

ONE NIGHT

The men were left alone at last—old Mikala and two other Gipsies, both of them bearded and angry-looking. All the noises in the Gipsy camp were dying down. The night being warm and the air close, everybody was going to sleep in the open—some were settling down in the carts, others—simply in the hay that before dark had been brought here, to this dry ridge, from the meadow where haymaking was in progress.

I had also settled myself to sleep, my head on my kit-bag which I had picked up near the camp-fire and brought along.

I had done a lot of walking on that day, and my feet were as sore and hot as if they were roasting over burning coals.

From somewhere close by came the sounds of the Gipsies' horses grazing.

Near the camp-fire the three men were engaged in a conversation.

From time to time the sounds of their excited voices reached me, and every now and again I could see that in the process of proving their points, the Gipsies came very near to gripping each other by their shirt-fronts.

It looked like a quarrel.

As the time went on I lay awake, and sleep would not come.

It is always like this after a long walk: your bones ache, your mind is blank and sleep escapes you. So I simply lay on my hay shake-down and listened to the sounds of the night.

Suddenly someone stood between me and the camp-fire—the shadow of a human figure was cast on me by the flickering light of the flames.

It was old Mikala's granddaughter, returning from the village. I knew that her name was Glafira, and that about two years before she had buried her husband near Sumy¹. He had been a young Gipsy and his death had been unexpected—nobody knew for certain why the man had died. Old Mikala had told me all this while we were on the way to the ridge that the Gipsies had chosen for their camp.

Now his granddaughter came up to me, and spoke,

"I went to the village to see if there were any eligible young men there..." The Gipsy woman sounded a little sad, and I even heard her sigh. "No use!" she went on, "For all the village girls there are only two miserable youngsters. How does the saying go?—"there are forty girls and I am the only man; wherever the forty girls go, they find that there I am". All the boys are in the Army, I was told. As for the men they are all tied to their wives' apron-strings. That's how things stand."

The Gipsy woman looked annoyed.

"At least let me tell you your fortune," she said, taking hold of my hand and sitting down beside me. Her narrow palm on which my hand rested now, was soft but cold. The fingers of her right hand travelled over mine, feeling for the lines of life and death. She spoke at length.

¹ Sumy—a city in the Ukraine (translator's note).

"You're going to live a long life. Even if a cuckoo tells you that you're not¹, don't believe it. . ."

I laughed and, unexpectedly, my laughter hurt the woman.

"Oh, you! You silly son of a stupid father!.. You hold nothing sacred!"

She jumped up and made to go away.

"Wait!" I cried.

The Gipsy woman sat down again but she did not take my hand this time. Her face was dark, and she was angry.

I had heard a similar prophecy before.

Then a group of Gipsies had made their camp near the Taras fir-tree, which stood close to my home village, on the slope of a ravine overgrown with pinkish horse-tails and other grasses.

There was no smith on the collective farm—he did not come back from the war. But the smithy was there and so was the work. After the spring-time many of the horses needed to be re-shod, and the iron tyres of many cart wheels needed replacement. The Gipsies had found out about it from the chairman of the collective farm, and were eager to take the opportunity and make some money.

So the Gipsy camp near the Taras fir-tree stayed on.

While iron was being hammered in the smithy, the Gipsy women went round the village cheating its female inhabitants out of the last few eggs that they possessed.

¹ According to an old Byelorussian superstition, a person is expected to live as many (or as few) years as there are calls from the cuckoo in answer to the question, "Please, tell me, cuckoo, how long can I expect to live in the world?" Each double call equals one year (translator's note).

We little boys were also interested in the Gipsies, and went to the Taras fir-tree to have a look at them.

There a Gipsy girl came up to me. She might have been even younger than I—say ten or even nine years of age.

“Let me tell you your fortune,” she said and fluttered her eyelashes as if she were going to burst into tears.

“I haven’t got anything to pay you with,” I answered, feeling extremely embarrassed.

The girl calmed me down saying, “Don’t worry—you may bring something later.” Then she took hold of my hand and went on, “You are going to live long. Even if the cuckoo tells you that you are not, don’t believe it.”

In all probability I might have been the little Gipsy’s first customer, and consequently she was showing off, doing her very utmost, for I had furnished her with a chance to practise the Gipsy trade that was meant to give the girl her bread,—so she had told me as much she could.

And later I brought her some sweet turnips from my grandfather’s garden.

“Your name is Glafira, isn’t it?” I asked the silent Gipsy woman.

“Yes, that’s right—my name’s Glafira.”

“Please, don’t be cross with me, Glafira. I didn’t mean to offend you when I laughed; I simply recalled something and just laughed at my thoughts.”

The Gipsy woman’s face was still dark. In the feeble light of the fire I saw her lips move silently as if she were whispering something but the shadow of sadness would not leave her pretty, almost childlike face.

“Why should you be so unkind?” said the Gipsy woman.

She was about to say something else, but at this moment Mikala's angry voice came to us from near the fire.

"Glaflra, leave the man alone! Come here!"

Glaflra got up and without saying a word, somehow reluctantly went in the direction from which the old man's voice had come.

I stretched myself on my shake-down from which the fragrance of hay rose, and was soon asleep.

In my dreams I saw a dusty road and the enormously thick lime-tree, a regular giant, that I had recently seen on the outskirts of the town of Garbavichy.

The lime-tree was in blossom and smelt of honey.

It was almost white with its creamy blossom.

On the lime-tree blossoms bees converged from all sides.

My attention was arrested by a little bird with a yellow breast. It was sitting on the roof top of the bath-house which stood nearby, at a distance of about twenty paces from the giant lime-tree, just at the place where the bees turned and started on their way back to their hives. The yellow-breasted bird, its feathers ruffled up, was doing something that seemed entirely beyond its abilities,—it was catching the bees flying by, and continually swallowing them one after another. . .

My next dream, without much connection with the previous one, was about Raman Mitaminkevich.

At the time Raman had come to our village, he was about twenty, I think. A strong, young Gipsy, he had run away from his Gipsy camp,—just like that—had left everything behind and had run away.

For about a month, or, perhaps, even longer he stayed with old Lavrynikha; an elderly woman who had lived alone and was only too happy to accomodate the homeless Gipsy—she hoped that he would stay, and treated him like her son. But the young Gipsy would not remain on the collective farm long; and after he had worked there for some time, he moved on to town. There he attended an evening school and, while doing so, he earned his living working as a ticket-collector at the House of Culture of the district centre. Later on, in three years or so, he became the Artistic director of that same establishment. With enviable eagerness the young man had taken root in the midst of our life that surrounded him now. And gradually he forgot his Gipsy camp completely. He thought that the Gipsies had forgotten about him, too.

By that time I had also moved to town, and taken up my studies there. Raman and I had been friends even in my village, and our friendship continued.

One day he walked in hurriedly in a state of great excitement.

"My camp folks are here!" Raman said, and his eyes were full of apprehension.

"What about it, after all?" I asked.

"What about it!... the young Gipsy went on, "They are after me! They've found me now. And they will hunt me down until. . ."

"Until what?"

"Until anything—they'll stop at nothing! You just don't know them as well as I do!" His excitement seemed to be increasing.

The Gipsies among whom Raman had been born, and with whom he had travelled long distances, appeared now in the vicinity of the town in order to get hold of their prodigal son and

take him back to his former Gipsy ways. I shared Raman's anxiety from the very moment he had broken the news to me, but I did not want to show it to him, in the hope that he would think that his fears were not justified. I realized that he was in danger. That was why I discussed the matter with my friends and then we five students went to the Gipsy camp, to have the matter out with them.

"You'd better leave Raman alone," we told the Gipsies.

When we were leaving their camp the unkempt Gipsy children threw stones after us—they must have been told to do so.

But they left Raman alone, after all.

...I woke up with a start as if somebody had nudged me. Somewhere deep in the forest which began immediately beyond the ridge that the Gipsies had chosen for their camp, a frightened bird was shrieking. It might have been the bird's loud cries that had awakened me.

The fire was just smouldering—the smoke was rising over the dampish log which the Gipsies had placed over the fire to prevent it from going out during the night but there were no flames playing—only smouldering embers glowed red in the darkness of the night.

Near the fire old Mikala was sitting, deep in some meditations that he alone knew of. It was evident that he had not been to bed yet. He was quite motionless, as if at prayer.

The heat with which the night had begun had long since subsided—apparently, the morning was close—and cold air was coming from somewhere near the meadow, from the river which was hidden behind the willow shrubs.

The Gipsies were sleeping peacefully under their striped blankets, obviously they were quite

comfortable, and I felt a little envious for I was not fortunate enough, in spite of all my experience, to sleep that night through without shivering with the cold. It would have been good if I could, though. However, the armful of hay which was my bed, seemed to be too thin. I had not bothered to bring any more in the evening, and now it was too late to look for it. Even if somebody had dropped a few handfuls by chance, scattering it about the ridge, the hay would have become wet with the night's dew.

I got up and approached the fire.

"What? Shivering?" Mikala asked me coming out of his trance. His voice was husky.

"A little," I agreed.

"Yes, old man, that's how it is: before morning your teeth always chatter, and even in summer it's cold around dawn." From somewhere behind his back he produced a charred stick and stirred the smouldering embers with it. "The fire's gone out already," he went on, "and I have been sitting here all the time and never noticed it."

When the fire was stirred, white ashes rose over it and fell again.

The old man poked the damp log with his charred stick hoping perhaps that it would catch fire. It was of no use though, for the log would not burn. Only some bubbles appeared on its surface, making a hissing sound.

"Ah, it'll just smoulder away," he continued, "but it'll never really burn. Exactly like our Gipsy sun—it shines but it never warms you. It must be true, after all, when they say that the only thing you can find in a swamp is the devil—hardly any good firewood there." He knocked the log with his stick several times as if trying to make sure that it was no use at all expecting the log to start burning, and then he turned to me.

"Well, old man, I think you'd better go and fetch some brushwood. We may make this fire burn, after all. You'll feel warmer then. Go and look around—I saw a dead tree lying somewhere near, a dead fir-tree or something. Don't be lazy now, go and fetch it, will you?"

In a few minutes I was back bringing an armful of firewood, and presently quick flames ran all over the fir-tree branches, first licking the darkness of the night cautiously, and then sending up a whole firework display of sparks which rose high over the fire and expired there; the night imperceptibly retreated to the far end of the ridge, and later it alternately came close to us and receded again as the bonfire fitfully blazed.

Mikala and I had to move away from the fire soon, for it had become very hot.

"I say, old chap, you aren't sorry that you stayed for the night with us?" Mikala asked me.

"Not at all," I replied.

"Aha, that's how it is—the hardest bed is soft enough when you want to sleep."

The old man said this, and smiled:

"So, I just saw there was a man who didn't know what to do and where to go—very much like a lone stork among hay-stacks in a meadow, or like a crane before the Pokroves¹. So, I took pity on you, eh?"

"Well," I replied, "the world's not without kind people."

The old man stretched himself so vigorously that I heard his bones crack.

In his younger days old Mikala had apparently been a handsome Gipsy, and many a young maiden from his camp must have sighed over

¹ The Pokroves—one of the Russian Orthodox Church holidays. It comes late in autumn when the weather is usually cold (translator's note).

him. What had remained of his good looks of those days was his aquiline Gipsy nose and his beard, which, for some unknown reason, had preserved its colour and remained as thick and black as it must have been when the old man was thirty, forty, and, later, fifty years of age; even now when old Mikala was quite close to the sunset of his days, his beard beautifully framed his faded face with its colourless eyes.

But the old Gipsy was fairly strong still. He, evidently, had enough strength not to succumb to old age. It was easy to discern even in his posture as he sat there, with his back so straight as if the heavy load of seventy years had not weighed much upon his shoulders.

All his life he had spent on the tramp, and you can hardly hold your own in such circumstances if you are weak.

The fir-tree branches were crackling in the fire. On the ridge shadows were dancing, as if frightened.

The old man and I sat there and continued talking.

"I couldn't help thinking about you yesterday," the Gipsy said, "and I'm still thinking about it today—what is it, man, that actually made you take to the road in this fashion?" The old Gipsy's eyes were deep and sharp, as if he wanted to pierce me through with his glance.

"What's there to think about?" I queried.

"How so? Here's a man on the tramp—he walks a long way. . . Now, take a look at it yourself—along any highway people are travelling, all through the summer, all going South, as far as the coast itself, and all of them in "Moskvich" or "Volga" cars. And there isn't a single one who just walks like you do. Well, even here, in this remote place, in the meadows—on the country

roads, well, did you meet any people walking like you? So, you are silent, aren't you? That's it, man. . ."

For a moment Mikala remained silent himself, his face wearing an expression of disbelief. Then he resumed his speech.

"All the same, tell me why you tramp about like this. I am sort of interested. Are you a kind of student or, probably, going to be a teacher?"

"You know," came my answer, "the people around one are interesting, and the places are beautiful. So I decided to tramp about for a while—I am on leave now."

The old Gipsy pondered over it as if trying to remember something.

"And you are doing the right thing, too," he said suddenly, "I am seventy now. Well, it seems to me I've been about everywhere. I am a Gipsy, I live together with Gipsies, I like Gipsy life. And every day there is a new place to go to. Take this place for example, this ridge. Do you think I won't be sorry to leave it when we move on tomorrow? Of course, I shall, very sorry, indeed! Because I'm never going to come back here, I'll never set my eyes on it again. We Gipsies are like wolves—we've got plenty of roads to go along. So, there's hardly a chance to go to one and the same place twice. And besides, life is short, after all. . ."

The old man lazily waved aside the smoke that had curled towards him. From somewhere behind the willow shrubs a light breeze rose, and rustled through the bushes, swayed the smoke over the fire and then died away at the far end of the ridge. Everything became still again.

"Sometimes I think," went on the old Gipsy, "that a man who has lived in one and the same place for a long time, and is accustomed to such

a life, will never be able to learn to love the world well enough. For the world is much larger than the plot of land on which your house stands. Yes, it is much larger. As for me, I love the whole world; it is my home. I love all there is of the earth. Perhaps, it is because I was born a Gipsy. You tramp around now, for example. But there were people before you who tramped in the same fashion. True, it was a long time ago, but they went wandering all the same. I was only a child at that time, I still remember it. People started out along the roads to search for the truth. Yes, it was a long time ago. You are quite different, of course. You'll be fed up with your tramping around soon. It's easy to see that. There's no more to see, in fact, than dust of the road on you, and everybody knows, of course that road dust is easy to brush off. And there'll hardly be anything left of your travels then. What kind of traveller do you make, you think, with those glasses on your nose? In fact you can't even walk properly—you just stumble along in a kind of blind-man fashion. No, man, there's hardly any hope that you'll ever be able to lead anybody—you rather need a guide yourself."

Today the old Gipsy seemed to be both kind and cross at the same time.

"Listen," the old man cast a sidelong glance at me, "you may know a few things that I've no idea about. . . . At least I think that if you go round with all those clever things dangling down your shouders, you must know something. . . . Well, will you tell me whether or not I am entitled to get a pension, after all?"

"I think you are. . . ."

"You think," the old man echoed, "you think so—but what do I care about it? What do I need it for? Do I ask anybody for it?"

Somewhere far behind the forest dogs began barking. At first there came the bark of one dog only and then several others joined in—at some moments the barking sounded like short separate outbursts, at other—it was accompanied by prolonged yelps. The dogs might have been frightened by a wolf prowling near the village, or it might have been something else, of course; but whatever the reason it was, the barking echoed far and wide and the stillness of the night was gone.

“Last night the state farm manager came here from the “Pechanezhy”¹. It’s nearby. You might have seen it on the other side of the river—those white stone houses. So, he came from over there. He wanted to hire us for the state farm—it’s just an old story for me. The only difference is that in olden times it was the contractors who used to come to the Gipsy camp, and last night it was the big boss himself. And d’you know what he told us?—“Haven’t you had enough of tramping about and sponging on the labour of others?” But the long and the short of it is, they just want hands. That’s why they used to come to the camp, and that’s why they came this time—this manager knows, of course, which side his bread is buttered on.”

All of a sudden the old Gipsy became very excited, even his hands began trembling. He heaved a sigh.

“No, old man, a human life can’t be changed as easily as that—it’s easy to turn an empty pocket inside out, but when human lives are concerned, then—what’s the need?...”

It seemed that the old man’s store of troubles that he was eager to complain of was inexhaustible...

¹ “Pechanezhy”—the name of the state farm.

When he fell silent at last I told him about Raman Mitaminkevich.

"Well," said the old man, "he might have done the right thing, your Raman. It might be, after all, that this is precisely the truth and the right thing for us Gipsies to do. But what kind of truth, what kind of a good thing is it for a man, if he feels bitter because of it? What do I care for such a kind of good thing if it hurts my soul?"

The old man rose, walked over to one of the carts and brought an old, shiny black sheepskin coat, which he flung over to me.

"Take it, old boy. Go on, get some sleep. You need it—your journey isn't over, is it? And as for me—I'm soon going to start off, too. The other folks of the camp are going to stay here, at "Pechanezhy"—there is nowhere for them to go any more; the journey's over. So,—I shall start off on my own."

For an instant the old man was silent and then added:

"The Gipsy's fate is to die on the road. . ."

* * *

In the morning I woke up along with the other inhabitants of the camp.

The rising sun was shining clear and bright.

All the inhabitants of the Gipsy camp were getting ready to start on their way. This time the road was not a long one,—it would lead them through the meadow and across the river, on the other side of which the white two-storeyed houses of the state farm stood.

The two bearded Gipsies that I had seen quarreling with Mikala near the fire the day before came up to me. The younger one of them address-

sed me with a question, and his tone was almost demanding:

"Where's Mikala?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"Ah, that's just like Mikala, the old tramp," the other Gipsy hissed through his yellow teeth. "The damned old horse. . ."

The first one added, with contempt.

"That Mikala chap has become a bit funny. . ."

I picked up my kit-bag, slung it across the shoulder and walked towards the meadow, skirting the willow shrubs as I went. Close to the shrubbery Mikala's track was visible leading through the dewy grass.

When I passed the bushes I saw Glafira: she stood there peering into the distance, where the morning mist was rising. The Gipsy woman looked excited. She pointed to the trail that led through the dew and said:

"It's old Mikala's track, that's the way he took. . ."

Glafira's eyes were a beautiful dark-brown, and from their depth shone a kind of warm amber glow, as if deep down they were lined with honey.

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*Translated from the Byelorussian
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