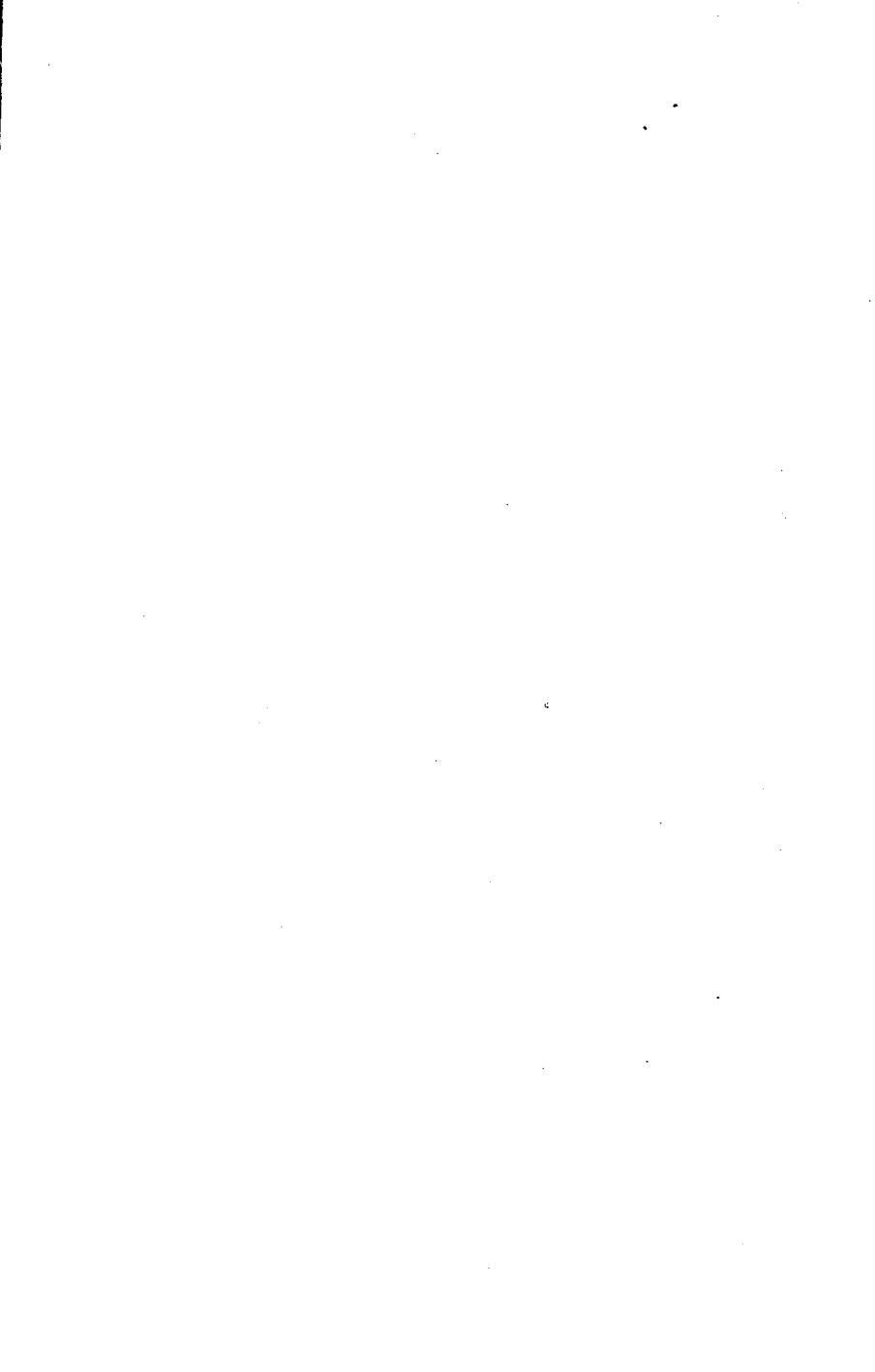




LYDIA OBUKHOVA

A TALE OF POLESIE

LIBRARY OF SOVIET LITERATURE





891.73

014

O **L** Y D I A
B U K H O V A

A T A L E O F P O L E S I E



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
M o s c o w

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY RALPH PARKER

DESIGNED BY Y. REBROV AND V. NOSKOV

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Chapter One.</i> THE DISTRICT HORIZON	9
<i>Chapter Two.</i> BRATICHI, A YEAR BEFORE	44
<i>Chapter Three.</i> ON THE ROAD	79
<i>Chapter Four.</i> TALK ABOUT WEDDINGS	110
<i>Chapter Five.</i> MAN ON THE RIGHT JOB	130
<i>Chapter Six.</i> SERAFIMA SINGS	179
<i>Chapter Seven.</i> HARVEST FESTIVAL	221
<i>Chapter Eight.</i> ON A MOONLESS NIGHT	267
<i>Chapter Nine.</i> THE BEGINNING OF AUTUMN	326



CHAPTER ONE
THE DISTRICT HORIZON

1

Like ancient Rome, the little town of Glubin stands where five roads converge. Along these roads, raising clouds of dust when the weather is dry, or heaving them-

selves, engines racing heart-rendingly, out of the deep miry puddles if it has rained recently, lorries from the collective farms head for the town. On entering it they sound their horns, each raising its own distinctive voice in greeting to Glubin, the little "capital" of their district.

Shreds of cool mist cling to the sides of the lorries, torn from that clammy white blanket which the land throws off so reluctantly as night turns to day and which every roadside shrub clutches at and wraps around itself. Every other minute the heavy-ribbed tyres fling up a spatter of mud from the swampy hollows, streams and fords which from a distance lie hidden under thick, dark-green grass. "From Dvortsy Hill to Grabun Moss, forty are the fords to cross," the people of these parts say, though no one has counted the fords or given them names.

Byelorussian Polesie is the lowest-lying part of the European continent, or nearly so. Long ago the sea stretched over that land, and the land has not forgotten it to this day: it is saturated with moisture. During the spring floods the villages look like floating islands.

At that time the only vehicle that can pick its way through the roads around Glubin is a renowned khaki-painted jeep that belongs to the district executive committee. Snorting boldly it takes the fords of nameless streams at a rush while Pinchuk, the chairman of the committee, casts an experienced eye over the floods and by their width estimates the hay crop to be expected that year.

Glubin itself has been here from times immemorial.

It is believed that one of the princes of Pinsk and Turov, the dynasty which at various times ruled over Pinsk, Turov and Berest—the Brest of our days—planted his younger son on the River Glubin to protect the approaches to Polesie. The princeling had a fortress built in the deep forest and surrounded it with a wall of enor-

mous logs. The march-dwellers' cottages sprang up around the fortress like mushrooms in rainy weather. The fields grew dark under the plough. People gathered honey, hunted and made pitch.

This place saw Tatars too; it was almost the farthest west they came. And they too settled in the deep forests along the banks of the good river of Glubin. To this day you may find people in the town with names like Gireyev and Shakhnazar.

In snowy winters the little town stands snugly wrapped in squirrel fur, so that sometimes a bird will fly over it without distinguishing it from the surrounding forest.

Even in summertime, at night, when the electric current has been switched off at the main, Glubin is swallowed up in the primeval darkness and silence.

But with the dawn Glubin awakes to bustling human activity. The dairy and the brick works exchange blasts on their hooters, the mail plane lands, the postmen mount the creaking steps of the porches, delivering letters and newspapers. And from early spring to late autumn a perky, noisy little steamer carries holiday-makers and folk on various errands along the Glubin, whose cool fresh waters are infused with forest herbs. After their long journey those travellers see in the little town of Glubin that desirable "point of final destination" for which they have been straining their eyes since the first streak of dawn appeared in the sky.

Very early one summer morning, when every blade of grass bent under the weight of its spangle of dew and lorries were racing towards Glubin along all five roads, the district executive committee's jeep was speeding back from the regional town, gallantly topping one sandy ridge after another.

It was four in the morning, no later. A pinkish light was breaking through the night mist. In the undergrowth beside the road the birds were trying out their voices. But because Glubin was still a good way off Chairman Pinchuk kept looking impatiently at his watch.

"Let it rip, Timofei," he pleaded with the driver. "I've called people in from the whole district."

In the back of the car sat a girl. She was wearing a check-patterned frock and had a red leather handbag slung over her shoulder. Her eyes, dark under straight, full brows, looked as if they were always on the point of registering surprise, delight, shock—in short, some active attitude to life. Now she was listening with curiosity to the conversation and with no less curiosity looking out of the car at the scenes that opened to her view.

Every time the car jolted on a specially big bump her suitcase bounced and she would grasp it in her arms; and these thin arms, bare almost to the shoulders, with bones sticking out at the elbows and wrists, were somehow particularly eloquent and completed her whole appearance of callow youth, of a time when looking at a person one does not know whether life is being so generous that it deals happiness out without bargaining or whether youth itself is so immeasurably rich, so happy in itself that it feels no need of any additional gifts.

"What's that river called?" the girl would ask Pinchuk, leaning forward. "And that village over there? There, see that thatched roof?"

Two days before, at this same early hour, she had left Moscow. The station buildings, vaguely green and silent, had looked strangely clean in the morning light. A fresh warm wind blew freely across the broad asphalted square before the station. Red signal lamps were still glowing far away on the radio pylons, lights garlanding the city streets were glimmering faintly and the clouds overhead were as bright pink as those which

floated in the sky now: up there they were the first to see the rising sun.

Pinchuk screwed up his eyes and glanced carelessly at the forest hamlet slipping behind the trees. As everywhere in those parts the cottages were timber-built, made out of whole logs with a low earth surround, and they looked so picturesque and archaic that it seemed one would only have to open the door to find an osier basket, smeared with clay, hanging on a thong from the ceiling and swaying in the draught, and in it dried pine cones burning brightly as they have burned in our Polesian cottages on winter evenings till quite recently.

"What, are you surprised to see thatched roofs?" said Pinchuk, half-turning towards the girl. His voice was gentle and at the same time mildly patronizing. Both these expressions were to the fore in his manner; his protruding, pale grey eyes wore a constant ironical smile, as if expressing an equal measure of good-will to one and all. "Oh, we've plenty of thatched roofs round here. You'll see for yourself when you get about the district more. Of course, you ought to see the new school at Bratichi too. Two storeys, brick-built, a place a big town would not be ashamed of. Incidentally, I laid the corner-stone myself."

Pinchuk liked to talk about the district. He has lived there without a break since 1945, having come to those parts first six years before when the frontier posts were moved westward and the artificial border which after the First World War had hacked the River Glubin and all Byelorussian Polesie in two was finally shifted.

"Our conditions here are peculiar," Pinchuk went on, aware of the interest in the girl's eyes. "What is the Pinsk Region? Sand and bog and mosquitoes in the scrub. Let me give you a few figures. Up to 'thirty-nine *Pan* Paslawski lived here, a prince or a count—I don't know. Incidentally, he was considered an enlightened

person. Oh yes, he had the idea of reclaiming a hundred hectares of marshland. A hundred hectares! That was their scale in the Poland of the *pans*. Why, last year alone our region planned to drain four thousand hectares. Instead, we did ten thousand. Hey, Timofei," he said with sudden decision, evidently not able to resist temptation any longer, "let's turn off the road and go to Bratichi. It'll cost us half an hour, no more. There's a little patch of bog I'd like to show you."

The car turned into a bumpy track through alder thickets and carried on for ten lurching minutes.

There was no water to be seen. Nothing but round mounds of earth clothed in bright, almost blue grass. Beyond a small hollow rose a dense field of hemp, a veritable forest of spears shutting out half the sky:

"Is this a marsh?" the girl asked doubtfully, stepping lightly out of the car. "Oh!" she cried out as the ground gave softly under her feet.

"It's all right, you needn't be afraid," Pinchuk assured her. "Five years ago it would have been another thing: cows were drowned here just like that. But now, look at that forest of hemp. They say there are wolves living in it."

With undisguised pleasure he parted the stems of the hemp, which grew twice the height of a man; as he walked he stroked them as he would a horse's withers, drew down the fluffy panicles and rubbed the little snake's-tongue leaves in the palm of his hand.

"You can get drunk by just breathing this. H'm, I didn't know they'd shot up so. A pity. Should have cut a couple down and taken 'em to town. It would have given them something to mention us by."

There was undisguised pride in his voice. It pleased him to be able to tell a newcomer all kinds of interesting things about Glubin. Usually it was quite different: he had but to cross the borders of the region to enter a

world where Glubin and its affairs shrank to insignificance and where the heroes of the day were the canal diggers and the builders of tall buildings. Quite right, of course, but a little hard to take. Not that Glubin had much to boast of: it *was* an out of the way place, seventy versts from the railway line.

“By the way, we had an expedition from the Academy of Sciences here last year,” said Pinchuk jealously when they were back in the car. “They excavated an early Slav burial ground. Found a pot made of local clay. Our clay makes very good ceramics. It’s the same kind that’s used for the facings on Moscow University. But maybe that sort of thing doesn’t interest you. Or does it?”

The girl shook her head.

“Is that Glubin?”

The narrow road, black as powdered charcoal, took them along the river-bank which was fairly high at this place. Where the current ran swiftest there was a stripe of a more intense blue with a pattern like the back-bone of a fish. A tributary, no more than a stream, cut right across the road; the car forded it easily. The water that ran along its sandy bed was clear though almost orange in colour. The yearling calves which had come to water might have borrowed that colour for their own coats: they were a rusty red with white patches on their backs and bellies. When Timofei tooted his horn they scattered merrily over the dense green of the pasture.

The car bounced along. Branches of willow, hanging low from the hollow stumpy trunks, stroked the windows. Pinchuk glanced over his shoulder at a cardboard box which had been squeezed so tight into the space at the feet of the girl passenger that these jolts could not possibly harm it. She caught that glance which expressed more vexation than anxiety, and at once her usual curiosity was aroused.

"What's in it?" she asked.

"I've got some medical apparatus for Luchesy hospital. Antonina Andreyevna, the doctor there, asked me to pick it up." Pinchuk groaned with a shade of resigned irritation. "Lost half a day." But, as though recollecting himself, he quickly resumed his benevolent, slightly patronizing tone. "Oh, it's a little jewel, that hospital. They built it a year ago. They've told me at the regional centre: your health services, Comrade Pinchuk, are something not to be matched."

"You know, at first I thought you were Klyucharev," the girl confessed candidly. "Comrade Kurilo advised me to go straight to Klyucharev when I get to Glubin."

"You can go to him or to me," replied Pinchuk with a broad, serene smile. "Oh no, I'm not Klyucharev. I'm Pinchuk, Maxim Petrovich Pinchuk, chairman of the district executive committee. What's your name, by the way?"

"Vdovina, Yevgenia Vasilyevna. Zhenya for short. What a pity you didn't give a lift to those teachers who are coming to your district." She had suddenly remembered them leaping at the opportunity to change the subject and conceal the shyness she felt at having pronounced her full name so solemnly. "There's room in the car, after all."

"Ye-es, that's true," Pinchuk agreed. "I'm sorry myself that those fellows were too proud to come and ask me a second time."

2

The conference from which Pinchuk was returning had ended in the afternoon the day before but other business in the town had kept him from getting away till it was dawn. For one thing, he had to give a talk over the lo-