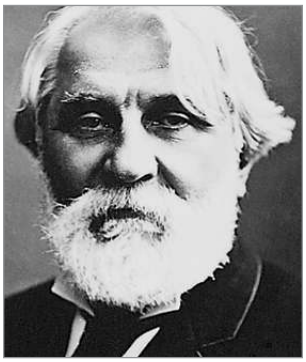
Bezhin Meadow

A STORY

by Ivan Turgenev



Ivan Turgenev, one of the giants of nineteenth-century Russian literature, was born in the Ukraine in 1818. A novelist, poet, and playwright, he was a strong advocate of the modernization of Russian society; his story collection, *A Sportsman's Sketches*, is thought to have convinced Czar Alexander II to emancipate Russia's serfs. Turgenev chose to live outside of Russia, in part because his masterpiece, *Fathers and Sons*, was poorly received there and in part so he could pursue a love affair with the married French opera singer who was his lifelong passion. Turgenev never married. He died in 1883.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL JULY DAY, one of those days which come only after a long spell of settled weather. From the very early morning the sky is clear. The sunrise does not blaze fiercely but spreads in a gentle flush. The sun is neither fiery nor incandescent, as in a time of sultry drought; it is not dark crimson as before a storm, but bright and gently radiant—rising peacefully from behind a long, narrow cloud, shining freshly, and once more sinking into its lilac mist.

"The thin upper rim of the extended cloud sparkles sinuously; its brilliance is like the brilliance of beaten silver. But a moment later the dancing beams come shooting out again and the mighty luminary rises gaily and majestically, as though borne aloft on wings. About midday there usually appears a multitude of high, round clouds, golden-grey, with delicate white edges. Like islands, scattered over a boundless river in flood, flowing round them with deep, transparent arms of an even blueness, they scarcely seem to stir; farther off, towards the horizon, they come more closely together, they almost touch and merge, and one no longer sees any patches of blue between them, but they remain almost as azure as the sky; they are filled through and through with light and warmth. The colour of the horizon, light and of a pale lilac, does not change all day and is the same all round; there is no sign of a

gathering, darkening storm, except that here and there bluish shafts can perhaps be seen coming down from above, but that is merely the scattering of an almost imperceptible shower. Towards evening these clouds vanish; the last of them, darkish and smudged like smoke, lie in pink puffs against the setting sun; over the place where it has set as calmly as it rose into the sky, a scarlet radiance lingers for a short time over the darkened earth and, flickering softly, like a candle that is carried with great care, the evening star twinkles faintly in the sky.

On such days all colours are softened; they are clear but not bright; the seal of some touching tenderness is set upon everything. On such days the heat is sometimes very great and sometimes it is even steaming on the slopes of the fields; but the wind disperses and breaks up the accumulated sultriness, and whirling eddies—an infallible sign of settled weather—move in tall white pillars along the roads and across the ploughland. There is a smell of wormwood, harvested rye, and buckwheat in the air; even an hour before nightfall you feel no dampness. It is for such weather that the husbandman prays to gather in his corn.

On such a day I once set off on a black-cock shoot in the Chern District of Tula Province. I had found and shot a fair number of game; a bulging game bag cut into my shoulders mercilessly; but when at last I made up my mind to return home, the sunset was fading, and in the air, still light, although no longer illumined by the rays of the setting sun, cold shadows were beginning to thicken and spread. At a brisk pace I walked across the long acreage of bushes, climbed a hill, and, instead of the familiar plain with the small oak wood on the right and the little white church in the distance, I saw a totally different and unfamiliar landscape. At my feet was a narrow valley, and, immediately opposite, a dense aspen wood rose like a high wall. I stopped dead in perplexity and looked round.

"Good heavens," I thought, "I've lost my way! I've kept too much to the right!" And, surprised at my own mistake, I quickly descended the hill. I was at once enveloped in a pocket of disagreeable, stagnant, damp air, just as though I had descended into a cellar; the thick, tall grass at the bottom of the valley, dripping wet, stretched far ahead in a white unbroken line; walking on it somehow gave me an eerie feeling. I clambered out on the other side as quickly as I could and, bearing to the left, walked along beside the aspen wood. Bats were already flitting above its slumbering treetops, wheeling mysteriously and quivering against the dimly radiant sky; a young, belated hawk flew sharply past in a straight line high up in the sky, hurrying back to its nest. "Let me just go round the corner," I thought to myself, "and I shall get to the road at once. I must have gone a good mile out of my way!"

I reached the corner of the wood at last, but there was no sign of a road there: some low, unclipped bushes stretched a long way before me, and behind them, far, far away, I could see a bare field. I stopped again. "What on earth? . . . Where am I?" I began going over in my mind the places I had been to and the direction I had come from during the whole of that day. "Good Lord, this must be the Parakhin bushes!" I exclaimed at last. "Why, of course, then that must be the Sindeyev copse. How in heaven's name did I get here? So far! How curious! Now I must bear to the right again."

I went to the right, through the bushes. Meanwhile night was falling and growing like a storm cloud; it looked as though, together with the evening mists, the darkness was rising from every quarter, and even streaming down from above. I lighted upon some untrodden, overgrown path and walked along it, looking intently ahead of me. Everything round me was quickly growing dark and silent—only the quail could be heard calling to one another from time to time. A small night bird, flying noiselessly and low on its soft wings, almost knocked against me and shied away in alarm. I came out of the bushes and walked along the boundary of a field. Already I found it difficult to distinguish distant objects: all round me the field looked like a white blur; beyond it an enormous mass rose up in the gloomy darkness, moving nearer and nearer with every minute that passed. My footfalls sounded muffled in the thickening air. The sky, which had gone pale, began to grow blue once more, but that was already the blue of the night. Little stars glimmered and twinkled in it.

What I had taken for a wood turned out to be a dark round hillock. "But where on earth am I?" I again repeated aloud, stopping for the third time and looking inquiringly at my skewbald English gun dog, Dianka, without a doubt the cleverest of all four-legged creatures. But the cleverest of four-legged creatures merely wagged her tail, blinked her weary eyes dejectedly, and gave me no practical advice whatever.

I felt ashamed before her, and I hurried off ahead desperately, as though realising suddenly which way I ought to go. I rounded the hill and found myself in a low-lying hollow, which was ploughed all round. I was at once overcome by a strange feeling. This hollow was shaped almost like a symmetrical cauldron with sloping sides; at the bottom of it were some large white upright stones—it looked as though they had crept down there for some secret conference—and it was so lonely and still there, the sky hung so flatly and gloomily above that hollow, that my heart sank. Some little animal squeaked faintly and piteously among the stones. I hastened to get out onto the hillock again. Till that moment I had still not given up hope of finding my way home; but here I came finally to the conclusion that I was completely lost, and without even trying to see if I could recognise any of the surrounding landmarks, which were almost completely blotted out in darkness, anyway, I walked straight ahead, setting a course by the stars and trusting to chance to find the right way. I walked like that for half an hour, hardly able to drag my feet. I had a feeling that I had never before been in such a deserted, lonely place: there was not a glimmer of light to be seen anywhere, not a sound to be heard. One gently sloping hill followed another; field stretched endlessly upon field; bushes seemed to rise suddenly from under the ground under my very nose. I kept walking, and was already thinking of lying down somewhere till morning, when suddenly I found myself at the edge of a terrible precipice.

I drew back my raised foot quickly and through the almost transparent dark of the night saw a vast plain far below me. A broad river wound round it in a semicircle that turned away from me; the steely reflection of the water, gleaming faintly here and there, marked its course. The hill on which I was standing descended in an almost sheer drop; its vast outlines stood out black against the bluish void of the air; and directly below me, in the

corner formed by this precipice and the plain, beside the river—which at this point was motionless and dark—right beneath the steep slope of the hill, two fires were throwing up smoke and red flames close to each other. People were moving round them; shadows were swaying; and from time to time the front half of a small curly head was brightly lit up.

At last I recognised where I had got to. This meadow was widely known in our neighbourhood under the name of Bezhin Meadow. But there could be no question of returning home, especially at night; my legs were giving way under me from exhaustion. I decided to walk up to the campfires and wait for the dawn in the company of the people whom I took for drovers. I got safely down, but before I had time to let go of the last branch I had grasped, two big, shaggy white dogs suddenly threw themselves upon me, barking furiously. The ringing voices of children sounded round the campfires. Two or three boys got up quickly from the ground. I called back to their questioning cries. They ran up to me and at once called off the dogs, who were particularly struck by the appearance of my Dianka, and I went up to them.

I was wrong in taking the people who were sitting round the campfires for drovers. They were simply peasant boys from a nearby village who were minding a drove of horses. In the hot summer weather, horses in our part of the country are usually driven out at night into the fields to graze: in daytime, flies and gnats would give them no peace. To drive out the horses before nightfall and to drive them back in the early morning is a great adventure for the peasant boys. Sitting bareheaded and in old sheepskins on the liveliest nags, they gallop off with merry shouts and whoops of joy, swinging their arms and legs and jumping up high in the air and laughing at the top of their voices. A fine dust rises and is blown along the road in a yellow pillar; for a long way off you can hear the rapid clatter of hoofs; the horses are racing along, pricking up their ears; ahead of them all, its tail in the air and continuously altering its stride, gallops a shaggy sorrel with burrs in its shaggy mane.

I told the boys that I had lost my way, and sat down beside them. They asked me where I came from; then they fell silent and made room for me. We talked a little. I lay down under a bush with nibbled-off leaves and began to look round. The picture was a wonderful one: near the campfires a round, reddish glow of light trembled and then seemed to freeze as it leaned against the darkness; from time to time the flame blazed up and threw rapid reflections of light beyond the boundary of that circle; a thin tongue of light licked the bare willow twigs and immediately disappeared; long, thin shadows, bursting in for a moment in their turn, ran up to the very edge of the campfires; darkness was struggling with light. Sometimes, when the flame burned weaker and the circle of light narrowed, a horse's head would suddenly emerge from the encroaching darkness, a bay head with a white sinuous streak running from the forehead to the upper lip, or all white, stare intently and dully at us, quickly munching the long grass; and, dropping back again,

instantly vanish. All we could hear was that it was still munching away and snorting. From the lighted place it was difficult to make out what was going on in the darkness, and that was why near at hand everything seemed to be hidden by an almost black curtain; but, farther away, towards the horizon, hills and woods could be dimly discerned as long smudges. The dark, clear sky stood solemn and immensely high above us in all its mysterious grandeur. My breast was filled with an aching sweetness when I breathed that peculiar, languorous, fresh fragrance, the fragrance of a Russian summer night. All round us hardly a sound could be heard. Only occasionally, in the nearby river, there came the sudden loud splash of a big fish and the faint rustling of the reeds on the banks stirring lightly as the ripples reached them. The fires crackled faintly.

The boys sat round them; there too sat the two dogs who had been so eager to devour me. They could not reconcile themselves to my presence for a long time, and, blinking and squinting sleepily at the fire, growled from time to time with quite an extraordinary sense of their own dignity, growling at first and then whining a little, as though regretting the impossibility of carrying out their desires. There were five boys there altogether: Fedya, Pavlusha, Ilyusha, Kostya, and Vanya. (I learnt the names from their talk, and I propose to introduce them to the reader at once.)

Fedya, the first and the eldest of them, you would say was about fourteen. He was slender, with handsome, fine, rather small features, fair, curly hair, bright eyes, and a perpetual half-gay, half-dreamy smile. He belonged by all appearances to a well-to-do family and had gone out to spend the night in the fields, not because he had to, but just for the fun of it. He wore a gay cotton shirt with a yellow border; a small, new peasant overcoat was thrown precariously over his slender shoulders; a little comb hung from his blue belt; his boots with low tops were most certainly his own and not his father's. The second boy, Pavlusha, had tousled black hair, grey eyes, broad cheekbones, a pale, pock-marked face, a large but regular mouth, a huge head "as large as a beer cauldron," as the saying is, and a squat, awkward body. He was an uncouth lad, there is no denying it, and yet I liked him for all that: he had an intelligent, frank look, and in his voice too there was a note of authority. His clothes were nothing to boast of: they consisted of an ordinary hemp shirt and a pair of patched trousers. The face of the third boy, Ilyusha, was rather insignificant: long, hawk-nosed, with shortsighted eyes, it expressed a sort of dull, sickly anxiety; his compressed lips never moved; his contracted eyebrows were never smooth—he seemed to be always screwing up his eyes at the fire. His tow-coloured, almost white hair stuck out in sharp tufts from under his low felt cap, which he kept pulling down over his ears with both hands. He wore new bast shoes, and his legs were bound round with rags; a thick rope, twisted three times round his waist, carefully tightened his clean black Ukrainian coat. Neither he nor Pavlusha looked

more than twelve. The fourth, Kostya, a boy of ten, aroused my curiosity by his pensive and wistful look. His face was small, thin, freckled, with a pointed chin like a squirrel's; his lips one could barely make out; but his large black eyes, which glittered with a liquid brilliance, produced a strange impression; they seemed to wish to say something for which no tongue—his tongue, at least—had any words. He was short, of a puny build, and rather poorly dressed. The last boy, Vanya, I had not even noticed at first; he was lying on the ground, quietly curled up under an oblong piece of bast matting, and only occasionally thrust his curly head out from under it. This boy was only seven years of age.

And so I lay under a small bush, a little apart from the rest, and kept looking at the boys. A small pot hung over one of the campfires; in it "taters" were cooking. Pavlusha was keeping an eye on them and, kneeling, kept prodding with a small piece of wood in the boiling water. Fedya lay propped up on his elbow, with the skirts of his coat spread out. Ilyusha sat beside Kostya and all the time kept his eyes tensely screwed up. Kostya, his head drooping a little, gazed far away into the distance. Vanya did not stir under his matting. I pretended to be asleep. Little by little the boys began to talk again.

At first they chatted about all sorts of things—about the next day's work, about their horses—but suddenly Fedya turned to Ilyusha and, as though resuming an interrupted conversation, asked him, "Well, so you really saw a house goblin, did you?"

"No, I didn't see him, and besides, you can never really see him," replied Ilyusha in a weak, hoarse voice, the sound of which was entirely in keeping with the expression of his face, "but I heard him all right. And it wasn't me alone, either."

"And where does he live in your place?" asked Pavlusha.

"In the old pulping room of the paper-mill."

"Why, do you work at the paper-mill?"

"Course we do—my brother and Adruyshka and me all work in the pulping room."

"Fancy that! So you're factory hands, are you?"

"Well, how did you hear him?" asked Fedya.

"You see, it was like this. Me and my brother, and Fyodor from Mikheyevo and cross-eyed Ivashka, and the other Ivashka from the Red Hills and a third Ivashka with the withered arm, and some other boys—about ten of us all told; the whole shift, you see—had to spend the night in the pulping room. I mean, we didn't just happen to spend the night there, but Nazorov, our foreman, would not let us go home. 'What do you boys want to go home for?' he says. 'There's lots of work for you tomorrow, so you'd better not go home,' he says. So we stayed, and we all lay down together, and Adruyshka, he starts saying, 'What,' he says, 'if the house goblin was to come tonight, boys?' And before he—Adruyshka, that is—finished speaking,

someone suddenly started walking over our heads. You see, we was lying downstairs, and he starts walking upstairs by the wheel. So we hears him walking about, the boards bending under him—creaking, they was—and now he passes over our heads; and suddenly the water starts making an awful noise over the wheel, and the wheel starts knocking and turning round and round, although, you see, the slides in the troughs was let down. So we was wondering who could have lifted them up to let the water go through. Anyway, the wheel turned and turned and then stopped. Then he goes to the door upstairs again and starts coming down the stairs. Aye, coming down slowly, he was, just as if he was in no hurry at all, so that the steps under him fairly groaned. Well, so he walks up to our door, he does, and there he stands waiting and waiting, and—then—all of a sudden the door just flies open! It scared the life out of us, I can tell you. We looked, but there was nothing there, nothing at all . . . . Suddenly the net of one of the vats starts moving, then it starts rising, then dipping and floating about in the air, just as if someone was rinsing it, and then back it goes to its old place again. After that the hook of another vat comes off its nail, and then back on its nail it goes again. And then someone seems to walk up to the door, and there, suddenly, it starts coughing, clearing its throat just like it was a sheep, only very loud it was. Well, we just all falls down in a heap, and each of us tries to crawl under the other. Aye, we was scared all right that night!"

"Fancy that!" said Pavlusha. "What did he start coughing for?"

"Dunno. Must have been the damp."

They all fell silent for a while.

"What about the taters?" asked Fedya. "Are they done?"

Pavlusha felt them. "No, they're not done yet. . . . Hear that splash?" he added, turning his face in the direction of the river. "Must have been a pike. And there's a shooting star."

"I've got something to tell you too, boys," Kostya said in his thin little voice. "Just listen to what my dad told us the other day."

"Oh, all right," Fedya said with a patronising air, "we're listening."

"You know Gavrilo, the village carpenter, don't you?"

"Yes, we do."

"But do you know why he's always so glum and never speaks a word? You don't, do you? Well, I'll tell you why. One day, my dad says, he went into the woods to gather nuts. Well, so he went gathering nuts in the woods and lost his way. Didn't know where he was, he didn't. So he walked and walked and just couldn't find the way. And, you see, it was already getting dark, so he sits down under a tree. 'I'd better wait till the morning,' he says to himself. So he sits down and dozes off. But no sooner did he doze off than he heard someone calling him. He looks up. There's no one there. So he falls asleep again, and again someone is calling him. So again he looks and looks, and there, on a branch in front of him, he sees a water nymph.

There she sits, swinging on the branch and calling him to come to her, and she herself is laughing—dying of laughter, she was. And the moon was shining bright, so bright and clear it shone that he could see everything—everything. And so she kept on calling him and she herself was so bright and so light, just like a dace or a gudgeon, or a carp which is sometimes whitish and silvery. . . . Well, boys, so Gavrilo the carpenter, he nearly dies of fright, but she just goes on laughing and beckoning to him with her hands. So poor old Gavrilo, he gets up, and he's about to do as the water nymph tells him, but at that moment, boys, God Himself, I suppose, must have told him what to do, for just in the nick of time he crossed himself. It wasn't any too soon, either, for you can't imagine how difficult it was for him to cross himself. 'My hand,' he says, 'seems to have been turned to stone: I could hardly move it. The devil's own work it was all right!' So no sooner did he cross himself than the little water nymph stopped laughing and suddenly she starts crying. And she cries and she cries, wiping her eyes with her hair, and her hair is as green as hemp. So Gavrilo looks and looks at her and then he starts asking her, 'What are you crying for, you little witch of the woods, you?' And the water nymph, she says to him, she says, 'What did you want to cross yourself for, you silly man?' she says. 'You could have lived happily with me to the end of your days,' she says, 'and now I'm crying and grieving,' she says, 'because you crossed yourself. And,' she says, 'I won't be the only one to grieve, either. You too,' she says, 'will grieve to the end of your days.' And right at that very moment she disappeared, and old Gavrilo, you see, immediately realised which way he had to go to get out of the wood, only ever since that night he has been going about looking unhappy."

"Well, I never!" Fedya said after a short pause. "But how can such an evil spirit of the woods harm a Christian soul—he didn't do what she wanted, did he?"

"Well, there you are," said Kostya. "And Gavrilo, you know, said she had such a thin, pitiful little voice, just like a toad's."

"Did you hear your dad tell that himself?" Fedya went on.

"Yes, himself. I was lying on the plank-bed under the ceiling and heard it all."

"Funny thing! Why should he be unhappy? I expect she must have liked him, if she called him."

"Aye, she liked him all right," Ilyusha put in. "Course she liked him. She wanted to tickle him to death, that's what she wanted to do. That's what they always does, them water nymphs."

"I suppose there ought to be water nymphs here too," observed Fedya.

"No," replied Kostya, "not in a clean, open place like this. One thing, though—the river is near."

They all fell silent. Suddenly, somewhere in the far distance, there came a drawn-out, ringing, almost wailing sound, one of those mysterious night sounds which sometimes come out of the dead silence, rise, hang in the air, and then slowly

die away. You listen intently, and there seems to be nothing there, and yet it still keeps on reverberating. It was as if someone had uttered a long cry right under the very horizon, and as if someone else had answered him from the woods in a thin, sharp laugh; and a faint, low whistle went hissing along the surface of the river. The boys looked at each other and shuddered.

"Lord help us!" Ilyusha whispered.

"Oh, you gaping fools!" cried Pavlusha. "What are you scared of? Look, the taters are done!" They all moved nearer to the pot and began eating the steaming potatoes. Only Vanya did not stir.

"Why don't you come?" asked Pavlusha. But Vanya did not crawl out from under his matting.

The pot was soon empty.

"And have you heard, boys," began Ilyusha, "what happened at Varnavitsy the other day?"

"At the dam, you mean?" asked Fedya.

"Yes, at the dam, at the burst dam. There's a haunted place for you, if you like. Haunted and lonely. Ravines and ditches all round, and lots of snakes in the ditches."

"Well, what happened? Come on, tell us."

"This is what happened. I don't suppose you, Fedya, know that there's a drowned man buried there. He drowned himself a long time ago when the pond was deep, but you can still see his grave, but only just. A little mound, that's all you can see of it. . . . Well, so the agent sent for the kennel-man Yermil the other day and told him to go to the post office in town. Yermil always drives to the post office. You see, he lets all his dogs die. He can't keep them alive, for some reason, and so they never lives long—and yet he's a good kennel-man, old Yermil is; everyone likes him. So Yermil went off for the post, but he stayed too long in town, and when he drove back he was a little tipsy. It was night. A bright night too. The moon was shining. So Yermil rides over the dam—that was the way he took. So the kennel-man Yermil, he rides across the dam, and what do you think he sees? On the drowned man's grave there's a little lamb, a white, curly, pretty little lamb, and it keeps walking about. So Yermil, he thinks to himself, 'Why not take the little lamb? If I leave him here he's sure to die.' Well, the little lamb doesn't mind a bit. So Yermil walks up to his horse, and the horse stares at him and starts snorting and shaking its head. But he cries, 'Whoa there!' and the horse quietened. He then mounts with the lamb and rides off, holding the lamb in front of him. He looks at the lamb, and the lamb looks him straight in the face. Well, old Yermil, he got frightened, for, you see, he couldn't ever remember seeing a lamb looking a man straight in the face like that. Still, there didn't seem to be anything wrong, so he starts stroking the little lamb's fleece and says to it, 'Baa-baa!' And the little lamb suddenly bares its teeth and says to him too, 'Baa-baa!' "

Ilyusha had hardly uttered this last word when suddenly both dogs leapt up at once and, barking furiously, rushed away from the campfires and disappeared into the darkness. All the boys looked frightened. Vanya sprang out from under his matting, and Pavlusha ran shouting after the dogs. The barking quickly died away in the distance. One could hear the restless scamper of the frightened horses. Pavlusha shouted loudly, "Grey! Beetle!" After a few moments the barking stopped; Pavlusha's voice sounded a long way off. A little time passed. The boys exchanged bewildered glances, as though waiting for something to happen. Suddenly there came the thud of a galloping horse; it stopped abruptly at the very edge of the campfire, and Pavlusha, grasping the mane, jumped off it nimbly. The two dogs also rushed into the circle of light and at once sat down, with their red tongues hanging out.

"What was the matter there? What was it?" the boys asked.

"Nothing," replied Pavlusha, waving his hand at the horse. "The dogs must have scented something. I thought it was a wolf," he added in an indifferent voice, breathing quickly with his whole chest.

I could not help admiring Pavlusha. He looked very splendid at that moment. His unattractive face, animated by the rapid ride, blazed with fearless audacity and firm determination. Without a switch in his hand, at night, he had galloped off alone after a wolf without a moment's hesitation. "What a fine boy!" I thought, looking at him.

"You didn't see any wolves by any chance, did you?" Kostya, the coward, asked.

"There are always lots of 'em here," Pavlusha replied, "but they're only troublesome in winter." He settled down again in front of the fire. As he sat down on the ground, he dropped his hand on the shaggy neck of one of the dogs, and the delighted dog did not move its head for a long time, looking sideways at Pavlusha with grateful pride.

Vanya again crawled back under his matting.

"What a scarifying story you told us, Ilyusha," said Fedya, who as the son of a well-to-do peasant always called the tune (he spoke very little himself, as though afraid to lose his dignity). "And I suppose it was some evil spirit who made the dogs bark. No wonder! I was told that that place was haunted."

"Varnavitsy? I should think so! It's haunted, all right. I'm told they saw the old master there once—the one who's dead. They say he walks in a coat with long skirts and all the time he keeps groaning and looking for something on the ground. Grandpa Trofimich met him once and asked him, 'What are you looking for on the ground, sir?' "

"He asked him that?" Fedya interrupted in astonishment.

"Yes, he did."

"Oh, Trofimich must be a stout fellow to have done that! Well, and what did *he* say?"

" 'I'm looking for a magic herb,' he said, and he said it in such a hollow, dull voice: 'Magic herb!' 'But, sir,' says Trofimich, 'what do you want a magic herb for?' 'The grave,' he says, 'presses heavily on me, Trofimich. I want to get out, to get out!' "

"Oh, so that's what he wanted!" Fedya observed. "I expect he hadn't lived enough."

"That's strange," said Kostya, "I thought you could only see the dead on All Saints' Day."

"You can see the dead at any hour of the day and night," Ilyusha put in with conviction; for, so far as I could see, he knew, or he seemed to know, all the country superstitions better than the other boys. "But on All Saints' Day you can see a living man too. I mean one whose turn it is to die in that year. All you have to do is sit at night on the porch of a church and keep on looking at the road. The people who go past you on the road are those who are going to die in the same year. In our village Ulyana went to sit like that on the porch of the church."

"Well, did she see anyone?" Kostya asked with interest.

"Of course she did. First of all, she sat there a long, long time and never saw or heard no one. She thought she could hear a dog barking, barking far away. Suddenly she saw a boy coming along the road, wearing nothing but a shirt. She looked closer—it was Ivashka Fedoseyev coming—"

"You mean the one who died in the spring?" Fedya interrupted.

"Yes, that's the one. There he was, coming along without lifting his head, but Ulyana recognised him. And then she looked and there was a woman coming along. She looked closer and closer, and, good Lord, there she was herself, walking along the road!"

"Really herself?" asked Fedya.

"Oh yes, yes—herself."

"Well, she hasn't died yet, has she?"

"But the year isn't finished yet, you see. Just look at her: she's on her last legs."

They all fell silent again. Pavlusha threw a handful of dried twigs on the fire; they showed up black against the sudden blaze of flame, crackled, smoked, and began to curl up with the heat. The reflection of the fire, trembling violently, struck out in all directions, especially upwards. Suddenly a white pigeon seemed to fly out of nowhere straight into its reflection, hovered for a moment in alarm, enveloped in the warm glow, and disappeared with a whir of wings.

"Must have lost his way," Pavlusha observed. "Now he'll go on flying till he strikes something, and he'll stay until daybreak wherever that may be."

"Are you sure, Pavlusha," Kostya said, "it wasn't just the soul of a saint flying to heaven?"

Pavlusha threw another handful of twigs on the fire. "Perhaps," he said at last.

"But please tell me, Pavlusha," Fedya began, "did you in your village, in Shalamovo, also see the heavenly portents?"[1]

"You mean when we couldn't see the sun no more?"

"Yes. I expect you too must have been frightened."

"Yes, and we weren't the only ones. The master, who explained to us before it happened that there was going to be a portent, got so frightened himself when it got dark that you would never believe it. And in the servants' cottage, the woman cook, as soon as it got dark, went and broke all the pots in the oven with an oven fork. 'Who is going to eat,' she says, 'now that the end of the world has come?' So the cabbage soup was all spilt. And in our village they were saying that white wolves would run about the earth and eat people up and a bird of prey would fly about, or even that we would see Trishka himself."[2]

"Who is this Trishka?" asked Kostya.

"Why, don't you know?" Ilyusha cried warmly. "Well, I must say! Not to know about Trishka! Where do you come from? They must all be stay-at-homes in your village. Yes, stay-at-homes, that's what they are! Trishka is a big magician, and he's going to come one day. And when this magician comes, people won't be able to catch him, and they won't be able to do nothing to him—such an extraordinary man he'll be. If, for instance, some Christians will want to lay hands on him and attack him with sticks and surround him, he'll distract their attention so that they'll start hitting each other. And if, for instance, they put him in prison, he'll ask for a drink of water in a bowl. They'll bring him the bowl, and he'll dive into it, and they'll never see him again. If they put him in chains, he'll clap his hands and the chains will fall off. Well, so this Trishka will be going about from town to town and from village to village, and this same Trishka, clever magician that he is, will tempt the Christian people, and no one won't be able to do nothing to him, such a clever and crafty man he'll be."

"Well, yes," continued Pavlusha in his unhurried voice, "that's the sort of man he'll be, and it was him the people in our village were expecting. The old men said that Trishka would come as soon as ever the heavenly portent started. So the portent started and all the people rushed into the streets and into the fields and waited for what was going to happen next. And, as you know, the country round our village is open, and you can see for miles round. They looked, and suddenly, from the village on the hill, a strange kind of man was coming along, with such an extraordinary head, and everybody started shouting, 'Lord, Trishka's coming! Trishka's coming!' And they all ran away and hid themselves where they could. Our village headman crept into a ditch; his wife got stuck under the gate, and she kept screaming at the top of her voice, giving her own dog in the yard such a fright that he broke his chain, jumped through the fence, and ran off into the forest; and Kuzka's father, Dorofeyich, jumped into a field of oats, squatted down, and started calling like a quail; 'For,' he thought to himself, 'maybe the enemy of man will take pity on a bird!' So scared were they all! And all the time it was our cooper Vavila;

he had bought himself a new hooped wooden jug and had put the empty jug on his head!"

All the boys laughed and again fell silent for a moment, as often happens with people who are talking in the open air. I looked round. Solemn and majestic, the night encompassed us on all sides; the damp freshness of late evening had given way to the dry warmth of midnight, which would lie for a long time yet like a soft cloak on the sleeping fields; it was still a long time to the first murmur, the first rustlings and stirrings of the morning, to the first dewdrops of daybreak. There was no moon in the sky: at that time of the year it rose late. The numberless golden stars, twinkling in eager rivalry, seemed to float gently in the direction of the Milky Way; and indeed, looking at them, you seemed to be dimly aware yourself of the headlong and unceasing course of the earth.

A strange, sharp, painful cry suddenly sounded twice in succession over the river, and after a few moments it came again from farther off.

Kostya gave a start. "What was that?"

"It's a heron calling," Pavlusha replied calmly.

"A heron," Kostya repeated. "But what was that I heard yesterday evening, Pavlusha?" he added after a short pause. "Perhaps you know."

"What did you hear?"

"This is what I heard: I was going from the Stone Ridge to Shashkino, and at first I walked along our hazel wood, and then I went across the meadow—you know the place where it turns sharply at the corner of the ravine. There's a pool overgrown with reeds, you know. So I was walking past this pool, boys, when suddenly, from out of that pool, someone groaned, oh, ever so pitifully, 'Whoo-whoo-whoo!' I was frightened, I can tell you. You see, it was late, and the voice sounded so sickly that I nearly started crying myself. What could that have been, do you think?"

"The summer before last," Pavlusha observed, "Akim the forester was drowned there by thieves, so perhaps it was his soul that was complaining."

"I suppose that's what it was, boys," Kostya declared, widening his eyes, which were very big already. "I didn't know Akim was drowned in that pool. Had I known it, I'd have been even more frightened."

"Or else," Pavlusha continued, "they say there are such tiny little frogs which cry pitifully like that."

"Frogs? No! It wasn't frogs. Frogs would never have made a noise like that." A heron called again from over the river. "Oh, get out of it!" Kostya cried involuntarily. "Calling like a wood demon!"

"A wood demon doesn't call," Ilyusha put in. "He's dumb. He can only clap his hands and jabber—"

"Why, have you seen him, the wood demon?" Fedya interrupted sarcastically.

"No, I haven't, and God preserve me from ever seeing him! But other people

have. The other day he led one of our peasants astray: he took him round and round in the woods, all round the same clearing. He didn't get home till before dawn."

"Well, did he see him?"

"He did. He said he was a huge, enormous, dark fellow, all muffled up, and he seemed to be hiding behind a tree. He couldn't make him out clearly; he seemed to be hiding from the moon, and he kept staring with his huge eyes, blinking and blinking."

"Lord!" Fedya cried, trembling slightly and shuddering. "Ugh!"

"I wonder why such filthy creatures have spread all over the earth?" Pavlusha observed. "Really!"

"Don't call him names! You'd better be careful or he'll hear you," Ilyusha remarked.

There was silence again.

"Look—look, boys!" Vanya's childish voice called suddenly. "Look at God's little stars—swarming like bees!" He poked his fresh little face out from under the matting, leaned on his tiny fist, and slowly raised his big, gentle eyes.

All the boys raised their eyes to the sky and did not lower them for a long time.

"I say, Vanya," Fedya began affectionately, "how is your sister, Anyutka?"

"She's all right," replied Vanya.

"Ask her why she doesn't come and see us! Why doesn't she?"

"Dunno."

"Tell her to come."

"I will."

"Tell her I'll give her a present."

"And me?"

"You too."

Vanya sighed. "Oh, never mind, I don't want one. Better give it to her. She's a good, kind kid." And Vanya put his little head on the ground again.

Pavlusha stood up and picked up the empty pot.

"Where are you going?" Fedya asked him.

"To the river for some water. I want a drink of water."

The dogs rose and went after him. "Mind you don't fall in!" Ilyusha shouted after him.

"Why should he fall in?" said Fedya. "He'll take care."

"Yes, he will, but anything may happen: he may bend down and begin to draw water and then the river demon will seize him by the hand and drag him into the water. Afterwards, I suppose, people will say the poor boy fell into the river, but did he? There, he's gone into the rushes," he added, listening. And true enough, the rushes rustled as they were parted.

"And is it true," asked Kostya, "that Akulina, the fool, went mad after falling into the water?"

"Yes, she's been like that ever since. Just look at her now. Before, they say, she was such a beauty, but the river demon put a spell on her. I expect he didn't think they'd pull her out so soon, so he put a spell on her at the bottom of the river where he lives."

(I had met this Akulina more than once. Covered in rags, terribly thin, with a face as black as coal, blear-eyed and with perpetually bared teeth, she would hang about in the same place for hours on end, on the road somewhere, pressing her bony hands tightly to her breast and slowly shifting from one foot to the other like a wild beast in a cage. She did not understand a word of what was said to her and only laughed spasmodically from time to time.)

"But," Kostya went on, "I heard that Akulina threw herself into the river because her lover deceived her."

"Yes, that's why."

"And do you remember Vassily?" Kostya added sadly.

"Which Vassily?" asked Fedya.

"Why, the one who was drowned in this same river," Kostya replied. "Oh, he was such a wonderful boy! Oh, ever such a wonderful boy! How his mother, Feklista, loved him! And she seemed to feel—Feklista, that is—that water would be his undoing. Every time Vassily came with us to bathe in the river in summer she would start trembling all over. The other women didn't mind a bit—they just walked past with their washing in their wooden troughs, swaying from side to side, but Feklista would put her trough down on the ground and would start calling him, 'Come back, come back, my darling!' And the Lord only knows how he got drowned. He was playing on the ground and his mother was there too, raking hay. Suddenly she heard what she thought was someone blowing bubbles in the water. She looked round, and there was only Vassily's cap floating on the water. Since then Feklista isn't right in her mind, either. She comes and lies down at the place where he was drowned. Lies there and starts singing a song—you remember, Vassily used to sing that song too, and it's that song she sings, and she cries and complains bitterly to God. . . ."

"Here comes Pavlusha," said Fedya.

Pavlusha came up to the fire with a full pot of water in his hands. "Well, boys," he began after a pause, "I'm done for."

"Why? What is it?" Kostya asked hurriedly.

"I heard Vassily's voice."

Everyone gave a start.

"Good Lord, are you sure?" Kostya murmured.

"Of course I'm sure. The moment I started bending down to the water I heard someone calling me in Vassily's voice, and it seemed as if it came from under the water. 'Pavlusha, Pavlusha, come here!' I ran back, but I got the water all the same."

"Dear, oh dear," the boys said, crossing themselves.

"That was the river demon calling you, Pavlusha," added Fedya. "We were just talking about him—about Vassily, I mean."

"Oh, it's a bad omen," Ilyusha said slowly.

"Oh, I don't care, let it!" Pavlusha said resolutely and sat down again. "No use running away from your fate, is it?"

The boys fell silent. It could be seen that Pavlusha's story had made a deep impression on them. They began to settle down before the fire, as if preparing to sleep.

"What's that?" asked Kostya suddenly, raising his head.

Pavlusha listened hard. "That's snipe flying and whistling."

"Where are they flying to?"

"Why, to the country where there's no winter."

"Is there such a country?"

"Yes, there is."

"Is it far away?"

"Yes, ever so far away, beyond the warm seas."

Kostya sighed and closed his eyes.

More than three hours had passed since I had joined the company of the boys. At last the moon rose; I did not notice it at once: it was so small and narrow. This moonless night still seemed as magnificent as ever. But many stars, which a short while ago had stood high in the sky, were now sinking to the dark rim of the earth; everything was perfectly still all round, as everything does usually grow still towards the morning: everything was sunk in the deep, immobile sleep before the dawn. There was no longer the same strong scent in the air; once more dampness seemed to pervade it. . . . Oh, the short nights of summer! The boys' talk had died away, together with their fires. Even the dogs were dozing; the horses, as far as I could make out in the faintly glimmering and feebly streaming light of the stars, were lying down too, their heads drooping. A gentle drowsiness came over me, and it passed into a slumber.

A fresh breeze ran over my face. I opened my eyes. The day was breaking. There was still no flush of dawn, but in the east the sky was growing light. Everything became visible, though dimly, round me. The pale grey sky was becoming lighter; it was becoming cold and blue; the stars twinkled feebly, or vanished altogether; the ground had grown damp; the leaves were covered with dew; and from somewhere came the sounds of life, voices, and the light early breeze was already blowing and hovering over the earth. My body responded to it with a light, exhilarating shiver. I rose quickly and went across to the boys. They were all sound asleep round the glowing embers of the campfire; Pavlusha alone half raised himself and stared fixedly at me.

I nodded to him and went my way along the river over which the mist was just beginning to rise. I had not gone two miles when round me, all along the broad

water meadow and ahead of me on the hillocks, which were beginning to turn green, from wood to wood, and behind me, over the long dusty road, over the reddened, sparkling bushes and along the river—which was taking on a diffident blue tint as it emerged from the thinning mist—flowed scarlet, then red and golden torrents of new, warm light. . . . Everything stirred, awoke, began to sing, to make a noise, to speak. Everywhere the heavy dewdrops flashed like sparkling diamonds; the sound of church bells, pure and clear—as though they too had been washed in the coolness of the morning—came to meet me; and suddenly, driven by my friends, the boys, the drove of rested horses galloped past me.

I am sorry to have to add that Pavlusha died the same year. He was not drowned: he was killed by a fall from a horse. A pity; he was such a fine lad!

[1] This is what the peasants in our part of the country call an eclipse of the sun.
[2] The popular belief about Trishka probably derives from the legend of the Antichrist.