

ИВАН БУНН

**SHADOWED
PATHS**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

IVAN BUNIN

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MOSCOW

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**ТЕМНЫЕ
АЛЛЕИ**



ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

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APPLE FRAGRANCE



I

... I REMEMBER a fine, early autumn. August was a month of soft, warm rains that seemed to fall specially for the sowing—rain just when it was needed, in the middle of the month, about St. Lawrence's Day. And the saying is that autumn and winter will get on well together if the waters are still and there's rain on St. Lawrence's Day. After that came an Indian summer when gossamer settled lavishly on the fields. That's a good sign

too. I remember a crisp, clear morning. . . . I remember a big, golden orchard, rather dry, with thinning trees. I remember the walks lined with maples, the subtle fragrance of fallen leaves and the smell of Antonovka apples—a smell of honey and autumn freshness. The air was so pure it hardly seemed to be there, and the whole orchard echoed the call of voices and the squeak of cart wheels. That was the *tarkhane*,* the trading gardeners who, with the help of hired peasants, were loading apples on to the carts to send to town that very night—at night it had to be, when it was so pleasant to lie on top of the load, gazing into the starry sky, smelling the tar in the crisp air and hearing the soft creaking of the long train of carts along the dark road. A peasant loading apples would eat one after another with a juicy crunch, but that was one of the unwritten laws—the employer would never cut him short; on the contrary, he would say:

“Go ahead and eat your fill, there’s nothing I can do! Everyone drinks mead on barrelling day!”

All that disturbed the cool stillness of the

* *Tarkhane*—tax-free travelling peddlers.—*Tr.*

morning was the complacent chirp of thrushes in the coral-red rowans down the orchard, the call of voices and the hollow thud of apples as they were poured into the measures and barrels. Through the thinning trees you could see far down the straw-strewn road leading to a large tent, and the tent itself which the peddlers had made quite a household during the summer months. The smell of apples was strong everywhere, particularly here. Inside the tent there were some camp-beds, a single-barrelled gun, a mouldy-green samovar, and some kitchen utensils in the corner. Mats and packing cases, rags and rubbish lay in a heap beside the tent and a hearth for the fire had been dug in the ground. At midday a delicious stew was cooked there and in the evening the samovar was warmed up, and a long ribbon of bluish smoke would spread between the trees in the orchard. But on holidays there was a regular fair round the tent and bright Sunday finery would flicker behind the trees. There would be a crowd of pert girls, the daughters of small holders, dressed in sarafans that smelled strongly of dye; the gentry's servants would come too, in their beautiful though coarse, strange dress, and

the young pregnant wife of the village bailiff, with a broad, sleepy face and the sedateness of a cow. She wore a head-dress known as "antlers." Her hair was parted in the middle, plaited and pinned up on each side, with several kerchiefs worn over it, making her head look enormous. Her feet in half boots with steel-tipped heels were planted firmly, the toes turned in; her sleeveless jacket was of velveteen, her apron long, and her skirt of deep mauve with brick-red stripes had a wide gold braid trimming.

"That's the right sort of little woman!" the tradesman remarked, slowly shaking his head. "They're getting rare nowadays...."

Little boys in white twill shirts and short trousers, with their white bleached hair uncovered, kept coming up. They would come in twos or threes, tripping along on their bare feet with short, quick steps and darting wary glances at the shaggy sheep-dog tied to an apple-tree. Only one of the group would be a buyer, of course, for all the wealth they possessed was a kopek or a fresh egg to barter; but there were plenty of customers anyway, business was brisk, and the consumptive tradesman in a long frock-coat and yellow top-boots would serve them gaily.

He and his brother, a half-wit of slovenly speech whom he kept out of charity, joked and clowned, and sometimes even played a tune on a Tula accordion as they sold their wares. And until late in the evening there would be a crowd of people in the orchard, there would be laughter and talk and sometimes the tap of dancing feet close to the tent....

In fair weather it got very cold and damp towards nightfall. After a day out on the threshing-floor, where you had breathed your fill of the scent of threshed rye and chaff, you briskly walked home to supper past the orchard boundary ditch. Voices down in the village or the creaking of a gate rang with extraordinary clearness in the frosty evening air. Darkness would fall. And then there was a new smell, that of a woodfire being lighted in the orchard and the fragrant smoke of the burning cherry branches. The picture you saw at the bottom of the dark orchard was like a scene from a fairy-tale: in the surrounding darkness, the crimson flames blazing close to the tent were like a corner of hell, with black shapes that seemed to be carved of ebony moving around the fire, while their monstrous shadows wavered

across the apple-trees. A black arm, several yards in length, would lie across the whole of a tree, or suddenly a pair of legs, like two black pillars, would be etched clearly. And suddenly, all these shadows would slip down from the tree and one long shadow fall on the path, from the tent to the very gate....

Late at night when the lights had gone out in the windows and the brilliant stars of the Great Bear shone high in the sky, you would run once again into the orchard. With the dry leaves rustling underfoot, you would grope your way blindly to the tent. It was a little lighter there in the opening, with the Milky Way overhead.

"Is that you, young master?" someone's voice would call softly from the darkness.

"Yes. Aren't you asleep yet, Nikolai?"

"We're not supposed to sleep. But it must be late, eh? There's the passenger train now, I think."

We would listen hard and then make out a tremor running along the ground. The tremor would become a noise, it grew and grew until it seemed that wheels were beating time loudly and hurriedly just beyond the orchard ditch; knocking and clamouring, the train rushed on ... closer and closer, louder and

angrier.... And suddenly the sound grew fainter and muffled as though it were vanishing into the ground....

“Where’s your gun, Nikolai?”

“Why, here, beside the box.”

You would fling up the gun which was as heavy as a crowbar, and fire at random. A crimson spurt of flame would shoot up into the sky with a deafening report, blinding you for a moment and snuffing out the stars, and a cheerful echo would roar and roll towards the horizon, fading in the pure and keen air, far, far away.

“My, that was a good one!” the tradesman would say. “Give them a scare, young master, give them a scare! The trouble they’re giving us; they’ve shaken down all the pears by the wall again....”

Shooting stars streaked the black sky with fiery trails. You would gaze so long into its dark blue depths thronged with constellations, that you felt the ground slipping away from under your feet. Then you would get up and, hiding your hands in the sleeves of your coat, run home quickly along the path.... How cold and damp it was, but how good to be alive!

II

"If the apples are good, the year will be good." All's well in the village if the Antonovkas are good: it means the corn harvest will be a good one too. I remember a year of abundant crops.

At the break of day, when cocks were still crowing and black smoke was pouring from the chimneyless huts, I would throw open the window into the cool orchard, cloaked in a lilac mist, through which the morning sun flashed brightly here and there, and the temptation would be so strong that I would order my horse to be saddled at once, while I hurried down to the pond to wash. The willows dipping to the water were almost stripped of their tiny leaves, and the turquoise sky showed through the bare branches. The water beneath the willows had grown transparent and icy, so that it seemed heavy. It dispelled your drowsiness and lassitude at once, and when you had dressed and eaten your breakfast of hot potatoes and black bread sprinkled with damp coarse salt in the kitchen with the farm hands, you revelled in the feel of the slippery leather saddle as you rode out hunting through the village of Visel-

ki. Autumn is the season of patron saint's days, and the people look trim and happy; the village itself has quite a different, festive air. If the crops were good that year and tall castles of gold rose from the threshing-floors, while the geese gabbled shrilly and clearly on the river of a morning, then life in the village was not bad at all. Moreover, our Viselki had always been known as a prosperous village since the beginning of time, since Grandfather's day. Viselki people lived to a ripe old age—which is the first sign of a prosperous village—and all these old people were tall and big-boned, with hair as white as snow. You were always hearing someone say: "Look at Agafya there, she's eighty-three if she's a day!" Or conversations like this:

"And when are you going to die, Pankrat? You must be nearly a hundred by now?"

"What's that you say, my dear?"

"I'm asking how old you are?"

"That I couldn't tell you, my dear."

"D'you remember Platon Apollonich?"

"Of course I do, I remember him well."

"You see! That means you can't possibly be less than a hundred."

The old man, standing rigidly before his

master, would smile a humble and guilty smile. What could he do? He had outlived his day, he felt. And probably he would have outlived it even longer if he had not eaten too many onions on St. Peter's Day.

I remember his wife too. The old woman was always sitting on a bench on the porch, her back hunched, her head shaking, her hands clutching the edge of the bench, her breath coming in short gasps, and her mind busy on something. "Thinking of her wealth, I expect," the women used to say, because she really had a lot of "wealth" in her trunks. But she seemed not to hear; with fading eyes, she gazed from under her sadly raised eyebrows into the distance, shaking her head and trying to remember something. She was a large woman, and everything about her was dark. The skirt she wore looked a hundred years old, her cloth slippers were the kind they put on the dead, her neck was yellow and scraggy and her blouse, inset with dimity diamonds, was always very, very white—"good enough to bury her in," they said. There was a large stone slab lying close to the porch: she had bought it herself for her gravestone, as she had her burial robe—a splendid shroud with angels, crosses and a prayer printed round the edges.