

The Village



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“A most powerful ‘connoisseur of colours’. One could write an entire dissertation on his colour schemes.”

Vladimir Nabokov

“You have, Mr Bunin, thoroughly explored the soul of vanished Russia, and in doing so you have most deservedly continued the glorious traditions of the great Russian literature.”

*Professor Wilhelm Nordenson,
at the 1933 Nobel Prize banquet*

The Village

Ivan Bunin

Translated by Galya and Hugh Aplin



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ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD
London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.oneworldclassics.com

The Village first published in 1910
This edition first published by Oneworld Classics Limited in 2009
© Ivan Bunin, 1910
English Translation and Notes © Galya and Hugh Aplin, 2009
Extra material © Andrei Rogatchevski
Cover image © Catriona Gray, 2009

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe

ISBN: 978-1-84749-104-6

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The Village

1

THE KRASOV'S GREAT-GRANDFATHER, nicknamed Gypsy by the servants, had borzoi hounds set on him by his master, Durnovo. Gypsy had stolen his lover from him, his master. Durnovo ordered Gypsy to be taken out into the fields beyond Durnovka and sat on a knoll. He himself rode out with the pack, crying: "Tally-ho!" Gypsy, who had been sitting benumbed, made off at a run. But you shouldn't run away from borzois.

The Krasov's grandfather was lucky enough to win his freedom. He left with his family for the town and soon made a name for himself: he became a renowned thief. He rented a shack in the Chornaya Sloboda for his wife and he settled her down to make lace to sell, while he himself, with a poor townsman, Belokopytov, went off around the province robbing churches. When he was caught, he conducted himself in such a way that for a long time people throughout the district were enraptured by him – he stands there, apparently, in a velveteen kaftan and goatskin boots with his cheekbones and eyes playing brazenly, and confesses most deferentially to even the very least of his countless jobs:

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

And the Krasov's father was a small-time trader. He travelled around the district, lived at one time in his native Durnovka, and tried setting up a store there, but he went bust, turned to drink, went back to town and died. After working in stores, his sons, Tikhon and Kuzma, were in trade as well. They used to drag along in a cart with a locker in the middle and yell out dolefully:

"La-adies, wa-ares! La-adies, wa-ares!"

The wares – little mirrors, soaps, rings, cottons, kerchiefs, needles, pretzels – were in the locker. And in the cart was everything they got in exchange for the wares: dead cats, eggs, homespun canvas, old clothes...

But one day, after travelling for several years, the brothers almost knifed one another – and they parted, so as not to tempt fate. Kuzma

got a job with a cattle-dealer, Tikhon rented a little inn on the highway at the station of Vorgol, some five *versts** from Durnovka, and opened a tavern and a “taxable” store:* “trading in general goods tea shoogar tobacco sigarets et setera”.

By the age of about forty, Tikhon’s beard was already silvery in places. But he was handsome, tall and slim, as before; stern of face, swarthy, a little pockmarked, broad in the shoulder and wiry, masterful and abrupt in his conversation, quick and agile in his movements. Only his brows had begun knitting ever more frequently, and his eyes flashing ever more sharply than before.

Tirelessly he would chase after the district policemen in those dark days of autumn when they exact taxes and sale after sale takes place in the village. Tirelessly he would buy up standing crops from landowners and rent land for a song... He lived for a long time with a mute cook – “it’s no bad thing, she can’t go spreading any gossip!” – and had a child with her, which she took into her bed and crushed in her sleep, and then he married a middle-aged housemaid of old Princess Shakhova’s. And after marrying and getting the dowry, he “finished off” the heir of the now impoverished Durnovo family, a plump, delicate young gentleman, bald at twenty-five, but with a magnificent chestnut-coloured beard. And the peasants just gasped in pride when he took over the Durnovo family’s small estate: after all, practically the whole of Durnovka was made up of Krasovs!

They gasped too at the way he contrived to be everywhere at once: selling, buying, on the estate almost every day, watching like a hawk over every speck of land... They gasped and said:

“He’s a brute! He’s the boss, though!”

Tikhon Ilyich himself persuaded them of this. He would often say edifyingly:

“We’re careful and we get along – catch you and we’ll put the bridle on. But justly so. I’m a Russian, brother. I don’t want anything of yours for nothing, but you bear it in mind: I’m damned if I’ll let you have a kopek of mine! Mollycoddle you – no, mark my words, that I won’t!”

And Nastasya Petrovna (yellow, swollen, with sparse, whitish hair, who, because of her continual pregnancies, always ending with still-born girls, walked like a duck, with her toes pointing inwards and rocking from side to side) would groan as she listened:

“Oh, what a simpleton, just look at you! Why take such trouble with him, the stupid thing? You try teaching him good sense, but nothing’s any use. Look at him standing with his legs apart – like some bukhara from Emir!”*

In the autumn, beside the inn, which stood with one side facing the highway and the other facing the station and the grain-elevator, there was the moaning and groaning of creaking wheels: strings of carts filled with grain were swinging round from both up the road and down. And pulleys were constantly squealing, now on the door to the tavern, where Nastasya Petrovna was serving, now on the door to the store – dark, dirty, smelling strongly of soap, herring, cheap tobacco, mint cake and paraffin. And ringing out constantly in the tavern was:

“Oo-ooph! That vodka of yours is strong stuff, Petrovna! Gave me a whack right in the forehead, the devil take it.”

“Like sugar on your lips, my dear!”

“Put snuff in it, do you?”

“Don’t be such an idiot!”

And the store was even busier:

“Ilyich! Can you weigh me out a pound of ham?”

“This year, brother, thanks be to God, I’ve got such a supply of ham, such a supply!”

“And how much is it?”

“Dirt cheap!”

“Storekeeper! Have you got any good tar?”

“Your grandfather never had such tar at his wedding, my dear!”

“And how much is it?”

The loss of hope of having children and the closing down of the taverns were the major events in Tikhon Ilyich’s life. He aged visibly when there was no longer any doubt that he wasn’t to be a father. At first he joked about it:

“No, sir, I shall get what I want,” he would say to acquaintances. “A man isn’t a man without children. Just like some barren patch of ground...”

Then he even began to be gripped by fear: what’s going on – one’s crushed a child in bed, the other keeps giving birth to dead ones! And the time of Nastasya Petrovna’s final pregnancy was an especially difficult one. Tikhon Ilyich was miserable, in a bad temper; Nastasya Petrovna prayed in secret, cried in secret, and she was pitiful when, by

the light of the icon lamp, she would climb down quietly from the bed at night, thinking her husband was asleep, and start laboriously getting down on her knees, bowing to the floor with a whisper, looking up in anguish at the icons and rising agonizingly from her knees like an old woman. From childhood, without even daring to admit it to himself, Tikhon Ilyich had disliked icon lamps, their false church light: there had remained in his memory all his life that November night when, in the tiny, lop-sided shack in the Chornaya Sloboda, an icon lamp had been burning too – so meekly, gently and sadly – the shadows from its chains had been dark, it had been deathly quiet, and on the bench beneath the saints his father had lain motionless with his eyes closed, his sharp nose raised and his waxen hands clasped on his breast, while near to him, beyond the little window, curtained with a red cloth, some conscripts had been passing by with wildly melancholy songs, wailing, and concertinas bawling out of tune... Now the icon lamp burned constantly.

Some hawkers from Vladimir fed their horses at the inn – and in the house there appeared *The New Complete Oracle and Wizard, foretelling the future from questions posed, with in addition The easiest method of fortune-telling with cards, beans and coffee*. And in the evenings, Nastasya Petrovna would put on her glasses, roll herself a little ball of wax, and begin tossing it onto the rings of the oracle. And Tikhon Ilyich would throw sidelong glances. But all the answers given were crude, ominous or senseless.

“Does my husband love me?” asked Nastasya Petrovna.

And the oracle replied:

“He loves you like a dog loves a stick.”

“How many children will I have?”

“Fate has doomed you to die, the field must be rid of its weeds.”

Then Tikhon Ilyich said:

“Let me toss it...”

And asked the question:

“Should I instigate a lawsuit against the person concerned?”

But he too got nonsense back:

“Count the teeth in your mouth.”

Once, glancing into the otherwise empty kitchen, Tikhon Ilyich saw his wife beside the cook’s child’s cradle. A speckled chick was wandering along the window sill, cheeping and tapping its beak against the glass

as it caught flies, while she was sitting on the plank bed, rocking the cradle and singing an old lullaby in a pitiful, tremulous voice:

Where lies my little baby?
Where now his tiny bed?
He’s in a lofty tower,
In a cradle painted bright.
No one come to visit us,
No, knock not at the tower!
His eyes are closed, he’s fast asleep
Behind a dark bed curtain
Of richly coloured taffeta...

And Tikhon Ilyich’s face was so changed at that moment that, when she glanced at him, Nastasya Petrovna was not embarrassed and did not quail – she just burst into tears and, blowing her nose, said quietly:

“For Christ’s sake, take me to the saint...”

And Tikhon Ilyich took her to Zadonsk. On the way, he was thinking God ought to punish him all the same for the fact that in his hustle and bustle he was only to be found in church at Easter. And blasphemous thoughts came into his head too: he kept comparing himself with the parents of saints who had also gone a long time without having children. This was not a clever thing to do, but he had already noticed long before that there was someone else inside him, stupider than he. Just before setting off he had received a letter from Athos: *“Most God-fearing benefactor Tikhon Ilyich! Peace and salvation to you, the Lord’s blessing and the honest Protection of the All-glorified Mother of God from Her earthly lot, the holy Mount Athos! I had the happiness of hearing of your good deeds and of how you lovingly spare mites for the creation and decoration of God’s temples and for monastic cells. My hut through time has now reached such a state of dilapidation...”* And Tikhon Ilyich had sent a tenner for repairs to the hut. The time had long gone when he had believed with naive pride that word of him really had reached Athos itself, he knew very well now that there were simply too many huts on Athos that had fallen into disrepair – and he had sent it all the same. But still it didn’t help, the pregnancy ended with utter torment: before giving birth to a last stillborn child, Nastasya Petrovna, while falling asleep, began shuddering, groaning, screaming...

According to her, she was instantly gripped in her sleep by a kind of wild gaiety, combined with inexpressible terror: first she would see the Queen of Heaven coming towards her through the fields, all aglow with golden raiments, and from somewhere would come harmonious, ever swelling singing; then from underneath the bed would leap a little devil, indistinguishable from the darkness, yet clearly visible to her inner eye, and start belting something out on a harmonica in such a resonant, jaunty, boisterous way! It would have been easier to sleep not in the stuffy heat, on feather mattresses, but in the fresh air, under the overhang of the granaries. But Nastasya Petrovna was afraid:

“The dogs’ll come up and sniff around my head...”

When all hope of having children had gone, the thought occurred to him ever more frequently: “Who’s all this torment for, then, the devil take it?” And the state monopoly was rubbing salt in the wound. His hands started to shake, his brows to knit and rise as if in pain, his lip to twist – especially at the phrase which was always on his tongue: “bear it in mind”. He tried as before to look younger than he was – he wore foppish calfskin boots and an embroidered *kosovorotka** under a double-breasted jacket. But his beard grew greyer, and thinner, and tangled...

And as if on purpose, the summer turned out hot and droughty. The rye failed completely. And complaining to customers became something to enjoy.

“We’re closing down, sir, closing down!” Tikhon Ilyich would say with joy of his trade in alcohol, rapping out every syllable. “What else! The state monopoly! The Minister of Finance fancies doing some selling himself!”

“Oh, just look at you!” groaned Nastasya Petrovna. “You’ll say too much one day, you will! They’ll send you where the raven never took any bones!”

“You can’t scare me!” Tikhon Ilyich would cut her off, raising his brows abruptly. “No, sir! You can’t put a gag on every mouth!”

And enunciating the words even more sharply, he would turn again to the customer:

“And the rye simply fills you with joy, sir! Bear it in mind: fills everyone with joy! Even in the night, sir – you can see it. You go out onto the doorstep, look into the moonlit fields: nothing there, sir, like a bald patch! You go out and look: it’s all shimmering!”

That year, during the fast before Peter and Paul’s Day,* Tikhon Ilyich spent four days in town at the fair and got even more upset – by his thoughts, the heat, sleepless nights. He usually set off for the fair with great enthusiasm. They would oil the carts in the twilight and fill them up with hay; into the one in which the master himself and his old workman were riding they put pillows and a *chuika*.* They would start out late at night and drag along, creaking, until dawn. At first they enjoyed friendly conversation, they smoked and told each other scary old stories about merchants murdered on the road and during overnight stops; then Tikhon Ilyich would settle down to sleep – and it was so pleasant hearing the voices of oncoming people in his sleep, feeling the cart rocking shakily and seeming to be forever going downhill, his cheek shifting about on the pillow, his cap falling off and the freshness of the night cooling his head; it was good too waking up before the sun on a pink dewy morning amidst matt-green crops, and catching sight in the distance of the cheerful whiteness of the town in the blue lowland, the gleam of its churches, and having a good yawn, crossing himself at the sound of distant bells and taking the reins from the hands of the sleepy old man, grown weak like a child in the morning chill, and pale as chalk in the light of the sunrise... Now Tikhon Ilyich sent the carts off with the foreman, and he himself travelled alone in a cabriolet. The night was warm and light, but nothing brought him any joy; the journey made him tired; the lights at the fair, in the jail and the hospital, which stood at the entrance to the town, could be seen for about ten *versts* across the steppe, and it seemed as if you would never reach them, those distant, sleepy lights. And it was so hot at the inn on Schepnaya Square, and the bedbugs bit so hard, and so frequently did voices ring out by the gates, such a clatter did the carts driving into the stone yard make, and so early did the cocks begin yelling and the pigeons cooing, and the pale light appear outside the open windows, that he got not a wink of sleep. He slept but little on the second night too, which he tried spending at the fair, in a cart: horses neighed, lights burned in tents, people walked and talked all around, and at dawn, when his eyelids were simply sticking together, bells started ringing in the jail and the hospital – and a cow set up an awful bellowing just above his head...

“Torment!” constantly came to mind during those days and nights.

The fair, sprawling over the common for an entire *verst*, was, as always, noisy and chaotic. There was a discordant hubbub – the

neighing of horses, the trills of children's whistles, the marches and polkas of the orchestrons crashing out on the carousels. A garrulous crowd of peasants, men and women, thronged from morning till evening down the dusty, dung-strewn lanes between the carts and tents, horses and cows, booths and food stalls, from which came the stinking fumes of greasy braziers. As always, there were swarms of horse-dealers, imparting terrible heat to every argument and deal; stretching out in endless lines with their nasal refrains were the blind and the poor, beggars and cripples, on crutches and trolleys; moving slowly in the midst of the crowd with its little bells ringing was the police chief's troika, held in check by a coachman in a velveteen, sleeveless jacket and a little hat with peacock feathers... Tikhon Ilyich had a lot of customers. He was approached by black-haired gypsies, ginger-haired Polish Jews in canvas overalls and worn-down boots, tanned landowners in *poddyovkas** and caps; he was approached by a handsome hussar, Prince Bakhtin, and his wife in an English suit, and by an ancient hero of Sebastopol, Khvostov – tall and bony, with amazing large features on his dark, wrinkled face, in a long uniform coat and sagging trousers, boots with wide toes and a big cap with a yellow band, from beneath which his hair, dyed a dead brown colour, was combed forwards onto his temples... Bakhtin, as he looked at a horse, leant back, gave a restrained smile into his moustache and tiny beard, and fidgeted with his leg in cherry-coloured breeches. Khvostov, after shuffling up to a horse which looked at him sidelong with a fiery eye, would stop in such a way that he seemed to be falling over, would raise a crutch and ask for the tenth time in a muffled, expressionless voice:

“How much are you asking?”

And everyone had to be answered. And Tikhon Ilyich did answer, but only with an effort, clenching his jaws, and he would demand such high prices that everyone went away with nothing.

He got very tanned, grew thinner and wan, got dusty, and felt mortal anguish and weakness throughout his body. He upset his stomach so much that he began having spasms. He was obliged to go to the hospital. But there he waited his turn for about two hours, sat in an echoing corridor sniffing the disagreeable smell of carbolic acid, and felt as though he were not Tikhon Ilyich, but were in the antechamber of his master or his superior. And when a heavy-breathing doctor,

looking like a deacon, red-faced, light-eyed, in a black frockcoat that was too tight for him and smelt of copper, put his cold ear up against his chest, he hastened to say that his stomach was “almost better”, and only out of timidity did he not refuse castor oil. And returning to the fair, he swallowed down a glass of vodka with pepper and salt, and again began eating sausage and poor-quality bread, drinking tea, unboiled water, sour cabbage soup – but still he was unable to quench his thirst. Acquaintances invited him to “refresh himself with some beer” – and he went. The *kvas** seller yelled:

“Have some *kvas*, it's a kick in a glass! A kopek a time, the number one lemonade!”

And he stopped the *kvas* seller.

“He-ere's ice cream!” cried the tenor voice of a bald, sweating ice-cream seller, a fat-bellied old man in a red shirt.

And from an ivory spoon he ate ice cream that was almost like snow, which made for a cruel ache in the temples.

The dusty common, pounded by feet, wheels and hoofs, and strewn with litter and dung, was already emptying – the fair was dispersing. But as if to spite somebody, Tikhon Ilyich continued to keep the unsold horses in the heat and the dust, continued to sit on the cart. Good Lord, what a land! Black earth an *arshin** and a half deep, and what earth! But not five years go by without a famine. The town is famed throughout Russia for its trade in grain – but only a hundred people in the whole town have enough of that grain to eat. And the fair itself? Beggars, simpletons, blind men, cripples – and all the kind that make you feel scared and wretched just looking at them – a whole regiment of them!

Tikhon Ilyich drove home on a hot, sunny morning along the Old Highway. He drove first through the town and the market, then across the shallow little river, soured by the leatherworks, and, beyond the river, uphill, through the Chornaya Sloboda. He had once worked at the market, along with his brother, in Matorin's store. Now everyone at the market bowed to him. His childhood had passed in the Sloboda – on this hillock, amidst sunken daub huts with rotten, blackened roofs, amidst the dung that they dry in front of them for fuel, amidst rubbish, cinders and rags... There was no trace now of the hut where Tikhon Ilyich had been born and grown up. In its place stood a new little plank-built house with a rusty sign over the entrance:

“Ecclesiastical Tailor Sobolev”. Everything else in the Sloboda was as it had been: pigs and chickens beside the doorsteps; tall poles by the gates, and sheep’s horns on the poles; the large, pale faces of lace-makers peering out from behind pots of flowers through tiny little windows; barefooted little boys with one brace over their shoulders flying a paper kite with a bast tail; quiet, tow-haired little girls by the *zavalinkas** playing their favourite game – dolls’ funerals... At the top of the hill, amidst fields, he crossed himself in the direction of the graveyard, behind whose fence, amongst old trees, there had once been the terrifying grave of the wealthy skinflint Zykov, which had fallen in at the very moment they had finished filling it up. And after giving it some thought, he turned the horse towards the gates of the graveyard.

By those big, white gates sat an old woman knitting a stocking, and looking like an old woman from a fairytale – with glasses, with a beak, with sunken lips – one of the widows who lived in the almshouse at the graveyard.

“Hello, granny!” cried Tikhon Ilyich, tying the horse to a pillar by the gates. “Can you look after my horse?”

The old woman stood up, bowed low and mumbled:

“I can, sir.”

Tikhon Ilyich took off his cap, rolled his eyes up towards his forehead and crossed himself once more in the direction of the painting of the Assumption of the Virgin above the gates, and added:

“Are there many of you here now?”

“A full dozen old women, sir.”

“Well, and do you argue a lot?”

“We do, sir...”

And Tikhon Ilyich set off unhurriedly between trees and crosses down the path leading to the old wooden church. At the fair he had had his hair cut, his beard evened up and shortened – and he looked much younger. He was made to look younger by his thinness after the illness. He was made to look younger by his tan – only the trimmed triangles on his temples had the whiteness of delicate skin. He was made to look younger by his memories of childhood and youth, and by his new canvas cap. He walked and gazed from side to side... How short and muddled life is! And what peace and quiet all around in this sunny calm, inside the fence of the old cemetery! A hot wind was

rushing through the tops of the light trees, thinned out prematurely by the intense heat and allowing the cloudless sky to show through, and it swung their transparent, light shade over the stones and the monuments. And when it dropped, the hot sun warmed the flowers and grasses, the birds in the bushes sang sweetly, and the butterflies, in sweet languor, were dead still on the hot pathways... On one cross Tikhon Ilyich read:

What dreadful quit-rents

Death gathers from men!

But there was nothing dreadful around him. He walked, remarking even with a sort of pleasure that the graveyard was growing, that a lot of new mausoleums had appeared among the ancient gravestones in the form of coffins on legs, of heavy, cast-iron slabs, and of huge, crude, already rotting crosses, of which it was full. “Passed away on 7th November 1819 at five in the morning” – such inscriptions were terrible to read: death at the dawn of an inclement autumn day in an old provincial town is not a nice thing! But nearby, between the trees, shone the whiteness of a plaster angel with its eyes fixed upon the sky, and hammered out in golden letters on the plinth beneath it was: “Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord!” On the iron monument of some Collegiate Assessor,* made iridescent by bad weather and time, could be made out the verses:

He served the Tsar most honestly,

He loved his neighbour heartily,

Was honoured by his fellow men...

Those verses seemed false to Tikhon Ilyich. But – where is the truth? A human jawbone is lying about here in the bushes, looking as if it were made of dirty wax – all that remains of a man... But is it all? Flowers, ribbons, crosses, coffins and bones in the ground are rotting – all is death and decay! But Tikhon Ilyich walked on and read: “So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption.”*

All the inscriptions spoke touchingly of quiet and rest, of tenderness, of a love which seemingly does not and will not exist on earth, of