

II. THE THUNDERSTORM

The sun was sinking towards the west, and his long, hot rays were burning my neck and cheeks beyond endurance, while thick clouds of dust were rising from the road and filling the whole air. Not the slightest wind was there to carry it away. I could not think what to do. Neither the dust-blackened face of Woloda dozing in a corner, nor the motion of Philip's back, nor the long shadow of our britchka as it came bowling along behind us brought me any relief. I concentrated my whole attention upon the distance-posts ahead and the clouds which, hitherto dispersed over the sky, were now assuming a menacing blackness, and beginning to form themselves into a single solid mass.

From time to time distant thunder could be heard--a circumstance which greatly increased my impatience to arrive at the inn where we were to spend the night. A thunderstorm always communicated to me an inexpressibly oppressive feeling of fear and gloom.

Yet we were still ten versts from the next village, and in the meanwhile the large purple cloudbank--arisen from no one knows where--was advancing steadily towards us. The sun, not yet obscured, was picking out its fuscous shape with dazzling light, and marking its front with grey stripes running right down to the horizon. At intervals, vivid lightning could be seen in the distance, followed by low rumbles which increased steadily in volume until they merged into a prolonged roll which seemed to embrace the entire heavens. At length, Vassili got up

and covered over the britchka, the coachman wrapped himself up in his cloak and lifted his cap to make the sign of the cross at each successive thunderclap, and the horses pricked up their ears and snorted as though to drink in the fresh air which the flying clouds were outdistancing. The britchka began to roll more swiftly along the dusty road, and I felt uneasy, and as though the blood were coursing more quickly through my veins. Soon the clouds had veiled the face of the sun, and though he threw a last gleam of light to the dark and terrifying horizon, he had no choice but to disappear behind them.

Suddenly everything around us seemed changed, and assumed a gloomy aspect. A wood of aspen trees which we were passing seemed to be all in a tremble, with its leaves showing white against the dark lilac background of the clouds, murmuring together in an agitated manner. The tops of the larger trees began to bend to and fro, and dried leaves and grass to whirl about in eddies over the road. Swallows and white-breasted swifts came darting around the britchka and even passing in front of the forelegs of the horses. While rooks, despite their outstretched wings, were laid, as it were, on their keels by the wind. Finally, the leather apron which covered us began to flutter about and to beat against the sides of the conveyance.

The lightning flashed right into the britchka as, cleaving the obscurity for a second, it lit up the grey cloth and silk galloon of the lining and Woloda's figure pressed back into a corner.

Next came a terrible sound which, rising higher and higher, and spreading further and further, increased until it reached its climax in a deafening thunderclap which made us tremble and hold our breaths. "The wrath of God"--what poetry there is in that simple popular conception!

The pace of the vehicle was continually increasing, and from Philip's and Vassili's backs (the former was tugging furiously at the reins) I could see that they too were alarmed.

Bowling rapidly down an incline, the britchka cannoned violently against a wooden bridge at the bottom. I dared not stir and expected destruction every moment.

Crack! A trace had given way, and, in spite of the ceaseless, deafening thunderclaps, we had to pull up on the bridge.

Leaning my head despairingly against the side of the britchka, I followed with a beating heart the movements of Philip's great black fingers as he tied up the broken trace and, with hands and the butt-end of the whip, pushed the harness vigorously back into its place.

My sense of terror was increasing with the violence of the thunder. Indeed, at the moment of supreme silence which generally precedes the greatest intensity of a storm, it mounted to such a height that I felt as though another quarter of an hour of this emotion would kill me.

Just then there appeared from beneath the bridge a human being who, clad in a torn, filthy smock, and supported on a pair of thin shanks bare of muscles, thrust an idiotic face, a tremulous, bare, shaven head, and a pair of red, shining stumps in place of hands into the britchka.

"M-my lord! A copeck for--for God's sake!" groaned a feeble voice as at each word the wretched being made the sign of the cross and bowed himself to the ground.

I cannot describe the chill feeling of horror which penetrated my heart at that moment. A shudder crept through all my hair, and my eyes stared in vacant terror at the outcast.

Vassili, who was charged with the apportioning of alms during the journey, was busy helping Philip, and only when everything had been put straight and Philip had resumed the reins again had he time to look for his purse. Hardly had the britchka begun to move when a blinding flash filled the welkin with a blaze of light which brought the horses to their haunches. Then, the flash was followed by such an ear-splitting roar that the very vault of heaven seemed to be descending upon our heads. The wind blew harder than ever, and Vassili's cloak, the manes and tails of the horses, and the carriage-apron were all slanted in one direction as they waved furiously in the violent blast.

Presently, upon the britchka's top there fell some large drops of rain--"one, two, three:" then suddenly, and as though a roll of drums

were being beaten over our heads, the whole countryside resounded with the clatter of the deluge.

From Vassili's movements, I could see that he had now got his purse open, and that the poor outcast was still bowing and making the sign of the cross as he ran beside the wheels of the vehicle, at the imminent risk of being run over, and reiterated from time to time his plea, "For-for God's sake!" At last a copeck rolled upon the ground, and the miserable creature--his mutilated arms, with their sleeves wet through and through, held out before him--stopped perplexed in the roadway and vanished from my sight.

The heavy rain, driven before the tempestuous wind, poured down in pailfuls and, dripping from Vassili's thick cloak, formed a series of pools on the apron. The dust became changed to a paste which clung to the wheels, and the ruts became transformed into muddy rivulets.

At last, however, the lightning grew paler and more diffuse, and the thunderclaps lost some of their terror amid the monotonous rattling of the downpour. Then the rain also abated, and the clouds began to disperse. In the region of the sun, a lightness appeared, and between the white-grey clouds could be caught glimpses of an azure sky.

Finally, a dazzling ray shot across the pools on the road, shot through the threads of rain--now falling thin and straight, as from a sieve--and fell upon the fresh leaves and blades of grass. The great cloud was

still louring black and threatening on the far horizon, but I no longer felt afraid of it--I felt only an inexpressibly pleasant hopefulness in proportion, as trust in life replaced the late burden of fear. Indeed, my heart was smiling like that of refreshed, revived Nature herself.

Vassili took off his cloak and wrung the water from it. Woloda flung back the apron, and I stood up in the britchka to drink in the new, fresh, balm-laden air. In front of us was the carriage, rolling along and looking as wet and resplendent in the sunlight as though it had just been polished. On one side of the road boundless oatfields, intersected in places by small ravines which now showed bright with their moist earth and greenery, stretched to the far horizon like a checkered carpet, while on the other side of us an aspen wood, intermingled with hazel bushes, and parquettted with wild thyme in joyous profusion, no longer rustled and trembled, but slowly dropped rich, sparkling diamonds from its newly-bathed branches on to the withered leaves of last year.

From above us, from every side, came the happy songs of little birds calling to one another among the dripping brushwood, while clear from the inmost depths of the wood sounded the voice of the cuckoo. So delicious was the wondrous scent of the wood, the scent which follows a thunderstorm in spring, the scent of birch-trees, violets, mushrooms, and thyme, that I could no longer remain in the britchka. Jumping out, I ran to some bushes, and, regardless of the showers of drops discharged upon me, tore off a few sprigs of thyme, and buried my face in them to smell their glorious scent.

Then, despite the mud which had got into my boots, as also the fact that my stockings were soaked, I went skipping through the puddles to the window of the carriage.

"Lubotshka! Katenka!" I shouted as I handed them some of the thyme, "Just look how delicious this is!"

The girls smelt it and cried, "A-ah!" but Mimi shrieked to me to go away, for fear I should be run over by the wheels.

"Oh, but smell how delicious it is!" I persisted.