



MATVEI TEVELYOV



HOTEL

in

SNEGOVETS

LIBRARY OF SOVIET SHORT STORIES

MATVEI TEVELYOV

**HOTEL
IN SNEGOVETS**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M O S C O W

МАТВЕЙ ТЕВЕЛЕВ

ГОСТИНИЦА В СНЕГОВЦЕ

Рассказы

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY O. SHARTSE

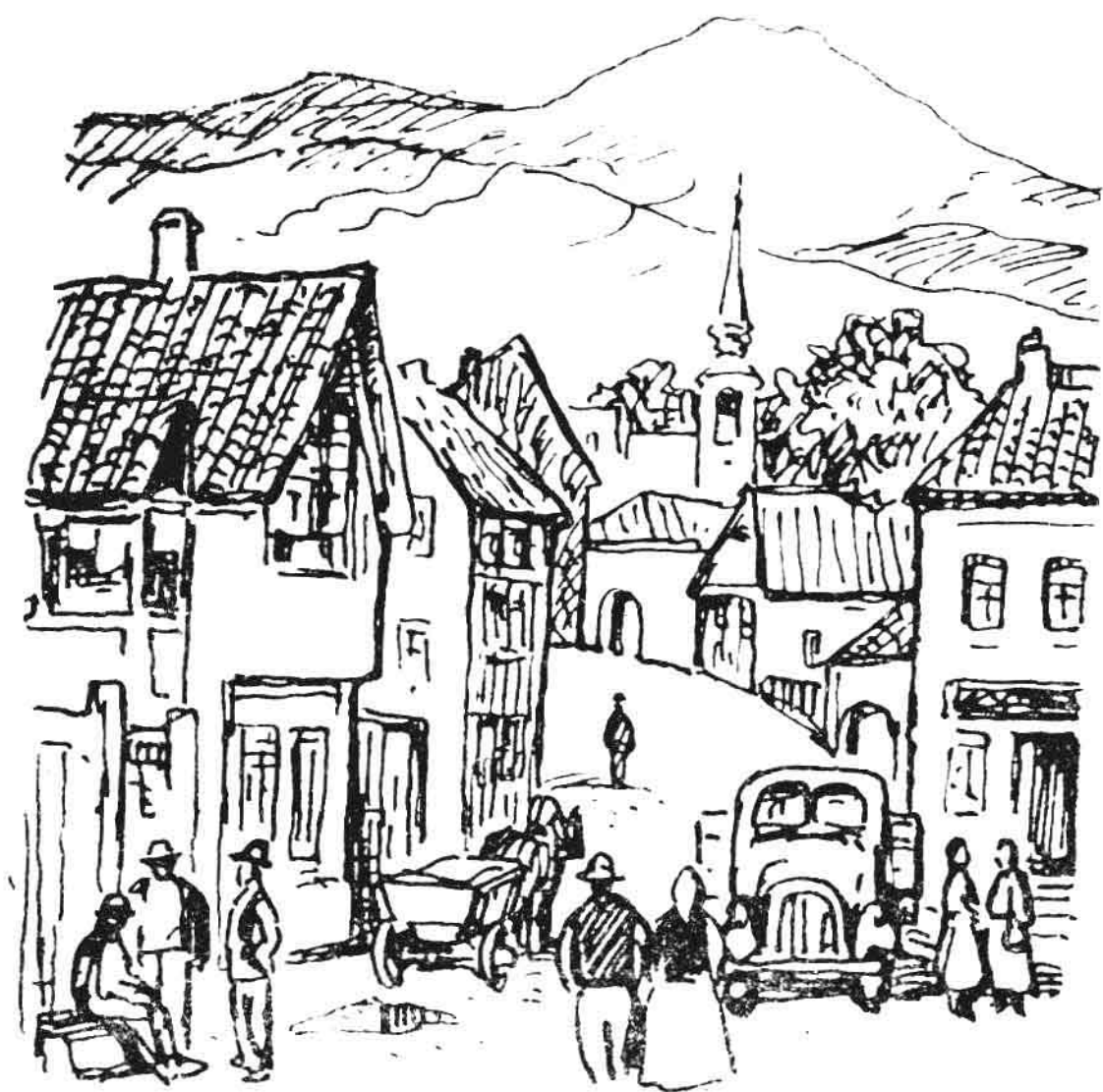
EDITED BY G. HANNA

DESIGNED BY A. TARAN

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
BY WAY OF A FOREWORD	5
MIRACLE	9
MAN'S WORTH	26
BY THE WHITE TISZA	33
A GOOD MATCH	61
A MATTER OF DUTY	82
THE BROOK	96
IT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING	104
BY WAY OF EPILOGUE	174



BY WAY OF A FOREWORD

Never is man more talkative and confidential than when he is travelling. Sometimes you find yourself telling a fellow-traveller something that you would not even reveal to your dearest friend.

Is not someone you have just met for the first time and whom, perhaps, you will never meet again, the best possible confidant of what you have already told more than once but which still lies heavy on your heart? On whom, if not on him, should you pour out your stored up experiences, the stories you have heard, or—if it comes to that—a bit of boasting too?

Travelling does not merely imply movement. Whether you are waiting to change trains, trying to hitchhike at some cross-roads, or are staying the night at an inn or a roadside hotel—it all comes under the heading of “travelling.”

We have a place called Snegovets, a district centre, in the Carpathian Mountains, not far from the pass. It can hardly be called a village any longer, but it is still rather premature to call it a town. It stretches from north to south along a perverse little river: abounding in water when nobody wants it, and mean with it when the water is desperately needed by the local power station. High mountains of incomparable beauty are all around. They begin almost on the threshold of the cottages, and sweep up sharply to the sky, and stand clothed in dark, slate-black conifer forests, intermingled with bright squares of corn-fields, wrested from the forests, and alluring alpine meadows.

Snegovets is a stopping place. Roads lead from it in all four directions. You do not usually have to wait more than fifteen minutes at the cross-roads by the bridge to be picked up by a timber-carrier with clattering, heavy chains, or a collective-farm cart, or the co-operative store lorry, impregnated with that smell peculiar to village stores whose stock-in-trade consists of kerosene, haberdashery, coffee and mint biscuits of an uncertain age.

But towards nightfall traffic dies down—the steep mountain paths are too dangerous in the dark. Belated motor-cars and lorries, overtaken by the night in Snegovets, park along the side of the street, and all the rooms in the little hotel are taken.

The inhabitants, like all small-town local patriots, have a weakness for exaggeration: “our park here,” they say, and you see a square planted with young trees; here’s our “stadium,” and your gaze meets a stamped out pasture; “our palace of culture” . . . which is nothing but a club, reconstructed without undue expense out of a former warehouse. But even the most ardent patriots of Snegovets lack the courage to call their hotel—a hotel. The reception clerk’s window, a corridor with rooms opening into it, a lounge with the inevitable copy of Shishkin’s “Morning

in a Pine Wood" on the wall—all this is a matter of the not far distant future, for in the centre of the town masons are already roofing the new hotel building.

But in the meantime . . . a rickety, steep staircase will bring you up to the second floor into a long room with rows of narrow iron beds placed closely side by side. In the corner of the room stands a pail of cold water and a stool with a wash-basin and mug on it. The place smells of plaster and freshly scrubbed floors.

This is the hotel in which I have stayed for long periods at different seasons of the year.

My Snegovets friends looked upon me as something of a curiosity.

"Why do you have to put up with all these inconveniences?" they would say to me. "Why don't you rent a room in a private house? It's like living in the street where you are."

But I stuck doggedly to my hotel and I do not regret it. I have long forgotten all the inconveniences, but the people I came across at the hotel and the stories I heard there remain in my memory and are as dear to me as an old friend on a long and difficult journey.



MIRACLE

There is a short but wonderful moment early in the morning, which I would call the moment of anticipation. It does not last long and in life's haste or in ordinary surroundings it often flashes past us unnoticed.

In Snegovets, for instance, this moment comes after the sawmill whistle, resembling the crowing of a young cock, has sounded down the valley. The whistle dies away and silence, as unreliable as a thin thread, falls over Snegovets.

In fair weather, neither sleep, laziness nor fatigue can make me resist the temptation of getting up at this early hour and going out on to the balcony which stretches along the second floor of the hotel. From here you can see the whole of Snegovets and the mountains hemming it in.

The sun is not up yet, but its pale, golden light is already dispersed in space. The last of the night's shadows seem to stagger blindly into the forests ranging down the mountain slope in a solid wall. The narrow streets are deserted. The houses look sleepy and seem to feel chilly in the mountain coolness, the way a man feels when he throws the covers off his feet in his sleep: he feels cold but does not know why.

But no, nothing sleeps any longer. Everything is awake and stands spellbound in anticipation of a miracle never known before. Day is ahead! And this is like youth, only then it's life that is ahead.

And the seed of the miracle is already stirring in every living soul. It is ready to sprout, so that later during the day, as its strength grows, it

may bring joy to everything that comes in touch with it.

But the trouble is this: a day comes to an end and though you believe that you have done everything you ought to have done, there has been no miracle. When it wilted within you, you cannot even tell. You only know it did not sprout, it did not bring you joy....

Of course it is not a question of a single day. Sometimes it's a day and sometimes it's years and the only difference between them is that man finds it easier to think with regret of one wasted day, than with bitterness of a senselessly squandered life.

What has hindered the growth of the miracle? What was lacking? I have often pondered over this, but the answer always seems to evade me.

Two of the hotel's guests came out with me one morning to watch daybreak in Snegovets. They had both taken part in a plenary session of the District Committee of the Communist Party which had ended the previous day. One of the men was Dr. Nikolai Avdeyev, a corpulent man with closely cropped grey hair. Twelve years or so ago Avdeyev, then a lieutenant-colonel in the Medical Corps, was in charge of the medical unit of a guerilla formation fighting in these mountains. When the war was over Avdeyev asked to

be appointed to work in the Carpathians. In Uzhgorod they gave him the choice of any hospital there. He walked up to a map on the wall and poked his finger at the most out-of-the-way village in Verkhovina,* a God-forsaken spot, as they used to say.

"There's no hospital there," he was courteously informed.

"We'll build one!" Avdeyev replied.

"There's no provision for it in the plan," he was told.

"Trousers are cut to fit a man, and not a man to fit his trousers," Avdeyev muttered angrily.

He went to Kiev and Moscow and worried the authorities for two months until he finally had his way. And then Avdeyev was appointed physician to the rural hospital he himself had built.

The doctor had lost his family in the war. He lived all by himself but he always tried to be with people as much as possible.

His one attachment was an old, squat, chestnut army horse called Mishka. After the war Mishka had been "written off for soap," but having been rescued and nursed back to health by the doctor, was serving him loyally to this day.

* Verkhovina—the mountainous part of Sub-Carpathia.—*Tr.*

In the mornings Mishka would open the wooden latch on the stable door, climb the steps hewn in the rock up to the doctor's small house on top of the hill, and wake Advzeyev by pushing its nose against the window-pane.

Mounted on Mishka, his legs dangling on one side of the saddle, the doctor made his rounds. He did not wait for patients to come to him, but sought them out himself and rated them soundly for their carelessness, as though it was Avdeyev himself who was sick and the one he was scolding hindered his recovery.

The other guest, who got up at this early hour, was Fyodor Subbota, a wood-carver, famous in the district or, perhaps, all over Verkhovina.

On more than one occasion at the exhibition of national art in Uzhgorod, I had admired his work: ornaments on wooden platters and shepherds' crooks, figure groups and bas-reliefs. I did not know Fyodor Subbota personally and only met him for the first time at the plenary session of the District Party Committee. I must admit that I expected to see a man who was getting on in years, but instead I saw a tall, black-eyed lad of twenty-three or so, with a direct look in his eyes and a light, swift gait. From his whole appearance one guessed him to be an independent

sort of character, who knew both his worth and his limitations.

He was foreman of a tractor team at a Machine and Cattle-Breeding Station in the mountains. Subbota joined it on graduating from the middle school of his native village. People advised him to continue with his studies, to enter some art institute or other in Uzhgorod or Kiev, but Subbota did what he thought best.

"I decided to wait," he told me afterwards, "to listen to what was going on...."

"Going on where?"

"Within myself."

Subbota found the work of a tractor-driver to his liking. He cared for his tractor with the somewhat naive fondness of youth. But this did not interfere with his devoting all his spare time to carving, which had been his hobby since he was a child.

Wherever he went he carried his carving tools with him, and his pockets always bulged with small blocks and pieces of wood: he had everything handy in case he happened to have a spare moment, all he had to do was sit down and start carving.

Although he was so young, he already had quite a large family. It was said that he had married for love—a widow with two children of her

own. A year later she presented Subbota with a third. It was his wife's likeness Subbota had carved out of a block of hardwood: a young woman sitting on the porch steps, nursing her child, her fine, sweetly smiling face raised upwards, not towards the sky, but to a man. The man was not in the group, but you could feel him there. He stood over his beloved and he must have been saying something very tender to her, something important to both of them.

The director of the station asked Subbota to give him this figure, and he placed it not at the club, but at the office, in the room where tractor-drivers received their orders for the day. It has been standing there for over six months now, and according to the assertions of an old order clerk, it exercised a very favourable influence on all those who were there. "You'd feel ashamed to say a coarse word in her presence, or throw a cigarette stub on the floor, and apart from that you feel happier and there's less formality," he said.

And so it happened that Fyodor Subbota and doctor Avdeyev came out on the balcony with me that early morning.

The silence which fell after the whistle had died away was again broken by a melodious sound like that made by great old-fashioned

locks when the key is being turned in them. And then something hummed and droned as though a top had started spinning: this was the engine of the secretary's car starting up. Then gravel hissed on the road: a flock of workmen riding bicycles, luncheon baskets and thermos flasks tied to their baggage carriers, sped down the street towards the sawmill. There came a fragrance of freshly baked bread and the sound of women's voices. The skinny delivery man from the local grocery store wheeled out his barrow, loaded with blue siphons of aerated water, and started off on his daily calls at Snegovets offices. A column of lorries loaded with timber rumbled over the temporary wooden bridge and began the climb to the pass.

"Day has begun!" said Subbota and grew pensive. "What will it bring us?"

"What we ourselves will give it," replied the doctor.

"You're right," Subbota agreed, "one reaps what one sows.... I can't get Kovalets out of my mind...." he added.

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "a riddle if ever there was one."

And again the conversation turned to the subject we had talked over almost the whole night through.