



The Meeting

ONE DAY VASILY IVANOVICH WAS STROLLING ALONG Tverskoy Boulevard.¹

Vasily Ivanovich was a landowner from Kazan,² about fifty years old, of short stature, but so portly that it was amusing just to look at him. He had a broad, ruddy face and small, gray eyes. He was dressed like a landowner: he wore a white downy cap with a large peak; a blue tail-coat with bright buttons, made for him in Kazan by a one-eyed tailor, whose sign for the last forty years proclaims that he has “recently arrived from Petersburg”; pea-green trousers, which undulated pleasantly in picturesque folds around his boots. His necktie was fastened with an enormous clasp on the back of his head; and on his vest he wore a light-blue beaded watch chain.

Vasily Ivanovich walked along Tverskoy Boulevard and smiled craftily to himself at the thought of all the enjoyments that Moscow

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1. The most fashionable of Moscow’s grand boulevards.
 2. Kazan is the capital and largest city of the Republic of Tatarstan at the confluence of the Volga and Kazanka Rivers.

offered in such great profusion. Really, if you just consider, there was the English Club, the German Club, the Commercial Club—and all the card tables at which one could sit down and observe all the people playing cards for high and low stakes. And then there was lotto where the landowners played, and billiards with its mustachioed players and jovial scorekeepers. What a delight! And what about the gypsies, the comedies, the bear hunts with mastiffs at the Rogozhskaya Gate, and then the excursions outside of town, and what about the theater, the theater, where such beautiful women dance and where their little feet perform such steps that you can hardly believe your eyes. Here Vasily Ivanovich remembered his imposing, portly spouse, left behind to tend the household in their Kazan village, and he smiled definitively with the look of a desperate rake.

At the very same time Ivan Vasilievich was also strolling along Tverskoy Boulevard. He was a young man, who had just returned from abroad. Ivan Vasilievich was wearing an English raincoat without a waist; his trousers had been made for him at Chevreuil's; the walking stick, which he used, was purchased at Verdier's. His hair was cut in the style of the Middle Ages, and traces of an awful beard were still visible on his chin.

Previously, when a young Russian returned from Paris, he brought back the appearance of a men's barber, several bright vests, several worn witticisms, various unbearable affectations, and intolerable authoritative bragging. Thanks be to God that all of that has passed. But now things have gone to the other extreme: our young people are trying to appear deep in thought. They study political economy, worry about the Russian aristocracy, concern themselves with the welfare of the state, and—what do you think? While abroad these young people become Russian, even too Russian; they think only about Russia, the majesty of Russia and Russia's deficiencies, and they return to their motherland with some strange enthusiasm, sometimes ridiculous and inappropriate, but at least excusable, and in any case more praiseworthy than their former insignificance. A worthy representative of young Russia, Ivan Vasilievich traveled all

over Europe, and heeding the political chatter of mixed classes of society, scrutinizing the petty passions, concealed by the vociferous names of common good, freedom, and enlightenment, he realized how great and beautiful in many respects his fatherland was; since that time there arose in him a warm, although unconscious love for his homeland, and since then he began to take pride in himself and before the entire world that he had been born a Russian. Separate from this feeling, moreover, and similar to that of other of our countrymen, he brought back from abroad a fervid enthusiasm for the Parisian opera and tender recollections of Parisian suburban balls.

And so, Ivan Vasilievich was strolling along Tverskoy Boulevard, observing with astonishment the brilliant attire of Muscovite women of fashion, the fantastic livery of unshaven lackeys, and mumbling to himself “*Nel furor della tempesta*,” the wonderful aria from Bellini’s opera *Il pirate*.³ “Good Lord,” he thought, “what a pity that there is so little activity and life here. . . . ‘*Nel furor!*’ It’s a different story in Paris . . . ‘*della tempesta*. Ah, Paris, Paris! Where are your grisettes, your theaters, and balls given by Musard? ‘*Nel furor.*’ How I recall: Lablache, Grisi, Fanny Elssler, while here they merely ask what rank you have. You say: Provincial Secretary—and no one even wants to look at you . . . ‘*della tempesta!*’”⁴

At that moment he noticed a strange massive figure in a white cap with pea-green curtains around his legs, heading right for him. His ruddy smiling face seemed familiar. “Bah! Why it’s Vasily Ivanych,” he thought, “our neighbor in our Kazan village of Mordasy.⁵ Three hundred serfs! He’s a good landlord. He’s afraid of his wife. During name-day celebrations he gets tipsy and then sings Russian songs and sometimes even dances. He’s probably seen my father.”

3. *The Pirate* is an opera by Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35) written in 1827. The title of the aria is “In the fury of the storm.”

4. Philippe Musard (1792–1859) was a French composer, important to the development and popularity of the promenade concert. Luigi Lablache (1794–1858) was an Italian opera singer. Giulia Grisi (1811–69) was an Italian opera singer. Fanny Elssler (1810–84) was an Austrian ballerina.

5. A village located not far from the town of Kazan.

“Hello, Vasily Ivanovich,” the young man said politely, nodding his head.

Vasily Ivanovich stopped and looked at him with uncertainty.

“Bah, bah, bah!” he cried at last in his stentorian voice. “Bah, bah, bah, Vanya, Vanyusha, Vanechka!⁶ Fancy meeting you here!” And grasping hold of the frightened dandy with his huge hands, Vasily Ivanovich began to choke him with cumbersome kisses, paying no attention to the crowd of strolling gapers. “Well, my friend, you look just like a scarecrow! Turn around, please . . . once more. . . That’s it. Is this the latest fashion? For all the world, you look just like a sack of flour. Splendid, brother! Just splendid. Where are you coming from?”

“I was abroad.”

“Aha! Where, if may I ask, have you been?”

“In Paris for six months.”

“Aha!”

“In Germany, Italy. . .”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes. . . Fine . . . and, if I may ask, did you spend a lot of money?”

“What, sir?”

“Money, sir, how much did you squander?”

“Enough, sir.”

“Indeed. . . And your father, my neighbor, what will he say about it? Why, old folks are not very accommodating to young folks’ extravagance. Besides, it’s been a bad year. Perhaps you’ve heard that your father’s buckwheat took a beating from the hail?”

“My father wrote to tell me, sir. I’m planning to visit him soon.”

“It’s a good idea to console the old fellow. Ah . . . and if I may ask, what rank do you hold?”

“There it is!” thought the young man.

“The twelfth class,” he replied reluctantly. . . .⁷

“Hmm . . . not very high. . . Are you retired by any chance?”

6. An assortment of diminutives for Ivan.

7. The Table of Ranks was a formal list of fourteen positions and ranks in the military, government, and court of imperial Russia, introduced by Peter the Great in 1722.

“Yes, indeed.”

“Right! You young people have taken it into your heads to avoid the service. You’ve become too clever, don’t you see? And now, if I may ask, what do you intend to do, sir? Huh?”

“I’d like to have a look at Russia, to get to know her.”

“What, sir?”

“I’d like to study my motherland. . . .”

“What? What? What?”

“I intend to study my motherland.”

“Excuse me, I don’t understand. . . . You want to study it?”

“To study my motherland . . . to study Russia.”

“And how, my friend, will you study Russia?”

“Two ways . . . in relation to her antiquity and her nationality, which, by the way, are closely connected to one another. By analyzing our monuments, our beliefs and legends, and listening carefully to all the echoes of our olden times, I will succeed . . . excuse me, we will succeed . . . we, my comrades and I . . . we will achieve an understanding of our national spirit, our customs, and demands, and we will know from what source our national enlightenment should come, using the example of Europe, but not accepting it as a model.”

“In my opinion,” said Vasily Ivanovich, “I’ve found you the best means of studying Russia—get married. Forget these empty words and come along with me to Kazan. Your rank is not very high, but you are an officer; you have an estate: you’ll easily find a match. Our crop of eligible maidens, thank the Lord, is plentiful. . . . You should get married, really, and live with your father. It’s time to think about him. Hey, my friend, really and truly! You may think it’s boring to live in the country. Not at all. In the morning you walk in the fields, have a bite to eat, eat dinner at home, take a snooze, and visit your neighbors. . . . And then the name-day feasts, the hunts with your dogs, your own music, the fairs. . . . Huh? That’s life, my friend. What’s Paris? The main thing is having children, growing your crop of rye, gathering in so much grain in your barn that you won’t have time to thresh it all, and you’ll have so much money in your pocket

that you won't be able to count it all—that's the way, in my opinion, you'll really get to know Russia, eh?"

"Of course," said Ivan Vasilievich, "that wouldn't be bad at all."

"Do you know what? You're going to Kazan?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"The sooner, the better."

"Splendid! How will you go, if I may ask?"

"I myself still don't know."

"You don't have your own carriage?"

"No, sir."

"Excellent. We'll go together."

"How's that, sir?"

"We'll go together. I'll take you to your father's place. . . . I assume that you have no extra cash?"

"Excuse me, I don't understand. . . ."

"Don't put on airs! Tell the truth. . . ."

"As a matter of fact, I'm short of funds at the moment."

"Well, well, well. . . . There, you see. It's high time! I'll take you and reckon up with your father. . . ."

"Permit me. . . ."

"What now?"

"I'm embarrassed, sir."

"What nonsense! After all, we're Russians. Stop playing the dandy, my friend. I don't stand on ceremony. Well, shall we shake on it?"

"I'd be much obliged to you."

"Well, then good. Splendid! Listen now, do you know how we'll go?"

"In a coach?"

"No."

"In a carriage?"

"No."

"In a cart?"

"No, again."

"In a wagon?"

“Not at all.”

“Then in what?”

Here Vasily Ivanovich smiled cunningly and uttered triumphantly:

“In a tarantas!”⁸

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8. A four-wheeled horse-drawn vehicle on a long longitudinal frame. It was widely used in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century.