

IVAN GONCHAROV

THE SAME  
OLD STORY







И В А Н    Г О Н Ч А Р О В

**ОБЫКНОВЕННАЯ  
И С Т О Р И Я**

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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ  
*Москва*



I V A N   G O N C H A R O V

**THE SAME  
OLD STORY**

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One summer day the entire household of Anna Pavlovna Aduyeva, the owner of a modest estate in the village of Grachi, was up at dawn, from the mistress herself to Barbos the watchdog.

But Anna Pavlovna's only son, the twenty-year-old Alexander Fyodorich, slept the sound sleep of youth. The house was full of fuss and flurry, but everybody went on tiptoe and spoke in whispers, so as not to wake the young master. If anyone made the slightest noise, or spoke loudly, Anna Pavlovna was on the spot instantly, like an infuriated lionness, scolding the thoughtless one severely, showering insulting epithets, and sometimes, if very angry and feeling strong enough, even using her fists.

In the kitchen frantic preparations were on foot, as if for a great company, although the proprietor's family consisted of only two persons—Anna Pavlovna and Alexander Fyodorich. In the coach-house the carriage was being polished and the wheels greased. All were busy, all worked in the sweat of their brow. Barbos was the only one who had nothing to do, but even he took part in the general stir in his own way. When a footman or the coachman passed him, or a maidservant scurried across the yard, he wagged his tail and sniffed energetically at the passer-by, while his eyes

seemed to say: I do wish somebody would tell me what all the fuss is about!

Now, all this fuss was simply because Anna Pavlovna was seeing her son off to work in a government office in Petersburg, or, as she put it, to see the world, and let the world see him. A tragic day for her! And that is why she was so melancholy and irritable. Every now and then, in the midst of her cares, she opened her mouth to give some order, but stopped half-way through the sentence, her voice failing her, and turned aside to wipe away a tear, or if too late, to let it drop into the trunk in which she was packing Sashenka's clothes. Tears had long been welling up in her heart, they lay like a weight in her breast, reached her throat and threatened to gush up in torrents. But, as if saving them up for the last farewell, she only shed an occasional tear.

She was not the only one mourning the coming separation—Sashenka's man-servant, Yevsei, was also overcome with grief. He was going with his master to Petersburg, leaving the warmest nook in the house, behind the stove in the room of Agrafena, the prime minister of Anna Pavlovna's cabinet, and what was still more important for Yevsei—her house-keeper.

There was only just room behind the stove for two chairs and a table, for serving tea, coffee, and *hors-d'oeuvres*. Yevsei had entrenched himself firmly both on one of the chairs and in the heart of Agrafena. The second chair was for herself alone.

The affair of Agrafena and Yevsei was an old story in the house. Like all such affairs it was discussed, with much slanderous gossip about the persons involved, and then, like all such affairs, dropped. The mistress herself was used to seeing them together, and they had enjoyed ten years of bliss. There are not many who can count ten happy years

in their whole existence. But now the hour of bereavement had struck! Farewell, warm nook, farewell, Agrafena Ivanovna, farewell, games of *duraki* \*, coffee, vodka, cordials—farewell everything!

Yevsei sat in his accustomed place, sighing noisily. Agrafena, a perpetual scowl on her face, busied herself about the house. She expressed her grief in a way of her own. That day she poured out the tea fiercely, and instead of handing the first cup, very strong, to her mistress, as she usually did, she poured it away, as if to say "nobody shall have it," taking her mistress's rating with stoical firmness. The coffee was boiled too long, the cream "caught," the cups slipped through her fingers. She did not place the tray on the table, she banged it down. She did not merely unlock cupboards and doors, she wrenched them open. But she shed no tears, only vented her rage on everything and everybody. And this was quite in keeping with her character. She was never satisfied; nothing suited her; she was always scolding and complaining. But at this crucial moment of her life her character displayed itself in all its splendour. And it seemed as if no one annoyed her so much as Yevsei.

"Agrafena Ivanovna!" he wailed with a plaintive tenderness that did not quite suit his tall, but closely-knit figure.

"Couldn't you sit somewhere else, you dolt?" she replied, as if he had never sat there before. "Let me pass, I want to get a towel."

"Ah, Agrafena Ivanovna!" he repeated languidly, sighing and getting up, only to sink back on to the seat as soon as she had taken the towel.

"He can do nothing but whimper! Sticking to me like a leech! A perfect pest, dear Lord!"

And she dropped a spoon noisily into the slop-basin.

\* A card-game, something like "Beggar My Neighbour."— *Tr.*

"Agrafena!" came suddenly from the next room. "Have you gone mad? Don't you know Sashenka's still asleep? What are you doing—fighting with your beloved, by way of farewell?"

"You'd like me not to stir, sit there like the dead!" hissed Agrafena venomously, drying a cup with both her hands as if she would have liked to break it into pieces.

"Farewell! Farewell!" said Yevsei, heaving a mighty sigh. "The last day, Agrafena Ivanovna!"

"And thank God for that! Good riddance to bad rubbish! There'll be more room. Get out of the way, now, I can't move! Stretching out your long legs!"

He tried touching her on the shoulder—and didn't she give him what for! He heaved another sigh, but made no attempt to move. And he was quite right, that was not what Agrafena wanted. Yevsei knew this, and was not disturbed.

"Who will sit in my place?" he murmured, with another sigh.

"A pixie!" she snapped.

"God grant it! So long as it's not Proshka. And who will play *duraki* with you?"

"Well, and supposing Proshka does, what of it?" she asked venomously.

Yevsei rose.

"Don't play with Proshka—only not that!" he said in anxious, almost threatening tones.

"And who's to prevent me, pray? The likes of you?"

"Dear Agrafena Ivanovna!" he pleaded, putting his arm round what might have been called her waist, if there had been the slightest hint of a waist in her figure.

She responded to the embrace by sticking her elbow into his chest.

"Dear Agrafena Ivanovna!" he repeated. "Will Proshka love you as much as I do? You know what a rascal he is—

he's after every woman he sees. And I—oh! Why, you're the apple of my eye! If it weren't the mistress's will ... oh!"

He groaned and made a gesture of despair. Agrafena could bear no more—at last even *her* grief showed itself in tears.

"Can't you leave me alone, you miserable wretch?" she said through her tears. "How you do go on! As if I would take up with Proshka! Can't you see nobody can get a word of sense out of him? All he thinks about is pawing me...."

"So he *has* been after you! The scoundrel! And you never told me a word! I'd—"

"Only let him try to touch me! As if I was the only female in the house! Me to take up with Proshka! What next, I wonder! It makes me sick even to sit next to him—the dirty swine. If one doesn't look out he's up to striking someone, or eating the mistress's victuals under one's very nose, and nobody ever noticing!"

"Agrafena Ivanovna, if the necessity *should* arise—the Evil One is very cunning—better let Grishka take my place. He's a quiet, hard-working chap, he isn't one of your scoffers."

"There you go again!" shouted Agrafena. "What makes you shove all sorts of people on me—as if I was some—Get out! There's plenty of you men, and I'm not the one to throw myself at the first-comer. You were the only one, you pixie, I got myself mixed up with, the Evil One must have caught me in his toils for my sins, and I repent it ... and you keep on nagging at me!"

"God reward you for your goodness! It's a weight off my shoulders!" exclaimed Yevsei.

"Now he's pleased!" she shouted ferociously. "If you find anything to be pleased about in that you're welcome to it!"

And her very lips turned pale with fury. Neither of them spoke for a few moments.

And then: "Agrafena Ivanovna," began Yevsei timidly.

"Now what?"

"I was almost forgetting—I haven't had a crumb since the morning."

"Is that all?"

"It's on account of my grief."

She reached for a glass of vodka and two huge hunks of bread and ham from behind a sugar-loaf on the bottom shelf of the cupboard. All this had long been made ready for him by her solicitous hands. She thrust the food and drink at him—you would hardly fling food to a dog so roughly. One hunk fell on the floor.

"Here you are—choke yourself! The devil take you! Quiet now, the whole house can hear you champing!"

She turned away from him with an expression of assumed disgust, and he began slowly eating, eyeing Agrafena from beneath his brows, and covering his mouth with his free hand.

In the meanwhile a carriage and three drove up to the gate. The shaft-bow was fixed over the wheel-horse. The little bell, hanging from it, its clapper lolling from side to side, emitted hollow sounds, like the tongue of a drunken man, bound and flung into a cell. The coachman tied up the horses under a pent-house, took off his cap, and extracted from it a grubby towel, with which he proceeded to wipe the sweat from his face. Catching sight of him from the window, Anna Pavlovna turned pale. Her knees gave, and her hands hung limp at her sides, although she had been on the look-out for the carriage. Mastering her emotion, she called Agrafena.

"Go on tiptoe, very, very quietly, and see if Sashenka's still asleep," she said. "His last day will go in sleep, the darling, and I shan't be able to look my fill at him. But no, you can't—you'd steal in about as quietly as a cow. I'd better go myself."