

THOUGHTAUDIO



THE HORSE STEALERS

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## THE HORSE STEALERS

**A** HOSPITAL assistant, called Yergunov, an empty-headed fellow, known throughout the district as a great braggart and drunkard, was returning one evening in Christmas week from the hamlet of Ryepino, where he had been to make some purchases for the hospital. So that he might get home in good time and not be late, the doctor lent him his very best horse.

At first, it had been a still day, but at eight o'clock that night a violent snowstorm arose, and when he was only about four miles from home Yergunov completely lost his way.

He did not know where to drive, he did not know the road, and he drove at random, hoping that the horse would find the way. Two hours passed; the horse was exhausted, he himself was chilled, and he began to imagine that he was not going home, but back towards Ryepino. At last, above the uproar of the storm, he heard the far distant barking of a dog, and a murky red blur came into sight ahead of him. Yergunov soon discerned the outlines of a high gate, then a long fence with their points peeking above the snowdrifts, and beyond the fence there stood the slanting crane of a well. The wind drove away the mist of snow from before his eyes, and where there had been a red blur, there sprang up a small, squat modest house with a steep thatched roof. Of the three small windows, one was lighted and covered on the inside with something red.

“What sort of place was this?” Yergunov asked himself. Then he remembered that to the right of the road, about four miles from the hospital, there was Andrey Tchirikov's tavern. He remembered, too, that this Tchirikov, who had lately been killed by some sledge drivers, had left a wife and a daughter called Lyubka, who had come to the hospital two years before as a patient. The inn had a bad reputation, and to visit it late in the evening, and especially with someone else's horse, was not free from risk. But there was no way around it. Yergunov fumbled

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in his knapsack for his revolver, and coughing sternly, tapped at the window frame with his whip.

“Hey! Who is inside?” he cried. “Let me come in and get warm!”

Then with a growling bark, a black dog appeared under the horse’s feet, then a white one emerged, and then another black one — there must have been a dozen of them. Yergunov looked to see which dog was the biggest, and then swung his whip and lashed it with all his might. The long-legged dog turned its sharp muzzle upwards and shrieked a shrill, piercing howl.

Yergunov stood for a long while tapping at the window. At last, the hoar frost on the trees near the house glowed red, and a muffled female figure appeared with a lantern in her hands.

“Let me in to get warm,” said Yergunov. “I was driving to the hospital, and I have lost my way. It’s such bad weather, God preserve us. Don’t be afraid; we are your own people.”

“All my own people are at home, and we didn’t invite strangers,” said the figure grimly. “Why are you knocking? The gate is not locked.”

Yergunov drove into the yard and stopped at the steps.

“Bid your laborer take my horse, old woman,” he said.

“I am not an old woman,” she replied.

Indeed, she was not an old woman. When she lifted the lantern the light fell on her face, and Yergunov saw young black eyebrows, and recognized Lyubka.

“There are no laborers about now,” she said as she went back into the house. “Some are drunk and asleep, and some have gone to Ryepino and left this morning for the Christmas holiday.”

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As he fastened his horse in the shed, Yergunov heard a neigh, and distinguished in the darkness another horse, and felt on its back a Cossack saddle. He surmised that there must be someone else in the house besides the old woman and her daughter. For greater security, Yergunov unsaddled his horse, and when he went into the house, he took with him both his purchases and his saddle.

The first room he went into was large and hot and smelt of freshly washed floors. A short, lean peasant of about forty, with a slight, fair beard, wearing a dark blue shirt, was sitting at the table under the holy images. It was Kalashnikov, an errant scoundrel and horse stealer, whose father and uncle kept a tavern in Bogalyovka, and disposed of their stolen horses where they could. He too had been to the hospital more than once, not for medical treatment, but to see the doctor about horses — to ask whether the doctor had one for sale, and whether he would like to swop his bay mare for a dun-colored gelding. Now his head was pomaded, and a silver earring glittered in his ear, and altogether he had a holiday air. Frowning and dropping his lower lip, he was looking intently at a large, dog-eared picture book. Another peasant lay stretched on the floor near the stove; his head, his shoulders, and his chest were covered with a sheepskin — he was probably asleep. Beside his new boots, with shining bits of metal on the heels, there were two dark pools of melted snow.

Seeing the hospital assistant, Kalashnikov greeted him.

“Yes, it is terrible weather,” said Yergunov, rubbing his chilled knees with his open hands. “The snow is up to one’s neck. I am soaked to the skin, and I believe my revolver is, too.”

He took out his revolver, looked it over, and put it back in his knapsack. But the revolver made no impression at all; the peasant went on looking at the book.

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“Yes, it is frightful weather,” continued Yergunov. “I lost my way, and if it had not been for the dog’s barking, I believe it would have been my death. That would have been a ghastly spectacle. By the way, where are the women?”

“The old woman has gone to Ryepino, and the girl is getting supper ready,” answered Kalashnikov.

Silence followed. Yergunov, shivering and gasping, breathed on his hands, huddled up, and made a show of being cold and exhausted. The angry dogs still could be heard howling outside. It was dreary weather.

“You come from Bogalyovka, don’t you?” he asked the peasant sternly.

“Yes, from Bogalyovka,” answered the peasant.

To while away the time Yergunov began to think about Bogalyovka. It was a big village and it lay in a deep ravine, so that when one drove along the highway on a moonlight night and looked down into the dark ravine and then up at the sky, it seemed as though the moon were hanging over a bottomless abyss as if it were the end of the world. The path going down was steep, winding, and so narrow that when one drove down to Bogalyovka on account of some epidemic or to vaccinate the people, one had to shout at the top of one’s voice, or whistle all the way, for if one met a cart coming up one could not pass. The peasants of Bogalyovka had the reputation of being good gardeners and horse stealers. They had well stocked gardens. In spring the whole village was buried in white cherry blossoms, and in the summer, they sold cherries at three kopecks a pail. One could also pay three kopecks and pick as many as one liked. Their women were handsome and well fed, they were fond of finery, and never did anything even on working days, but spent all their time sitting on the ledge in front of their houses and searching in each other’s heads.

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At last, there was the sound of footsteps. Lyubka, a girl of twenty, with bare feet and a red dress, came into the room. She looked sideways at Yergunov and walked twice from one end of the room to the other. She did not move simply, but with tiny steps, thrusting her chest forward; evidently, she enjoyed walking about with her bare feet on the freshly washed floor, and had taken off her shoes for that purpose.

Kalashnikov laughed at something and beckoned her to him with his finger. She went to the table, and he showed her a picture of the Prophet Elijah, who, was driving three horses abreast as he dashed up to the sky. Lyubka put her elbow on the table; her braids fell across her shoulders — long chestnut braids tied with a red ribbon at the end almost touching the floor. She, too, smiled.

“A splendid, magnificent picture,” said Kalashnikov. “Breathtaking,” he repeated, and motioned with his hands as though he wanted to take the reins instead of Elijah.

The wind howled in the stove; something growled and squeaked as though a big dog had strangled a rat.

“Ugh! The unclean spirits are in the air!” said Lyubka.

“That’s the wind,” said Kalashnikov; and after a pause he raised his eyes to Yergunov and asked, “What is your learned opinion, Osip Vassilyitch — are there devils in this world or not?”

“What’s one to say, brother?” said Yergunov shrugging his shoulders. “If one reasons from a scientific point of view, of course there are no devils, for it’s a superstition; but if one looks at it simply, as you and I do now, there are devils. I have seen a great deal in my life. When I finished my studies I served as a medical assistant in the army in a regiment of the Dragoons, and I have been in the war, of course. I have a medal and a decoration from the Red Cross, but after

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the treaty of San Stefano, I returned to Russia and went into the service of the Zemstvo. In consequence of my many travels throughout the world, I have seen more than many others could have dreamed. I have seen devils, too; that is, not devils with horns and a tail — that is all nonsense — but to speak precisely, the darkness and evil inside of men.”

“Where?” asked Kalashnikov.

“In various places. There is no need to go far. For example, last year I met an evil one here — speak of him not at night — near this very inn. I remember I was driving to Golyshino; I was going there to vaccinate the people. Of course, as usual, I had the racing droshky and a horse, and all the necessary paraphernalia, and, what’s more, I had an expensive watch and all my valuables, so I was on guard as I drove along for fear of mischance. It is well known that there are many itinerants of all sorts on this road. As I came up to the Zmeinoy Ravine — damnation take it — and began my downward decent, all at once someone suddenly appears in front of me — he was a menacing fellow! Black hair, black eyes, and his whole face looked smutted with soot. He comes straight up to the horse and takes hold of the left rein. ‘Stop!’ he shouted. He looked at the horse, then at me, and then dropped the reins, and in a brisk voice he asks, ‘Where are you going?’ He bares his teeth as he grinned, and his eyes were spiteful looking.

“‘Ah, you are a strange customer! I am going to vaccinate the people for smallpox,’ I said. ‘What is that to you?’ ‘Well, if that’s so,’ he says, ‘vaccinate me.’ He uncovered his arm and thrust it under my nose. Of course, I did not bandy words with him; I just vaccinated him to be rid of him. Afterwards I looked at my lancet and it had gone rusty.”

The peasant who was asleep near the stove suddenly turned over and flung off the sheepskin. To his great surprise, Yergunov recognized the stranger he had

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met that day at Zmeinoy Ravine. This peasant's hair, beard, and eyes were black as soot; his face was swarthy; and, to add to the effect, there was a black spot the size of a lentil on his right cheek. He looked mockingly at the hospital assistant and said, "I did take hold of the left rein — that was so; but about the smallpox vaccine you are lying, sir. There was not a word said about the smallpox vaccine between us."

Yergunov was disconcerted.

"I'm not talking about you," he said.

The dark-skinned peasant had never been to the hospital, and Yergunov did not know who he was or where he came from; and now, looking at him, he made up his mind that the man must be a gypsy. The peasant got up, and stretching and yawning loudly, went up to Lyubka and Kalashnikov, and sat down beside them, and he, too, began looking at the book. His sleepy face softened, and a look of envy came into it.

"Look, Merik," Lyubka said to him; "get me horses such as these and I will drive to heaven."

"Sinners can't drive to heaven," said Kalashnikov. "That's for those with holiness."

Then Lyubka laid the table and brought in a big piece of fat bacon, salted cucumbers, a wooden platter of boiled meat cut up into little pieces, and then a frying pan, in which there were sausages and cabbage sputtering. A cut-glass decanter of vodka, which diffused a smell of orange peel all over the room when it was poured, was also put on the table.

Yergunov was annoyed that Kalashnikov and the dark fellow Merik talked together while they took no notice of him at all, behaving exactly as though he



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were not in the room. He wanted to talk to them too, to brag, to drink, to have a good meal, and have Lyubka treat him as she did them. Although there were signs of her acceptance as when she sat down near him while they were at supper, and as though by accident, she would brush against him with her shoulders. She was a healthy, active girl, always laughing and never still. She would sit down and then get up, and when she was sitting down, she would turn her face to him and then would swivel around, turning her back to him like a fidgety child, and never failed to brush against him with her elbows or her knees.

He was also displeased that the peasants drank only a glass each and no more, and this made it awkward for him to drink more. Yet he could not refrain from taking a second glass, and then a third, and then he ate all the sausage. He brought himself to flatter the peasants, so that they might accept him as part of their faction instead of holding him at arm's length.

“You are a fine set of fellows in Bogalyovka!” he said and wagged his head.

“In what way are we fine fellows?” enquired Kalashnikov.

“Why, about horses, for instance. You are fine fellows at stealing them!” responded Yergunov.

“H'm! fine fellows, you call them. They are nothing but thieves and drunkards,” retorted Kalashnikov.

“They have had their day, but it is over,” joined Merik after a pause. “Now they have only Filya left, and he is blind.”

“Yes, there is no one but Filya,” said Kalashnikov with a sigh. “Reckoning it, he must be seventy; the German settlers knocked out one of his eyes, and he does not see well with the other. It is a cataract. In the old days the police officers would shout as soon as they saw him, ‘Hey, you Shamil!’ and all the peasants

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called him that too — he was Shamil all over the place; and now his only name is One-eyed Filya. But he was a fine fellow! He and Lyubka's father, Andrey Grigoritch crept into Rozhnovo one night — there were cavalry regiments stationed there — and they carried off nine of the soldiers' horses, the very best of them. They weren't frightened of the sentry, and in the morning, they sold all the horses for twenty rubles to the gypsy Afonka. Yes, that is what I call fine fellows. Nowadays, a man only contrives to steal a horse whose rider is drunk or asleep and has no fear of God, and then slinks off and goes a hundred and fifty miles away with the horse, and haggles at the market until the policeman catches him — the fool. There is no honor in it; it is simply a disgrace! They have become a paltry set of people.”

“What about Merik?” asked Lyubka.

“Merik is not one of us,” said Kalashnikov. “He is a Harkov man from Mizhiritch. But he is a bold fellow, that's the truth; there's no denying that he is a fine fellow.”

Lyubka looked slyly and cheerfully at Merik, and said, “It wasn't for nothing they dipped him in a hole in the ice.”

“How was that?” asked Yergunov.

“It was like this,” said Merik, and he laughed. “Filya carried off three horses from the Samoylenka tenants, but they turned and pounced only upon me. There were ten of the tenants at Samoylenka, and with their laborers there were thirty altogether, and all of them Molokans. So, one of them says to me at the market, ‘Come and have a look, Merik; we have brought some new horses from the fair.’ I was interested, of course, and I went with them. Then whole lot of them, thirty men, tied my hands behind me and led me to the river. ‘We'll show you fine horses,’ they shouted. There was already one hole in the ice, and then they cut

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another beside it seven feet away. Then, to be sure, they took a cord and put a noose around my chest, and tied a crooked stick to the other end, long enough to reach both holes. Then they thrust the stick in the ice and dragged it to the other hole, pulling me along as they did so. I went plop into the hole in the ice just as I was, in my fur coat and my high boots, while they stood and shoved me, one with his foot and one with his stick, and then dragged me under the ice and pulled me out of the other hole. At first I was in a fever from the cold,” Merik went on, “but when they pulled me out, I was helpless and lay in the snow, and the Molokans stood around me and hit me with sticks. It hurt fearfully. After they beat me, they went away. Everything on me was frozen, my clothes were covered with ice. I got up, but I couldn’t move. Thank God a woman drove by and gave me a lift.”

Meanwhile Yergunov had drunk six glasses of vodka; his heart felt lighter, his cheeks grew bright red, his mind whirling in imagery, and he longed to tell some extraordinary, wonderful story to show that he too was a bold fellow and not afraid of anything.

“I’ll tell you what happened to me in Penza Province,” he began.

Either because he had drunk a great deal and was more than tipsy, or perhaps because he had been detected in a lie, the peasants did not take the slightest notice of him. What was worse, they spoke among themselves with candor and friendly joviality in his presence that made him feel uncomfortably left out of the conversation. They were cold to him and never took notice of his attempts to join in their banter.

**XOX**

Kalashnikov had the dignified manners of a sedate and sensible man; he spoke weightily, and made the sign of the cross over his mouth every time he yawned,

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and no one could have believed that this was a heartless thief who had stripped poor mortals of their possessions, who had already been twice in prison, who had been sentenced by the commune to exile in Siberia, and had been brought up by his father and uncle, who were greater thieves and rogues than he was. Merik gave off the air of bravado, and Lyubka and Kalashnikov deeply admired him. He perceived himself as a very fine, debonair fellow, putting his arms akimbo and squaring his chest as he spoke, and stretched in such a way that the bench creaked under him.

After supper, Kalashnikov prayed to the holy image without getting up from his seat and shook hands with Merik; Merik prayed too and in turn shook Kalashnikov's hand. Lyubka cleared the table, and then served some peppermint biscuits, dried nuts and pumpkin seeds, and placed two bottles of sweet wine on the table.

“The kingdom of heaven and peace everlasting to Andrey Grigoritch,” said Kalashnikov, clinking glasses with Merik. “When he was alive, we used to gather here or at his brother Martin's, and — my word! my word! what men, what talks! We had such remarkable conversations! Martin used to be here, and Filya, and Fyodor Stukotey (Stu-ko-tey). It was all done in style; it was all in keeping with a great union of minds. What joy we had! What laughter we shared; what elation there was in those times!”

Lyubka went out and soon afterwards came back wearing a green kerchief and beads.

“Merik, look at what Kalashnikov brought me today,” she said.

She looked at herself in the mirror and tossed her head several times to make the beads jingle. Then she opened a chest and began taking out a cotton dress with red and blue flowers on it, and then a red one with flounces, which rustled

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and crackled like paper, and then another kerchief, dark blue, shot with many colors — and all these things she flaunted as she flung up her hands, laughing as though astonished that she had such treasures.

Kalashnikov tuned the balalaika (bala-la-i-ka) and began playing it, but Yergunov could not make out what sort of song he was singing, whether it was happy or melancholy, because at one moment it was so mournful, he wanted to cry, and in the next moment it would be joyful bringing a grin to his face. Merik suddenly jumped up and began tapping with his heels on the same spot, and then, brandishing his arms, he moved on his heels from the table to the stove, from the stove to the chest, then he bounded up as though he had been stung, clicked the heels of his boots together in the air, and began going round and round in a crouching position. Lyubka waved both her arms, uttered a desperate shriek and followed him. At first, she moved sideways like a snake, as though she wanted to stealthily sneak up on him and strike him from behind. She tapped rapidly with her bare heels as Merik had done with the heels of his boots, then she turned round and round like a top and crouched down, and her red dress was blown out like a bell. Merik, looking angrily at her, and showing his teeth in a grin, flew towards her in the same crouching posture as though he wanted to crush her with his terrible legs, while she jumped up, flung back her head, waving her arms like a large bird expanding its wings, floating across the room scarcely touching the floor.

“What a flame of a girl!” thought Yergunov, sitting on the chest watching the dance. “What fire! To give up everything for her would not be enough.”

He regretted that he was a hospital assistant, and not a simple peasant, that he wore a reefer coat and a chain with a gilt key on it instead of a blue shirt with a cord tied round the waist. Then he could boldly have sung, danced, flung both arms around Lyubka as Merik did.

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The sharp tapping, shouts, and whoops set the crockery ringing in the cupboard and the flames of the candles dancing.

The thread around Lyubka's neck broke and the beads were scattered all over the floor as the green kerchief slipped off. Lyubka was transformed into a red cloud flitting by with flashing black eyes, and it seemed as though in another second Merik's arms and legs would drop off.

Finally, Merik stamped for the last time, and stood still as though turned to stone. Exhausted and almost breathless, Lyubka sank into his bosom and leaned against him as against a post. He put his arms around her, and looking into her eyes, said tenderly and caressingly, as though in jest, "I will find where your mother's money is hidden, I will vanquish her, and after that I will set fire to the inn. People will think you have perished in the fire, and with her money I shall go with you go to Kuban. There I will keep droves of horses and flocks of sheep." XOX-END P02-02

Lyubka made no answer, but only looked at him with a guilty air and asked, "Is it nice in Kuban, Merik?"

He said nothing, but went to the chest, sat down, and sank into thought; most likely he was dreaming of Kuban.

"It's time for me to be going," said Kalashnikov, and begin getting up. "Filya must be waiting for me. Goodbye, Lyubka."

Yergunov went into the yard to see that Kalashnikov did not go off with his horse. The snowstorm persisted. White clouds were floating about the yard, their long tails clinging to the rough grass and the bushes, while on the other side of the fence in the open country huge giants in white robes with wide sleeves were whirling round and falling to the ground and getting up again to wave their arms and fight. The wind, the blowing wind! The bare birches and cherry trees, unable

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to endure its rude caresses, bowed low to the ground and wailed, "God, for what sin hast Thou bound us to the earth and will not let us go free?"

"Woah!" said Kalashnikov sternly, and he got on his horse; one half of the gate was opened, and by it lay a high snowdrift. "Well, get going!" shouted Kalashnikov to his horse. His short-legged nag set off, and at once sank to its stomach in the drift. Kalashnikov was white all over with snow, and soon vanished from sight.

When Yergunov went back into the room, Lyubka was creeping about the floor picking up her beads; Merik was not there.

"A splendid girl!" thought Yergunov, as he lay down on the bench and put his coat under his head. "Oh, if only Merik were not here."

Lyubka enthused him as she crept about the floor by the bench, and he thought that if Merik had not been there he would certainly have gotten up and embraced her. Lyubka collected her beads and went out. The candle burnt down, and the flame caught the paper in the candlestick. Yergunov laid his revolver and matches beside him and put out the candle. The light before the holy images flickered so much that it hurt his eyes, and patches of light danced on the ceiling, on the floor, and on the cupboard, and among them he had visions of Lyubka. In his dream, she was turning round like a top, and then became exhausted and breathless and fell into his arms as she did with Merik.

"Oh, if the devils would carry off Merik," he thought.

The little lamp gave a last flicker, spluttered, and went out. Someone, it must have been Merik, came into the room and sat down on the bench. He puffed at his pipe, and for an instant it lighted up his dark cheek. Yergunov's throat was irritated by the horrible fumes of the tobacco smoke.

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“What filthy tobacco you have — damnation! Take it away!” said Yergunov.  
“It makes me positively sick.”

“I mix my tobacco with the flowers of oats,” answered Merik after a pause. “It is better for the chest.”

He smoked, spat, and went out again. Half an hour passed, and all at once there was the gleam of light in the passage. Merik appeared in a coat and cap, then Lyubka with a candle in her hand.

“Do stay, Merik,” said Lyubka in an imploring voice.

“No, Lyubka, don’t make me stay.”

“Listen, Merik,” said Lyubka, and her voice grew soft and tender. “I know you will find mother’s money, and will do for her and for me, and you will go to Kuban and love other girls. God be with you. I only ask you one thing, sweetheart, do stay!”

“No, I want some fun,” said Merik, fastening his belt.

“But you have nothing to go on. You came on foot; what are you going on?”

Merik bent down to Lyubka and whispered something in her ear; she looked towards the door and laughed through her tears.

“He is asleep, the puffed-up devil,” she said.

Merik embraced her, kissed her vigorously, and left.

Hearing their words through his drowsiness, Yergunov thrust his revolver into his pocket, jumped up, and ran after him.



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“Get out of the way!” he said to Lyubka, who hurriedly bolted the door of the entry and stood across the threshold. “Let me pass! Why are you standing in my way?”

“Why do you want to go out into this weather?” Lyubka innocently asked.

“To have a look at my horse,” cried Yergunov.

Lyubka gazed at him with a sly and caressing look.

“Why look at your horse when you can look at me,” she said, and then bent down and touched the gilt watch-key that hung on his chain.

“Let me pass, or he will go off on my horse,” said Yergunov. “Let me go, you devil!” he shouted. Giving her an angry blow on the shoulder, he pressed his chest against her with all his might to push her away from the door. But she kept a tight hold of the bolt and stood fast like iron.

“Let me go!” he shouted, exhausted; “he will go off with my horse, I tell you.”

“Why should he? He won’t,” she beamed. Breathing hard and rubbing her painful shoulder she looked up at him again, became flushed, and then laughing, she said, “Don’t go away, dear heart, I am deadly alone.”

Yergunov looked into her eyes, hesitated, and put his arms around her; she did not resist.

“Come, no nonsense; let me go,” he begged her. She did not speak.

“I heard you just now,” he said, “telling Merik that you loved him.”

“I dare say. Only my heart knows who I love,” Lyubka responded.

She suddenly craned her neck and listened with a grave face, and her expression struck Yergunov as cold and cunning. He thought of his horse, and

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then easily pushed her aside and ran into the yard. In the shed, a sleepy pig was grunting with lazy regularity and a cow was knocking her horn against a wooden rail. Yergunov lit a match and saw the pig, the cow, and then saw the dogs rushing at him on all sides at seeing the light, but there was no trace of his horse. Shouting and waving his arms at the dogs, stumbling over the drifts and sticking in the snow, he ran out of the gate and began gazing into the darkness. He strained his eyes to the utmost and saw only the snow flying and the snowflakes distinctly forming into all sorts of shapes. At one moment the white, laughing face of a corpse would peep out of the darkness, at the next moment a white horse would gallop by with an Amazon in a muslin dress upon it, and then a string of white swans would fly overhead. Shaking with anger and cold, and not knowing what to do, Yergunov fired his revolver at the dogs, but did not hit one of them; then he rushed back to the house.

When he went into the entry, he distinctly heard Lyubka scurry out of the room and bang the door. It was dark in the room. Yergunov pushed against the door; it was locked. Then, lighting match after match, he rushed back into the entry, from there into the kitchen, and from the kitchen into a small room where all the walls were hung with petticoats and dresses, where there was a smell of cornflowers and fennel, and a bed with a perfect mountain of pillows standing in the corner by the stove; "This must be Lyubka's mother's room," he said to himself. From there he passed into another room, and here he saw Lyubka. She was lying on a chest, covered with a multi-colored patchwork cotton quilt, pretending to be asleep. A little ikon lamp was burning in the corner above the pillow.

"Where is my horse?" Yergunov asked.

Lyubka did not stir.

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“Where is my horse, I am asking you?” Yergunov repeated his question more sternly, and then tore the quilt off her. “I am asking you, devil woman!” he shouted.

She jumped up on her knees, with one hand holding her shift and with the other trying to clutch the quilt, huddled against the wall. She looked at Yergunov with repulsion and terror in her eyes, and, like a wild beast in a trap, kept cunning watch on his faintest movement.

“Tell me where my horse is, or I’ll knock the life out of you,” shouted Yergunov.

“Get away, you dirty brute!” she said in a hoarse voice.

Yergunov seized her by the shift near the neck and tore it. Then with all his might clasped the girl and begged her to tell him where Merik had taken his horse. Hissing with fury, she slipped out of his arms, and freeing one hand — the other was tangled in the torn shift — hit him with a blow with her fist on the skull.

His head was dizzy with pain, there was a ringing and rattling in his ears, he staggered back, and at that moment received another blow — this time on the temple. Reeling and clutching at the doorposts to prevent him from falling, he made his way to the room where his things were and lay down on the bench; then after lying down for a short time, took the matchbox out of his pocket and began lighting match after match for no reason. He lit a match, blew it out, threw it under the table, and went on repeating this until all the matches were gone.

Meanwhile the air began to turn blue outside, the cocks began to crow, but his head still ached, and there was an uproar in his ears as though he were sitting under a railway bridge and hearing the trains passing over his head. Somehow, he got into his coat and cap; but he could not find the saddle and the bundle of

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his purchases, his knapsack was empty. That was the reason someone had scurried out of the room when he came in from the yard.

He took a poker from the kitchen to ward off the dogs and went into the yard leaving the door open. The snowstorm had subsided, and it was calm outside. When he went out of the gate, the white plain looked dead, and there was not a single bird in the morning sky. On both sides of the road and in the distance, there were bluish patches of young trees.

Yergunov began thinking how he would be greeted at the hospital and what the doctor would say to him; it was absolutely necessary to think of that, and to prepare beforehand to answer the questions he would be asked. But this thought grew blurred and slipped away. He walked along thinking of nothing but Lyubka, of the peasants with whom he had passed the night. His mind was in a maze, and he wondered why in the world there were doctors, hospital assistants, merchants, clerks, and peasants instead of simple free men? There are, to be sure, free birds, free beasts, a free Merik, and they were not afraid of anyone, and did not have need of others! Whose idea was it, who had decreed that one must get up in the morning, dine at midday, and go to bed in the evening; that a doctor takes precedence over a hospital assistant; that one must live in rooms and love only one's wife? Why not the contrary — dine at night and sleep in the day? Ah, to jump on a horse without enquiring whose horse it is, to ride races with the wind like a devil, over fields and forests and ravines, to make love unabashed, to mock at everyone.

Yergunov thrust the poker into the snow, pressed his forehead to the cold white trunk of a birch tree, and sank into thought; he reflected on his grey, monotonous life, his abhorrently low wages, his subordinate position, the dispensary, the everlasting fuss with the bottles and blisters, and it struck him as contemptible, sickening.

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“Who says it’s a sin to enjoy oneself?” he asked himself with vexation. “Those who have never lived in freedom like Merik and Kalashnikov and have never loved a woman such as Lyubka; they have been beggars all their lives, have lived without any pleasure.”

He thought to himself that he had never been a thief, a swindler, or even a lawbreaker, simply because tradition compelled that he could not.



## EPILOGUE

A year and a half passed. In spring, after Easter, Yergunov, who had long before been dismissed from the hospital and was hanging around without a job, came out of the tavern in Ryepino and sauntered aimlessly along the street.

He went into the open country. The scent of spring flowed through the air, and a warm caressing wind blew through the trees. The calm, starry night looked down from the sky onto the earth. “My God, how infinite the depth of the sky, and with what fathomless immensity it stretched over the world! The world is created well enough, only why and with what right do people divide their fellows into the sober and the drunk, the employed and the dismissed,” thought Yergunov. “Why do the sober and well-fed sleep comfortably in their homes, while the drunken and the hungry must wander about the country without refuge? Why was it that if anyone did not have a job and did not get a salary, he had to go hungry, without clothes and boots? Whose idea was it? Why was it the birds and the wild beasts in the woods did not have jobs and get salaries, but lived as they pleased?”

Far away in the sky a beautiful crimson glow lay quivering, stretched wide over the horizon. Yergunov stopped, and for a long time he gazed at it, and kept wondering, “Why is it that if he had carried off someone else’s samovar<sup>i</sup> the day

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before and sold it for drink in the taverns it would be a sin? Why was it that way?”

Two carts drove by on the road; in one of them there was a woman asleep, in the other sat an old man without a cap.

“Kind sir where is that fire?” asked Yergunov.

“Andrey Tchirikov’s inn,” answered the old man.

Yergunov recalled what had happened to him eighteen months before in the winter in that very inn, and how Merik had boasted, and how in that moment he envied him. When he walked back to the tavern, looking at the houses of the rich publicans, cattle-dealers, and blacksmiths, he reflected how nice it would be to stealthily steal by night into some rich man’s house, and be the vanguard of a new revolution.”

## THE END

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<sup>i</sup> Samovar: expensive urn