what can I do about it now? You know I didn't do it on purpose. Besides," I say, "what've *you* got to complain about. You're dead now, and that's that!"

"Obviously," he says, "that's where we stand. And I'm very grateful to you for that – but I've come now from talking with your own true mother, to ask if you know that you're her *prayer son*?"

"What is this," I say. "I've heard that so many times, from my grandmother Fedosya, she brings it up constantly."

"Do you also know," he says, "that you're a *promised son*?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that you've been promised. To God."

"And who promised me to Him?"

"Your mother."

"And why doesn't she come tell me herself? How do I know it's not just something you made up?"

"No," he said, "I didn't make it up. It's just that it's impossible for her to come here."

"Why's that?"

"Because," he says, "it's different for us here than it is for you on earth. Not everyone here talks, not everyone here can be seen, but when someone here is given the power to do something, he does it. And if you want," he goes on, "I'll give you a sign that my message is real."

"I *do* want," I tell him. "Only – what kind of sign?"

"The sign," he answers, "is that you'll live all your life on the very brink of death,

and never actually manage to die, until the day appointed you finally dawns, and then you'll remember the promise of your mother and become a monk."

"Wonderful," I reply. "I'll await that day."

Then he disappeared, and I woke up and forgot all about it, never suspecting that all those troubles would arise and start befalling me one after the other. But just a short while later we were riding to Voronezh with the Count and Countess (they were taking their little daughter to the newly uncovered remains of a saint to cure her clubfeet) and we stopped over to feed the horses in the Yeletsky Province, in the village of Krutoy. I dozed off under the deck, and who do I see – that little monk is back, the one I did in!

He says, "Listen, Head: I feel sorry for you. Ask your master for leave to become a monk; he'll grant it."

I answer, "Why in the world should I?"

And he responds, "Many are the evils that will befall you if you don't."

I think, I already killed you, may as well let you hem and haw at me, and then, getting up from all this, I helped my father ease the horses back to their harnesses, and we took off again, the road twisting and snaking through the mountains, on one side sheer cliffs that echoed with all the lives they'd claimed.

"Careful, Head, take it a little easier!" the Count called out.

But I was good in a spot like this. Even though it was the driver's job to hold the shaft horses' reins, I knew a lot of ways of helping my father. His shaft horses were strong and reliable; they had a way of easing the cart down an incline by sitting on their tails in the middle of the road. But one of them was a real blackguard, disposed to astronomy: just rein him in for a minute and he'd throw his head back, and, well bless his soul, cast his gaze to the heavens like he was scanning the stars! These astronomers! Basically, there's nothing worse, and especially between the drawbars, that's where they're most dangerous. An outrider's got to keep a close eye on an astronomer horse: on their own they can barely put one foot in front of the other, and they're always causing all kinds of problems. All this, of course, I knew about our astronomer, and I always tried to lend my father a hand: I'd grab the horse's reins next to mine in the crook of my left elbow and bring him down to steady him; then I'd push them so their tails pressed into the shaft horses' muzzles, with the shafts between their cruppers, and meantime I'd keep the whip right where that astronomer could see it, and if he began banking up into the clouds, *thwack*, right across the muzzle, and he'd keep his head down after that, so that the carriage would make it down the hill just fine. That's how it started this time: I was watching that astronomer, wiggling in the saddle to keep a good angle against him, and keeping him steady with the whip. And then I see that he's not responding to my father holding the reins, or even to my thrashings, and I could see his mouth dripping with blood from the bit and his eyes were rolled up in his head, and then I hear something crack behind me and, smack, the whole carriage starts barreling down the hill out of control. The break had snapped. I shout to my father, "Hold on! Hold on!" And he shouts back, "Hold on! Hold on!" But there was nothing left to hold onto – all six horses had broken into a mad rush down the hill, running every which way, and I see a flash through the air, my father, thrown from the cart – the reins had broken! And that terrible cliff right before us! I wish I could say whether it was for the masters or myself that I felt so afraid, but, at any rate, seeing the writing on the wall, I jumped up and got the shafts in my teeth and held on

to them. . . I don't know what I weighed then, but in effect it must have been much more from all the force. So there I was, dangling. I pulled the necks of the draft horses in tight, so tight that it rattled in their throats when they breathed, and finally I marshaled the courage to open my eyes. The front horses were just gone, as though clipped cleanly from the front of the carriage, and I was dangling over the edge, the carriage standing behind me against the backs of the shaft horses I had nearly strangled.

It was only then that I had a chance to wake up to my fear, and my hands suddenly gave way and I flew down and can remember nothing further. I can't say how long I was out, but when I came to I was in some kind of an izba, and a burly peasant said, "Well, what's the word, little guy? You alive?"

"I suppose," I answered.

"And can you remember what happened to you?"

I started to remember and told him about how the horses had darted off and how I had ended up dangling over the cliff – but after that, I couldn't recall a thing.

"Right, how could you know what happened to you next?" he says. "But those horses of yours, they didn't get to the bottom in one piece, not by a damn sight. You only survived 'cause you landed on a lump of clay, and started sort of sledding down. We all thought you were a goner, but then we noticed you breathing. Figured you'd just got overwhelmed by all the rushing air. So," he went on, "get up now, stand up if you can, go quickly to see the saint. The Count left some money, said to bury you if you die, or send you to see him in Voronezh if you make it."

So I went. I didn't say a word the whole ride to Voronezh, just sat while this country idiot played barynyas on his accordion the whole way, wanting to throttle him.

As soon as I arrived in Voronezh, the Count had me sent for, and called me into his room, where he said to the Countess, "It seems we owe our lives to this young boy."

The Countess just nodded her head, and the Count added, "Tell me, Head, what do you want? I'll give you anything."

So I say, "I don't know what to ask for!"

And he says, "Well, what is it that you want?"

I thought and thought. Finally, I said, "An accordion."

The count laughed and replied, "True to God, you're an idiot, but no matter. I'll remember you, when the time comes. And meanwhile, you can have your accordion right away!"

One of the footmen went into town, and came back with an accordion, which he brought to me in the stables.

"Here you go," he said. "Play it."

I took it and tried to play, but soon figured out that I didn't know how. So I smashed it and tossed it away, and later some old hags on a religious quest fished it from under the stables and stole it.

When all of this happened, I should have pressed on the Count's kindness to be granted leave to a monastery, as the monk had advised me. I couldn't myself say why I'd asked for this accordion instead, running from my true calling so that one travesty after another heaped itself on me, my sufferings worse and unendingly worse, never managing to die, until all the warnings the monk had given in my dream were realized

against me, as punishment for the weakness of my faith.

III

Despite this failing, by the mercy and favor of my masters I was allowed to ride home with them in the coach-and-six, drawn by the horses they'd just got in Voronezh, and once I'd gotten back into the swing of things I decided to get some crested doves – a cock and a hen to raise on a shelf in the stable. The cock was all clay-colored, but the hen – oh, that hen was such a beaut! With her white plumes and her red legs. I was crazy about them: sometimes the cock would coo in the night, what a lovely sound, and during the day they would flit around among the horses, pecking at seeds and trading kisses. Wonderful scenes, to a child.

And then one day amid all that kissing and cooing they decided to have chicks, and then those'd grow up and start cooing and kissing each other all over, and then more eggs'd hatch and more doves still. These baby dove chicks are so tiny, tiny and covered in yellow fluff, like mallow seed-pods you might find in the grass, or that children gather when they play "Cat Communion," except these have gigantic beaks, so big they look like Circassian princes! One day I began looking them over, my little doves, and to make sure I didn't squish this one I picked him up by his little beak, and then I looked him over – looked and looked, once I started I couldn't stop looking at how soft and cute and sweet he was, but the cock was always trying to get him out of my hands. So I had a little fun with him, teasing the cock with his chick; but afterward when I went to put the little guy back in the nest, I saw he'd stopped breathing. Just my luck! I cupped my hands around him and tried to breathe on him for warmth, hoping to see him pull through – but no, dead is dead, and dead he was! Now I was all worked up – I scooped him up and flung him through the window. There was another one left in the nest. Then a white cat materialized out of nowhere, snatched up the dead one, and vanished. But not before I got a good look at her: white all over, but for a black patch on her head as though she was wearing a hat. I said to myself, to hell with the cat, let her eat the poor dead thing. But then that night I awoke with a terrible start from the sound of that dove getting into a terrible row on the shelf over my bed. I looked up, and what scene did the moon cast her light on but that same scrawny white cat, this time dragging off my other chick, the live one!

What's the big idea, I thought, who do you think you are! I threw my riding boot at her, but she jumped out of the way, carrying off my poor little chick. Probably to dinner! My doves were sad at first, and spent a while grieving after their babies, but soon they were kissing and cooing again and they had more chicks still, and wouldn't you know, that same damned cat showed up again! The devil knows how she knew they'd hatched – must've had the stables under constant surveillance. So one day I come in and there I see her in the middle of dragging another of the chicks off – this is in broad daylight – and she did it so stealthily I never had a chance to throw anything after her. I decided to teach her a lesson, so I set a trap on the windowsill; no sooner did that mangy head poke into the room than she was trapped for the night, gazing off and meowing pitifully. When I got there, I opened the trap and flung her face-first into my boot, so she wouldn't be able to get at me with those claws, and then I held her by her hind legs and her tail with my left hand while I took my whip from the wall with