

Singing in the Village

Leo Tolstoy

1909

Voices and an accordion sounded as if close by, though through the mist nobody could be seen. It was a work-day morning, and I was surprised to hear music.

"Oh, it's the recruits' leave-taking," thought I, remembering that I had heard something a few days before about five men being drawn from our village. Involuntarily attracted by the merry song, I went in the direction whence it proceeded.

As I approached the singers, the sound of song and accordion suddenly stopped. The singers, that is the lads who were leave-taking, entered the double-fronted brick cottage belonging to the father of one of them. Before the door stood a small group of women, girls, and children.

While I was finding out whose sons were going, and why they had entered that cottage, the lads themselves, accompanied by their mothers and sisters, came out at the door. There were five of them: four bachelors and one married man. Our village is near the town where nearly all these conscripts had worked. They were dressed town-fashion, evidently wearing their best clothes: peajackets, new caps, and high, showy boots. Conspicuous among them was a young fellow, well built though not tall, with a sweet, merry, expressive face, a small beard and mustache just beginning to sprout, and bright hazel eyes. As he came out, he at once took a big, expensive-looking accordion that was hanging over his shoulders and, having bowed to me, started playing the merry tune of "Bárynya," running his fingers nimbly over the keys and keeping exact time, as he moved with rhythmic step jauntily down the road.

Beside him walked a thick-set, fair-haired lad, also of medium height. He looked gaily from side to side, and sang second with spirit, in harmony with the first singer. He was the married one. These two walked ahead of the other three, who were also well dressed, and not remarkable in any way except that one of them was tall.

Together with the crowd I followed the lads. All their songs were merry, and no expression of grief was heard while the procession was going along; but as soon as we came to the next house at which the lads were to be treated, the lamentations of the women began. It was difficult to make out what they were saying; only a word here and there could be distinguished: "death ... father and mother ... native land ..."; and after every verse, the woman who led the chanting took a deep breath, and burst out into long-drawn moans, followed by hysterical laughter. The women were the mothers and sisters of the conscripts. Beside the lamentations of these relatives, one heard the admonitions of their friends.

"Now then, Matryóna, that's enough! You must be tired out," I heard one woman say, consoling another who was lamenting.

The lads entered the cottage. I remained outside, talking with a peasant acquaintance, Vasíly Oréhof, a former pupil of mine. His son, one of the five, was the married man who had been singing second as he went along.

"Well," I said, "it is a pity!"

"What's to be done? Pity or not, one has to serve."

And he told me of his domestic affairs. He had three sons: the eldest was living at home, the second was now being taken, and a third (who, like the second, had gone away to work) was contributing dutifully to the support of the home. The one who was leaving had evidently not sent home much.

"He has married a townswoman. His wife is not fit for our work. He is a lopped-off branch and thinks only of keeping himself. To be sure it's a pity, but it can't be helped!"

While we were talking, the lads came out into the street, and the lamentations, shrieks, laughter, and adjurations recommenced. After standing about for some five minutes, the procession moved on with songs and accordion accompaniment. One could not help marveling at the energy and spirit of the player, as he beat time accurately, stamped his foot, stopped short, and then after a pause again took up the melody most merrily, exactly on the right beat, while he gazed around with his kind, hazel eyes. Evidently he had a real and great talent for music.

I looked at him, and (so at least it seemed to me) he felt abashed when he met my eyes, and with a twitch of his brows he turned away, and again burst out with even more spirit than before. When we reached the fifth and last of the cottages, the lads entered, and I followed them. All five of them were made to sit round a table covered with a cloth, on which were bread and vódka. The host, the man I had been talking to, who was now to take leave of his married son, poured out the vódka and handed it round. The lads hardly drank at all (at most a quarter of a glass) or even handed it back after just raising it to their lips. The hostess cut some bread, and served slices round to eat with the vódka.

While I was looking at the lads, a woman, dressed in clothes that seemed to me strange and incongruous, got down from the top of the oven, close to where I sat. She wore a light green dress (silk, I think) with fashionable trimmings, and high-heeled boots. Her fair hair was arranged in quite the modern style, like a large round cap, and she wore big, ring-shaped, gold earrings. Her face was neither sad nor cheerful, but looked as if she were offended.

After getting down, she went out into the passage, clattering with the heels of her new boots and paying no heed to the lads. All about this woman—her clothing, the offended expression of her face, and above all her earrings—was so foreign to the surroundings that I could not understand how she had come to be on the top of Vasíly Oréhof's oven. I asked a woman sitting near me who she was.

"Vasíly's daughter-in-law; she has been a housemaid," was the answer.

The host began offering vódka a third time, but the lads refused, rose, said grace, thanked the hosts, and went out.

In the street, the lamentations recommenced at once. The first to raise her voice was a very old woman with a bent back. She lamented in such a peculiarly piteous voice, and wailed so, that the women kept soothing the sobbing, staggering old creature, and supported her by her elbows.

"Who is she?" I inquired.

"Why, it's his granny; Vasíly's mother, that is."

The old woman burst into hysterical laughter and fell into the arms of the women who supported her, and just then the procession started again, and again the accordion and the merry voices struck up their tune. At the end of the village the procession was overtaken by the carts which were to carry the conscripts to the District Office. The weeping and wailing stopped. The accordion-player, getting more and more elated, bending his head to one side and resting on one foot, turned out the toes of the other and stamped with it, while his fingers produced brilliant *fioritures*, and exactly at the right instant the bold, high, merry tones of his song, and the second of Vasíly's son, again chimed in. Old and young, and especially the children who surrounded the crowd, and I with them, fixed their eyes admiringly on the singer.

"He is clever, the rascal!" said one of the peasants.

"Sorrow weeps, and sorrow sings!" replied another.

At that moment one of the young fellows whom we were seeing off—the tall one—came up with long, energetic strides, and stooped to speak to the one who played the accordion.

"What a fine fellow," I thought; "they will put him in the Guards." I did not know who he was or what house he belonged to.

"Whose son is that one? That gallant fellow?" I asked a little old man, pointing to the fine lad.

The old man raised his cap and bowed to me, but did not hear my question.

"What did you say?" asked he.

I had not recognized him, but as soon as he spoke I knew him at once. He is a hard-working, good peasant who, as often happens, seems specially marked out for misfortune: first, two horses were stolen from him, then his house burnt down, and then his wife died. I had not seen Prokófey for a long time, and remembered him as a bright red-haired man of medium height; whereas he was now not red, but quite gray-haired, and small.

"Ah, Prokófey, it's you!" I said. "I was asking whose son that fine fellow is—that one who has just spoken to Alexander?"

"That one?" Prokófey replied, pointing with a motion of his head to the tall lad. He shook his head and mumbled something I did not understand.

"I'm asking whose son the lad is?" I repeated, and turned to look at Prokófey.

His face was puckered, and his jaw trembled.

"He's mine!" he muttered, and, turning away and hiding his face in his hand, began to whimper like a child.

And only then, after the two words, "He's mine!" spoken by Prokófey, did I realize, not only in my mind but in my whole being, the horror of what was taking place before my eyes that memorable misty morning. All the disjointed, incomprehensible, strange things I had seen suddenly acquired a simple, clear, and terrible significance. I became painfully ashamed of having looked on as at an interesting spectacle. I stopped, conscious of having acted ill, and I turned to go home.

And to think that these things are at the present moment being done to tens of thousands of men all over Russia, and have been done, and will long continue to be done, to the meek, wise, and saintly Russian people, who are so cruelly and treacherously deceived!

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