Bezhin Meadow by Ivan Turgenev

A Hunter's Sketches
("Zapiski okhotnika")

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http://eldred.ne.mediaone.net/ist/hunt.htm

BEZHIN MEADOW

IT WAS a glorious July day, one of those days which only come after many days of fine weather. From earliest morning the sky is clear; the sunrise does not glow with fire; it is suffused with a soft roseate flush. The sun, not fiery, not red-hot as in time of stifling drought, not dull purple as before a storm, but with a bright and genial radiance, rises peacefully behind a long and narrow cloud, shines out freshly, and plunges again into its lilac mist. The delicate upper edge of the strip of cloud flashes in little gleaming snakes; their brilliance is like beaten silver. But, lo! the dancing rays flash forth again, and in solemn joy, as though flying upward, rises the mighty orb. About midday there is wont to be, high up in the sky, a multitude of rounded clouds, golden-grey, with soft white edges. Like islands scattered over an overflowing river, that bathes them in its unbroken reaches of deep transparent blue, they scarcely stir; farther down the heavens they are in movement, packing closer; now there is no blue to be seen between them, but they are themselves almost as blue as the sky, filled full with light and heat. The colour of the horizon, a faint pale lilac, does not change all day, and is the same all round; nowhere is there storm gathering and darkening; only somewhere rays of bluish colour stretch down from the sky; it is a sprinkling of scarce perceptible rain. In the evening these clouds disappear; the last of them, blackish and undefined as smoke, lie streaked with pink, facing the setting sun; in the place where it has gone down, as calmly as it rose, a crimson glow lingers briefly over the darkening earth, and, softly flashing like a candle carried carelessly, the evening star flickers in the sky. On such days all the colours are softened, bright but not glaring; everything is suffused with a kind of touching tenderness. On such days the heat is sometimes very great; often it is even "steaming" on the slopes of the fields, but a wind dispels this growing sultriness, and whirling eddies of dust--sure sign of settled, fine weather--move along the roads and across the fields in high white columns. In the pure dry air there is a scent of wormwood, rye in blossom, and buckwheat; even an hour before nightfall there is no moisture in the air. It is for such weather that the farmer longs, for harvesting his wheat. . . .

On just such a day I was once out grouse-shooting in the Chernov District of the province of Tula. I started and shot a fair amount of game; my full game-bag cut my shoulder mercilessly; but already the evening glow had faded, and the cool shades of twilight were beginning to grow thicker and to spread across the sky, which was still bright, though no longer lighted up by the rays of the setting sun, when I at last decided to turn back homewards. With swift steps I passed through the long stretch of brushwood, clambered up a hill, and instead of the familiar plain I expected to see, with the oak wood on the right and the little white church in the distance, I saw before me a scene completely different, and quite new to me. A narrow valley lay at my feet, and directly facing me a dense wood of aspen-trees rose up like a thick wall. I stood still in perplexity, looked round me . . . . "Aha!" I thought, "I
have somehow come wrong; I kept too much to the right," and surprised at my own mistake, I rapidly
descended the hill. I was at once plunged into a disagreeable clinging mist, exactly as though I had
gone down into a cellar; the thick high grass at the bottom of the valley, all drenched with dew, was
white like a smooth table-cloth; one felt afraid somehow to walk on it. I made haste to get on the other
side and walked along beside the aspen wood, bearing to the left. Bats were already hovering over its
slumbering tree-tops, mysteriously flitting and quivering across the clear obscure of the sky; a young
belated hawk flew in swift, straight course upwards, hastening to its nest. "Here, directly I get to this
corner," I thought to myself, "I shall find the road at once; but I have come a verst out of my way!"

I did at last reach the end of the wood, but there was no road of any sort there; some kind of low
bushes overgrown with long grass extended far and wide before me; behind them in the far, far
distance could be discerned a tract of wasteland. I stopped again. "Well? Where am I?" I began
ransacking my brain to recall how and where I had been walking during the day. . . . Ah! but these are
the bushes at Parakhin," I cried at last; "of course! then this must be Sindeyev wood. But how did I get
here? So far? . . . Strange! Now I must bear to the right again."

I went to the right through the bushes. Meantime the night had crept close and grown up like a storm-
cloud; it seemed as though, with the mists of evening, darkness was rising up on all sides and flowing
down from overhead. I had come upon some sort of little, untrodden, overgrown path; I walked along
it, gazing intently before me. Soon all was blackness and silence around--only the quail's cry was heard
from time to time. Some small night-bird, flitting noiselessly near the ground on its soft wings, almost
flapped against me and scurried away in alarm. I came out on the further side of the bushes and made
my way along a field by the hedge. By now I could hardly make out distant objects; the field showed
dimly-white around; beyond it rose up a sullen darkness, which seemed moving up closer in huge
masses every instant. My steps gave a muffled sound in the air that grew colder and colder. The pale
sky began again to grow blue--but it was the blue of night. The tiny stars glimmered and twinkled in it.

What I had been taking for a wood turned out to be a dark round hillock. "But where am I, then?" I
repeated again aloud, standing still for the third time and looking inquiringly at my spot and tan
English dog, Dianka by name, certainly the most intelligent of four-footed creatures. But the most
intelligent of four-footed creatures only wagged her tail, blinked her weary eyes dejectedly, and gave
me no sensible advice. I felt myself disgraced in her eyes and pushed desperately forward, as though I
had suddenly guessed which way I ought to go; I scaled the hill and found myself in a hollow of no
great depth, ploughed round.

A strange sensation came over me at once. This hollow had the form of an almost perfect cauldron,
with sloping sides; at the bottom of it were some great white stones standing upright--it seemed as
though they had crept there for some secret council--and it was so still and dark in it, so flat and mute,
so dreary and weird seemed the sky, overhanging it, that my heart sank. Some little animal was
whining feebly and piteously among the stones. I made haste to get out again on to the hillock. Till
then I had not quite given up all hope of finding the way home; but at this point I finally decided that I
was utterly lost, and without any further attempt to make out the surrounding objects, which were
almost completely plunged in darkness, I walked straight forward, by the aid of the stars, at random. . . .
For about half an hour I walked on in this way, though I could hardly move one leg before the other. It
seemed as if I had never been in such a deserted country in my life; nowhere was there the glimmer of
a fire, nowhere a sound to be heard. One sloping hillside followed another; fields stretched endlessly
upon fields; bushes seemed to spring up out of the earth under my very nose. I kept walking and was
just making up my mind to lie down somewhere till morning, when suddenly I found myself on the
edge of a horrible precipice.
I quickly drew back my lifted foot, and through the almost opaque darkness I saw far below me a vast plain. A long river skirted it in a semicircle, turned away from me; its course was marked by the steely reflection of the water still faintly glimmering here and there. The hill on which I found myself terminated abruptly in an almost overhanging precipice, whose gigantic profile stood out black against the dark-blue waste of sky, and directly below me, in the corner formed by this precipice and the plain near the river, which was there a dark, motionless mirror, under the lee of the hill, two fires side by side were smoking and throwing up red flames. People were stirring round them, shadows hovered, and sometimes the front of a small curly head was lighted up by the glow.

I found out at last where I had got to. This plain was well known in our parts under, the name of Bezhin Meadow... But there was no possibility of returning home, especially at night; my legs were sinking under me from weariness. I decided to get down to the fires and to wait for the dawn in the company of these men, whom I took for drovers. I got down successfully, but I had hardly let go of the last branch I had grasped, when suddenly two large shaggy white dogs rushed angrily barking upon me. The sound of ringing boyish voices came from round the fires; two or three boys quickly got up from the ground. I called back in response to their shouts of inquiry. They ran up to me and at once called off the dogs, who were specially struck by the appearance of my Dianka. I came down to them.

I had been mistaken in taking the figures sitting round the fires for drovers. They were simply peasant boys from a neighbouring village, who were in charge of a drove of horses. In hot summer weather they drive the horses out at night to graze in the open country: the flies and gnats would give them no peace in the daytime; they drive out the drove towards evening, and drive them back in the early morning: it's a great treat for the peasant boys. Bare-headed, in old sheepskin coats, they bestride the most spirited nags, and scurry along with merry cries and hooting and ringing laughter, swinging their arms and legs and leaping into the air. The fine dust is stirred up in yellow clouds and moves along the road; the tramp of hoofs in unison resounds afar; the horses race along, pricking up their ears; in front of all, with his tail in the air and thistles in his tangled mane, prances some shaggy chestnut, constantly shifting his paces as he goes.

I told the boys I had lost my way. They made way for me and I sat down with them. They asked me where I came from, and then were silent for a little. Then we talked a little again. I lay down under a bush, whose shoots had been nibbled off, and began to look round. It was a marvellous picture; about the fire a red ring of light quivered and seemed to swoon away in the embrace of a background of darkness; the flame flaring up from time to time cast swift flashes of light beyond the boundary of this circle; a fine tongue of light licked the dry twigs and died away at once; long thin shadows, in their turn breaking in for an instant, danced right up to the very fires; darkness was struggling with light. Sometimes, when the fire burnt low and the circle of light shrank together, suddenly out of the encroaching darkness a horse's head was thrust in, bay, with striped markings, or all white, stared with intent blank eyes upon us, nipped hastily the long grass, and drawing back again, vanished instantly. One could only hear it still munching and snorting. From the circle, of light it was hard to make out what was going on in the darkness; everything close at hand seemed shut off by an almost black curtain; but farther away hills and forests were dimly visible in long blurs upon the horizon.

The dark unclouded sky stood, inconceivably immense, triumphant, above us in all its mysterious majesty. One felt a sweet oppression at one's heart, breathing in that peculiar, overpowering, yet fresh fragrance--the fragrance of a summer night in Russia. Scarcely a sound was to be heard around. Only at times, in the river near, the sudden splash of a big fish leaping, and the faint rustle of a reed on the bank, swaying lightly as the ripples reached it. The fires alone kept up a subdued crackling.
The boys sat round them: there, too, sat the two dogs who had been so eager to devour me. They could not for long after reconcile themselves to my presence, and, drowsily blinking and looking askance at the fire, they growled now and then with an unwonted sense of their own dignity; first they growled, and then whined a little, as though deploiring the impossibility of carrying out their desires. There were altogether five boys: Fedya, Pavlusha, Ilyusha, Kostya and Vanya. (From their talk I learnt their names, and I intend now to introduce them to the reader.)

The first and eldest of all, Fedya, one would take to be about fourteen. He was a well-made boy, with good-looking, delicate, rather small features, curly fair hair, bright eyes, and a perpetual half-merry, half-careless smile. He belonged, by all appearances, to a well-to-do family, and had ridden out to the meadow not through necessity, but for amusement. He wore a gay print shirt, with a yellow border; a short new overcoat slung round his neck was almost slipping off his narrow shoulders; a comb hung from his blue belt. His boots, coming a little way up the leg, were certainly his own----not his father's. The second boy, Pavlusha, had tangled black hair, grey eyes, broad cheek-bones, a pale face pitted with small-pox, a large but well-cut mouth; his head altogether was large--"a beer-barrel head," as they say --and his figure was square and clumsy. He was not a good-looking boy--there's no denying it!--and yet I liked him; he looked very sensible and straightforward, and there was a vigorous ring in his voice. He had nothing to boast of in his attire; it consisted simply of a homespun shirt and patched trousers. The face of the third, Ilyusha, was rather uninteresting; it was a long face, with short-sighted eyes and a hooknose: it expressed a kind of dull, fretful uneasiness; his tightly-drawn lips seemed rigid; his contracted brow never relaxed; he seemed continually blinking from the firelight. His fair hair hung out in wisps under his low felt hat, which he kept pulling down with both hands over his ears. He had on new bast shoes and leggings; a thick string, wound three times round his figure, carefully held together his neat black smock. Neither he nor Pavlusha looked more than twelve years old. The fourth, Kostya, a boy of ten, aroused my curiosity by his thoughtful and sorrowful look. His whole face was small, thin, freckled, pointed at the chin like a squirrel's; his lips were barely perceptible; but his great black eyes, that shone with liquid brilliance, produced a strange impression: they seemed trying to express something for which the tongue--his tongue, at least--had no words. He was undersized and weakly, and dressed rather poorly. The remaining boy, Vanya, I had not noticed at first; he was lying on the ground, peacefully curled up under a square mat, and, only occasionally thrust his curly brown head out from under it; this boy was seven years old at the most.

So I lay under the bush at one side and looked at the boys. A small pot was hanging over one of the fires; in it potatoes were cooking. Pavlusha was looking after them, and on his knees he was trying them by poking a splinter of wood into the boiling water. Fedya was lying leaning on his elbow and smoothing out the skirts of his coat. Ilyusha was sitting beside Kostya, and still kept blinking constrainedly. Kostya's head drooped despondently, and he looked away into the distance. Vanya did not stir under his mat. I pretended to be asleep. Little by little, the boys began talking again.

At first they gossiped of one thing and another, the work of tomorrow, the horses; but suddenly Fedya turned to Ilyusha, and, as though taking up again an interrupted conversation, asked him:

"Come then, so you've seen the goblin?"

"No, I didn't see him, and no one ever can see him," answered Ilyusha in a weak hoarse voice, the sound of which was wonderfully in keeping with the expression of his face; "I heard him. Yes, and not I alone."
"Where does he live--in your place?" asked Pavlusha.

"In the old paper mill."

"Why, do you go to the factory?"

"Of course we do. My brother Avdyushka and I, we are paper-glazers."

"Well!--factory-hands!"

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

"It was like this. It happened that I and my brother Avdyushka, with Fyodor Mikheyevsky, and Ivashka the Squint-Eyed, and the other Ivashka who comes from the Red Hills, and Ivashka Sukhorukov, too--and there were some other boys there as well--there were ten of us boys there altogether--the whole shift, that is--it happened that we spent the night at the paper mill; that's to say, it didn't happen, but Nazarov, the overseer, kept us. 'Why,' said he, 'should you waste time going home, boys; there's a lot of work tomorrow, so don't go home, boys.' So we stopped, and were all lying down together, and Avdyushka had just begun to say, 'I say, boys, suppose the goblin were to come?' And before he'd finished saying so, someone suddenly began walking over our heads; we were lying down below, and he began walking upstairs overhead, where the wheel is. We listened: he walked; the boards seemed to be bending under him, they creaked so; then he crossed over, above, our heads; all of a sudden the water began to drip and drip over the wheel; the wheel rattled and rattled and again began to turn, though the sluices of the conduit above had been let down. We wondered who could have lifted them up so that the water could run; anyway, the wheel turned and turned a little, and then, stopped. Then he went to the door overhead and began coming downstairs, and came down, not hurrying himself; the stairs seemed to groan under him, too. . . . Well, he came right down to our door, and waited and waited . . . and all of a sudden the door simply flew open. We were in a fright; we looked--there was nothing. Suddenly what if the net on one of the vats didn't begin moving; it got up and went rising and ducking and moving in the air as though someone were stirring with it, and then it was in its place again. Then, at another vat, a hook came off its nail, and then was on its nail again; and then it seemed as if someone came to the door and suddenly coughed and choked like a sheep, but so loudly! . . . We all fell down in a heap and huddled against one another. Just weren't we in a fright that night!"

"I say!" murmured Pavlusha, "what did he cough for?"

"I don't know; perhaps it was the damp." All were silent for a little.

"Well," inquired Fedya, "are the potatoes done?"

Pavlusha tried them.

"No, they are raw. . . . My, what a splash!" he added, turning his face in the direction of the river; "that must be a pike. . . . And there's a star falling."

"I say, I can tell you something, brothers," began Kostya in a shrill little voice; "listen what my Dad told us the other day."

"Well, we are listening," said Fedya with a patronizing air.
"You know Gavrila, I suppose, the carpenter up in the big village?"

"Yes, we know him."

"And do you know why he is so sorrowful always, never speaks? do you know? I'll tell you why he's so sorrowful; he went one day, Daddy said, he went, brothers, into the forest nutting. So he went nutting into the forest and lost his way; he went on--God only can tell where he got to. So he went on and on, brothers--but 'twas no good!--he could not find the way; and so night came on out of doors. So he sat down under a tree. 'I'll wait till morning,' thought he. He sat down and began to drop asleep. So, as he was falling asleep, suddenly he heard someone call him. He looked up; there was no one. He fell asleep again; again he was called. He looked and looked again; and in front of him there sat a mermaid on a branch, swinging herself, and calling him to her, and simply dying with laughing; she laughed so. . . . And the moon was shining bright, so bright, the moon shone so clear--everything could be seen plain, brothers. So she called him, and she herself was as bright and as white sitting on the branch as some dace or a roach, or like some little carp, so white and silvery. . . . Gavrila the carpenter almost fainted, brothers, but she laughed without stopping, and kept beckoning him to her like this. Then Gavrila was just getting up; he was just wanting to go up to the mermaid, brothers, but--the Lord put it into his heart, doubtless--he crossed himself. . . . And it was so hard for him to make that cross, brothers; he said, 'My hand was simply like a stone; it would not move.' Ugh! the horrid witch!. . . So when he made the cross, brothers, the mermaid, she left off laughing, and all at once how she did cry. . . . She cried, brothers, and wiped her eyes with her hair, and her hair was green as any hemp. So Gavrila looked and looked at her, and at last he fell to questioning her. 'Why are you weeping, wild thing of the woods?' And the mermaid began to speak to him like this: 'If you had not crossed yourself, man,' she says, 'you should have lived with me in gladness of heart to the end of your days; and I weep, I am grieved at heart because you crossed yourself; but I will not grieve alone; you, too, shall grieve at heart to the end of your days.' Then she vanished, brothers, and at once it was plain to Gavrila how to get out of the forest. . . . Only since then he goes always sorrowful, as you see."

"Ugh!" said Fedya after a brief silence; "but how can such an evil thing of the woods ruin a Christian soul--he did not listen to her?"

"Strange, isn't it?" said Kostya. "Gavrila said that her voice was as shrill and plaintive as a toad's."

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

"Yes. I was lying in the loft; I heard it all."

"It's a strange thing. Why should he be sorrowful? . . . But I suppose she liked him, since she called him."

"Ay, she liked him!" put in Ilyusha. "Yes, indeed! she wanted to tickle him to death, that's what she wanted. That's what they do, those mermaids."

"There ought to be mermaids here, too, I suppose," observed Fedya.

"No," answered Kostya, "this is a clear, open place. There's one thing, though: the river's near."

All were silent. Suddenly from out of the distance came a prolonged, resonant, almost wailing sound,
one of those inexplicable sounds of the night, which break upon a profound stillness, rise upon the air, linger, and slowly die away at last. You listen: it is as though there were nothing, yet it echoes still. It is as though someone had uttered a long, long cry upon the very horizon, as though some other had answered him with shrill harsh laughter in the forest, and, a faint, hoarse hissing hovers over the river. The boys looked roundabout shivering.

"Christ's aid be with us!" whispered Ilyusha.

"Ah, you craven crows!" cried Pavlusha; "what are you frightened of? Look, the potatoes are done." (They all came up to the pot and began to eat the smoking potatoes; only Vanya did not stir.) "Well, aren't you coming?" said Pavlusha.

But he did not creep out from under his mat. The pot was soon completely emptied.

"Have you heard, boys," began Ilyusha, "what happened with us at Varnavitsi?"

"Near the dam?" asked Fedya.

"Yes, yes, near the dam, the broken-down dam. That is a haunted place, such a haunted place, and so lonely. All round there are pits and quarries, and there are always snakes in pits."

"Well, what did happen? Tell us."

"Well, this is what happened. You don't know, perhaps, Fedya, but there a drowned man was buried; he was drowned long, long ago, when the water was still deep; only his grave can still be seen, though it can only just be seen . . . just a little mound. . . . So one day the bailiff called the huntsman Yermil, and says to him, 'Go to the post, Yermil.' Yermil always goes to the post for us; he has let all his dogs die; they never will live with him, for some reason, and they have never lived with him, though he's a good huntsman, and everyone likes him. So Yermil went to the post, and he stayed a bit in the town, and when he rode back, he was a little tipsy. It was night, a fine night; the moon was shining. . . . So Yermil rode across the dam; his way lay there. So, as he rode along, he saw, on the drowned man's grave, a little lamb, so white and curly and pretty, running about. So Yermil thought, 'I will take him,' and he got down and took him in his arms. But the little lamb didn't take any notice. So Yermil goes back to his horse, and the horse stares at him, and snorts and shakes his head; however, he said 'wo' to him and sat on him with the lamb, and rode on again; he held the lamb in front of him. He looks at him, and the lamb looks him straight in the face, like this. Yermil the huntsman felt upset. 'I don't remember,' he said, 'that lambs ever look at any one like that'; however, he began to stroke it like this on its wool and to say, 'Chucky! chucky!' And the lamb suddenly showed its teeth and said too, 'Chucky! chucky!'"

The boy who was telling the story had hardly uttered this last word, when suddenly both dogs got up at once, and, barking convulsively, rushed away from the fire and disappeared in the darkness. All the boys were alarmed. Vanya jumped up from under his mat. Pavlusha ran shouting after the dogs. Their barking quickly grew fainter in the distance. There was the noise of the uneasy tramp of the frightened drove of horses. Pavlusha shouted aloud, "Hey, Sery! Zhuchka!" In a few minutes the barking ceased; Pavlusha's voice sounded still in the distance. A little more time passed; the boys kept looking about in perplexity, as though expecting something to happen. Suddenly the tramp of a galloping horse was heard; it stopped short at the pile of wood, and, hanging on to the mane, Pavlusha sprang nimbly off it. Both the dogs also leaped into the circle of light and at once sat down, their red tongues hanging out.
"What was it? what was it?" asked the boys.

"Nothing," answered Pavlusha, waving his hand to his horse; "I suppose the dogs scented something. I thought it was a wolf," he added, calmly drawing deep breaths into his chest.

I could not help admiring Pavlusha. He was very fine at that moment. His ugly face, animated by his swift ride, glowed with hardihood and determination. Without even a switch in his hand, he had, without the slightest hesitation, rushed out into the night alone to face a wolf. "What a splendid fellow!" I thought, looking at him.

"Have you seen any wolves, then?" asked the trembling Kostya.

"There are always a good many of them here;" answered Pavlusha; "but they are only troublesome in the winter."

He crouched down again before the fire. As he sat down on the ground, he laid his hand on the shaggy head of one of the dogs. For a long while the flattered brute did not turn his head, gazing sidewise with grateful pride at Pavlusha.

Vanya lay down under his mat again.

"What dreadful things you were telling us, Ilyusha!" began Fedya, whose part it was, as the son of a well-to-do peasant, to lead the conversation. (He spoke little himself, apparently afraid of lowering his dignity.) "And then some evil spirit set the dogs barking. . . . Certainly I have heard that place of yours was haunted."

"Varnavitsi? I should think it was haunted! More than once, they say, they have seen the old master there--the late master. He wears, they say, a long skirted coat, and keeps groaning like this, and looking for something on the ground. Once grandfather Trofimich met him. 'What,' says he, 'your honour, Ivan Ivanich, are you pleased to look for on the ground?'"

"He asked him?" put in Fedya in amazement.

"Yes, he asked him."

"Well, I call Trofimich a brave fellow after that. . . . Well, what did he say?"

" 'I am looking for the herb that cleaves all things,' says he. But he speaks so thickly, so thickly. 'And what, your honour, Ivan Ivanich, do you want with the herb that cleaves all things?' 'The tomb weighs on me; it weighs on me, Trofimich; I want to get away--away."

"My word!" observed Fedya, "he didn't get enough out of life, I suppose."

"What a marvel!" said Kostya. "I thought one could only see the departed on All Hallows' Day."

"One can see the departed any time," Ilyusha interposed with conviction. From what I could observe, I judged he knew the village superstitions better than the others. "But on All Hallows' Day you can see the living too; those, that is, whose turn it is to die that year. You need only sit in the church porch and
keep looking at the road. They will come by you along the road; those, that is, who will die that year. Last year old Ulyana went to the porch."

"Well, did she see anyone?" asked Kostya inquisitively.

"To be sure she did. At first she sat a long, long while, and saw no one and heard nothing . . . only it seemed as if some dog kept whining and whining somewhere. . . . Suddenly she looks up: a boy comes along the road with only a shirt on. She looked at him. It was Ivashka Fedoseyev."

"He who died in the spring?" put in Fedya.

"Yes, he. He came along and never lifted up his head. But Ulyana knew him. And then she looks again: a woman came along. She stared and stared at her. . . . Ah, God Almighty! . . . it was herself coming along the road; Ulyana herself."

"Could it be herself?" asked Fedya.

"Yes, by God, herself."

"Well, but she is not dead yet, you know?"

"But the year is not over yet. And only look at her; her life hangs on a thread."

All were still again. Pavlusha threw a handful of dry twigs on to the fire. They were soon charred by the suddenly leaping flame; they cracked and smoked, and began to contract, curling up their burning ends. Gleams of light in broken flashes glanced in all directions, especially upwards. Suddenly, a white dove flew straight into the bright light, fluttered round and round in terror, bathed in the red glow, and disappeared with a whirr of its wings.

"It's lost its home, I suppose," remarked Pavlusha. "Now it will fly till it gets somewhere, where it can rest till dawn."

"Why, Pavlusha," said Kostya, "might it not be a just soul flying to heaven?"

Pavlusha threw another handful of twigs on to the fire.

"Perhaps," he said at last.

"But tell us, please, Pavlusha," began Fedya, "did you in Shalamov also see the heavenly portent?"

*This is what the peasants call an eclipse--Author's Note.

"When the sun could not be seen? Yes, indeed."

"Were you frightened, too?"

"Yes; and we weren't the only ones. Our master, though he talked to us beforehand and said there would be a heavenly portent, yet when it got dark, they say he himself was frightened out of his wits. And in the house-serfs' cottage the old woman, directly it grew dark, broke all the dishes in the oven
with the poker. "Who will eat now?" she said; "the last day has come." So the soup was running all about the place. And in the village there were such tales about among us: that white wolves would run over the earth and would eat men, that a bird of prey would pounce down on us, and that they would even see Trishka."

*The popular belief in Trishka is probably derived from some tradition of Antichrist--Author's Note.

"What is Trishka?" asked Kostya.

"Why, don't you know?" interrupted Ilyusha warmly. "Why, brother, where have you been brought up, not to know Trishka? You're a stay-at-home, one-eyed lot in your village, really! Trishka will be a marvellous man, who will come one day, and he will be such a marvellous man that they will never be able to catch him, and never be able to do anything with him; he will be such a marvellous man. The people will try to take him; for example, they will come after him with sticks, they will surround him, but he will blind their eyes so that they fall upon one another. They will put him in prison, for example; he will ask for a little water to drink in a bowl; they will bring him the bowl, and he will plunge into it and vanish from their sight. They will put chains on him, but he will only clap his hands--they will fall off him. So this Trishka will go through villages and towns; and this Trishka will be a wily man; he will lead astray Christ's people . . . and they will be able to do nothing to him. . . . He will be such a marvellous wily man."

"Well, then," continued Pavlusha in his deliberate voice, "that's what he's like. And so they expected him in our parts. The old men declared that directly the heavenly portent began, Trishka would come. So the heavenly portent began. All the people were scattered over the street, in the fields, waiting to see what would happen. Our place, you know, is open country. They look; and suddenly down the mountain-side from the big village comes a man of some sort; such a strange man, with such a wonderful head that all scream, 'Oy, Trishka is coming! Oy, Trishka is coming!' and all run in all directions! Our elder crawled into a ditch; his wife stumbled on the door-board and screamed with all her might; she terrified her yard-dog so that he broke away from his chain and over the hedge and into the forest it went; and Kuzka's father, Dorofeyich, ran into the oats, lay down there, and began to cry like a quail. 'Perhaps,' says he, 'the Enemy, the Destroyer of Souls, will spare the birds, at least.' So they were all in such a scare! But he that was coming was our cooper Vavila; he had bought himself a new pitcher and had put the empty pitcher over his head."

All the boys laughed; and again there was a silence for a while, as often happens when people are talking in the open air. I looked out into the solemn, majestic stillness of the night; the dewy freshness of late evening had been succeeded by the dry heat of midnight; the darkness still had long to lie in a soft curtain over the slumbering fields; there was still a long while left before the first whisperings, the first dewdrops of dawn. There was no moon in the heavens; it rose late at that time. Countless golden stars, twinkling in rivalry, seemed all running softly towards the Milky Way, and truly, looking at them, you were almost conscious of the whirling, never-resting motion of the earth. . . . A strange, harsh, painful cry sounded twice together over the river, and a few moments later, was repeated farther down. . . .

Kostya shuddered. "What was that?"

"That was a heron's cry," replied Pavlusha tranquilly. "A heron," repeated Kostya. . . . "And what was it, Pavlusha, I heard yesterday evening?" he added, after a short pause; "you perhaps will know."
"What did you hear?"

"I will tell you what I heard. I was going from Stony Ridge to Shashkino; I went first through our walnut wood, and then passed by a little pool--you know where there's a sharp turn down to the ravine-there is a water-pit there, you know; it is quite overgrown with reeds; so I went near this pit, brothers, and suddenly from it came a sound of someone groaning, and piteously, so piteously: oo-oo, oo-oo! I was in such a fright, my brothers; it was late, and the voice was so miserable. I felt as if I should cry myself. . . . What could that have been, eh?"

"It was in that pit the thieves drowned Akim the forester last summer," observed Pavlusha; "so perhaps it was his soul lamenting."

"Oh, dear, really, brothers," replied Kostya, opening wide his eyes, which were round enough before, "I did not know they had drowned Akim in that pit. Shouldn't I have been frightened if I'd known!"

"But they say there are little, tiny frogs," continued Pavlusha, "who cry piteously like that."

"Frogs? Oh, no, it was not frogs, certainly not." (The heron again uttered a cry above the river.) "Ugh, there it is!" Kostya cried involuntarily; "it is just like a wood-spirit shrieking."

"The wood-spirit does not shriek, it is dumb," put in Ilyusha; "it only claps its hands and rattles."

"And have you seen it then, the wood-spirit?" Fedya asked him ironically.

"No, I have not seen it, and God preserve me from seeing it; but others have seen it. Why, one day it misled a peasant in our parts, and led him through the woods and all in a circle in one field. . . . He scarcely got home till daylight."

"Well, and did he see it?"

"Yes. He says it was a big, big creature, dark, shapeless, as if it were standing behind a tree; you could not make it out well; it seemed to hide away from the moon, and kept staring and staring with its great eyes, and winking and winking them. . . ."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Fedya with a slight shiver, and a shrug of the shoulders; "pfoo!"

"And how does such an unclean brood come to exist in the world," said Pavlusha; "it's a wonder."

"Don't speak ill of it; take care, it will hear you," said Ilyusha.

Again there was a silence.

"Look, look, brothers," suddenly came Vanya's childish voice; "look at God's little stars; they are swarming like bees!"

He put his fresh little face out from under his mat, leaned on his little fist, and slowly lifted up his large soft eyes. The eyes of all the boys were raised to the sky, and they were not lowered quickly.

"Well, Vanya," began Fedya caressingly, "is your sister Anyutka well?"
"Yes, she is very well," replied Vanya with a slight lisp.

"You ask her, why doesn't she come to see us?"

"I don't know."

"You tell her to come."

"Very well."

"Tell her I have a present for her."

"And a present for me, too?"

"Yes, you, too."

Vanya sighed.

"No; I don't want one. Better give it to her; she is so kind to us at home."

And Vanya laid his head down again on the ground. Pavlusha got up and took the empty pot in his hand.

"Where are you going?" Fedya asked him.

"To the river, to get water; I want some water to drink."

The dogs got up and followed him.

"Take care you don't fall into the river!" Ilyusha cried after him.

"Why should he fall in?" said Fedya. "He will be careful."

"Yes, he will be careful. But all kinds of things happen; he will stoop over, perhaps, to draw the water, and the water-spirit will clutch him by the hand, and drag him into the depths. Then they will say, 'The boy fell into the water.' Fell in, indeed! . . . There, he has gone in among the reeds," he added, listening.

The reeds certainly "shished," as they call it among us, as they were parted.

"But is it true," asked Kostya, "that Akulina has been mad ever since she fell into the water?"

"Yes, ever since. . . . How dreadful she is now! But they say she was a beauty before then. The water-spirit bewitched her. I suppose he did not expect they would get her out so soon. So down there at the bottom he bewitched her."

(I had met this Akulina more than once. Covered with rags, fearfully thin, with face as black as coal, blar-eyed and for ever grinning, she would stay whole hours in one place in the road, stamping with her feet, pressing her fleshless hands to her breast, and slowly shifting from one leg to the other, like a
wild beast in a cage. She understood nothing that was said to her, and only chuckled spasmodically from time to time.)

"But they say," continued Kostya, "that Akulina threw herself into the river because her lover had deceived her."

"Yes, that was it."

"And do you remember Vasya?" added Kostya, mournfully.

"What Vasya?" asked Fedya.

"Why, the one who was drowned," replied Kostya, "in this very river. Ah, what a boy he was! What a boy he was! His mother, Feklista, how she loved him, her Vasya! And she seemed to have a foreboding, Feklista did, that harm would come to him from the water. Sometimes, when Vasya went with us boys in the summer to bathe in the river, she used to be trembling all over. The other women did not mind; they passed by with the pails, and went on, but Feklista put her pail down on the ground, and set to calling him, 'Come back, come back, my little joy; come back, my darling!' And no one knows how he was drowned. He was playing on the bank, and his mother was there haymaking; suddenly she hears as though someone was blowing bubbles through the water, and behold! there was only Vasya's little cap to be seen swimming on the water. You know since then Feklista has not been right in her mind: she goes and lies down at the place where he was drowned; she lies down, brothers, and sings a song--you remember Vasya was always singing a song like that--so she sings it, too, and weeps and weeps, and bitterly rails against God."

"Here is Pavlusha coming," said Fedya.

Pavlusha came up to the fire with a full pot in his hand.

"Boys," he began after a short silence, "something bad happened."

"Oh, what?" asked Kostya hurriedly.

"I heard Vasya's voice."

"I heard Vasya's voice."

They all seemed to shudder.

"What do you mean? what do you mean?" stammered Kostya.

"I don't know. Only I went to stoop down to the water; suddenly I hear my name called in Vasya's voice, as though it came from below water, 'Pavlusha, Pavlusha, come here.' I came away. But I fetched the water, though."'

"Ah, God have mercy upon us!" said the boys, crossing themselves.

"It was the water-spirit calling you, Pavlusha," said Fedya; "we were just talking of Vasya."

"Ah, it's a bad omen," said Ilyusha, deliberately.
"Well, never mind, don't bother about it," Pavlusha declared stoutly, and he sat down again; "no one can escape his fate."

The boys were still. It was clear that Pavlusha's words had produced a strong impression on them. They began to lie down before the fire as though preparing to go to sleep.

"What is that?" asked Kostya, suddenly lifting his head.

Pavlusha listened.

"It's the curlews flying and whistling."

"Where are they flying to?"

"To a land where, they say, there is no winter."

"But is there such a land?"

"Yes."

"Is it far away?"

"Far, far away, beyond the warm seas."

Kostya sighed and shut his eyes.

More than three hours had passed since I first came across the boys. The moon at last had risen; I did not notice it at first; it was such a tiny crescent. This moonless night was as solemn and hushed as it had been at first. . . . But already many stars, that not long before had been high up in the heavens, were setting over the earth's dark rim; everything around was perfectly still, as it is only still towards morning; all was sleeping the deep unbroken sleep that comes before daybreak. Already the fragrance in the air was fainter; once more a dew seemed falling. . . . How short are nights in summer! . . . The boys' talk died down when the fires did. The dogs even were dozing; the horses, so far as I could make out in the hardly perceptible, faintly shining light of the stars, were asleep with downcast heads. . . . I fell into a state of weary unconsciousness, which passed into sleep.

A fresh breeze passed over my face. I opened my eyes; the morning was beginning. The dawn had not yet flushed the sky, but already it was growing light in the east. Everything had become visible, though dimly visible, around. The pale-grey sky was growing light and cold and bluish; the stars twinkled with a dimmer light, or disappeared; the earth was wet, the leaves covered with dew, and from the distance came sounds of life and voices, and a light morning breeze went fluttering over the earth. My body responded to it with a faint shudder of delight. I got up quickly and went to the boys. They were all sleeping, as though they were tired out, round the smouldering fire; only Pavlusha half rose and gazed intently at me.

I nodded to him, and walked homewards beside the misty river. Before I had walked two miles, already all around me, over the wide dew-drenched prairie, and in front, from forest to forest, where the hills were growing green again, and behind, over the long dusty road and the sparkling bushes, flushed with the red glow, and the river faintly blue now under the lifting mist, flowed fresh streams of
burning light, first pink, then red and golden. . . . All things began to stir, to awaken, to sing, to flutter, to speak. On all sides thick drops of dew sparkled in glittering diamonds; to welcome me, pure and clear as though bathed in the freshness of morning, came the notes of a bell, and suddenly there rushed by me, driven by the boys I had parted from, the drove of horses, refreshed and rested. . . .

Sad to say, I must add that in that year Pavlusha met his end. He was not drowned; he was killed by a fall from his horse. Pity! he was a splendid fellow!