FYODOR GLADKOV

RESTLESS YOUTH

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

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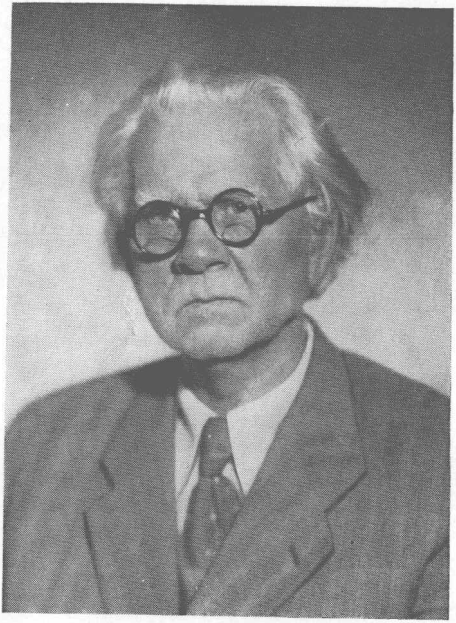

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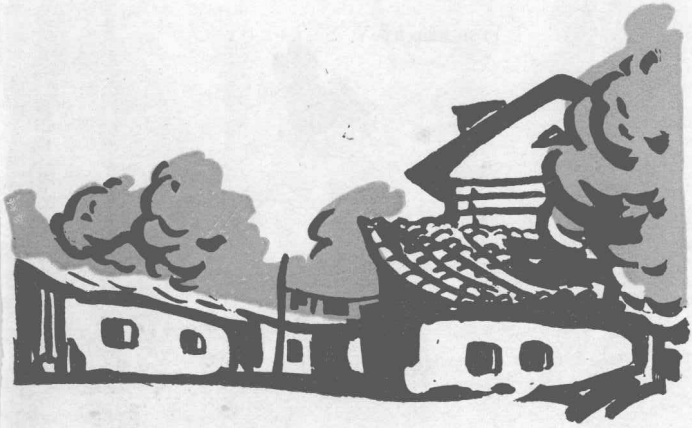

RESTLESS YOUTH

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
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Translated from the Russian
by Ralph Parker
and Valentina Scott

designed by V. Surikov

I

We moved and settled in one of the clay and wattle cottages on the estate of the leading figure of the town, a man named Kanivetsky. This lay outside the town in a

working-class suburb called Dubinka. Kanivetsky rented these hovels to workers and various impoverished souls at three rubles a month. A dilapidated fence divided them from the stone mansions, the vineyard and a neglected orchard.

In a shabby out-building, screened by a thick growth of honey locust, ash and hornbeam, lived a very fat and flabby young engineer named Sosnovsky with his proud, tall, beautiful wife, Alexandra Vasilyevna, and their son Kolya, a pale-faced, skinny little fellow. Morning and evening Alexandra Vasilyevna played the piano. That was usually after having a noisy row with her husband. She played beautifully.

Beyond the vineyard, in another stone house that faced a grass-grown lane, lived a decrepit old lady—Kanivetsky's mother—an imposing personage with a fierce little grey moustache who always wore a black lace head-dress. She spent all her days in an armchair, spoke in an authoritative bass and chain-smoked cigarettes which she rolled herself. Her daughter, Nadezhda Nikolayevna, was Sosnovsky's mother; grey-haired, plump and merry, with mischievous, youthful eyes, she was always fussing noisily over a whole

brood of cats, though she never parted with a slim, yellow-backed book. Clad in a long tussore talma she ran about the vineyard calling to her cats in a tender voice. She would sit beside her mother on an old creaking chaise-longue, her arms full of the creatures. Then the two women would start reminiscing about some very far-away days in Bessarabia and croon foreign songs in cracked voices.

Meanwhile, the yard, with its well-trodden grass, thorn-apple and liquorice, its old log-framed well in the middle and the white acacias near the tumble-down fence, went about its bustling life. The yard gates opened on to a wide, dirty square. In bad weather no one could slosh through let alone walk across that square; and many hot days had to pass before the muddy morass dried up. Its puddles reflected the bricky bulk of the steam mill and the macaroni factory, which belonged to a merchant named Bobrov. Right across the square was a high railway embankment with brightly striped turnpikes as long as well sweeps. In front of the embankment and beyond it to the left, stood two Cossack kurens* with watch-towers

* *Kuren*—a Cossack term for a house.

thatched with reed. Within the enclosures, before the white-washed walls of the long barracks, Cossacks wearing Circassian cloaks and caps used to stroll lazily or busy themselves with their horses; sometimes whole squads of them would set off somewhere. In the evening at sundown a bugle would play a beautifully sad call. And later the Cossacks would sing Ukrainian songs late into the night. The strains of a brass band, now loud, now barely audible, would be wafted from the town park.

On either side of the gate stood a clay and wattle out-house, each of two rooms. One of these buildings was occupied by a brisk old fellow named Barabash who had a red face and a bristly white beard and the usual little smile of a pushful crook. His two daughters —Lisa and Klava—both young and pretty though rather mannered worked for a certain Madame Sophie who ran a dressmaking establishment in the town. In our half of the yard rumour had it that Barabash did well out of his daughters and brought them visitors at night.

The other out-house was occupied by a cobbler named Filat, a bent, shaggy man with the face of a drunkard, who never took

off his dirty apron. A hoarse wail was always to be heard coming out his house: this was Filat either singing or quarrelling with his wife Fyokla, a scraggy woman with angry pop-eyes. Fyokla used to yell at her husband and at her two constantly howling children too, and made herself exceedingly unpopular. The cobbler and his wife put up two workers, Klim and Osinin, from the same mill where my father was employed.

Opposite us in our little yard stood a hovel like our own. Here lived the widow Darya with a little girl of my own age and a boy of fifteen called Pashka who worked as an apprentice to Filat. Widow Darya took in washing and also went out laundering in other people's homes. She would sometimes come home from work drunk. When she laundered at home she was always shouting in an angry, desperate tone:

"Nyurka, you bitch! Where's the water, you little rascal? Get a move on and bring me some from the well. I'll drown you in the first bucketful!"

Nyurka, the little imp, took her revenge in an ingenious way: she would shove rags or bast mats into the wash-tub and would then run off a safe distance and show her sharp

little teeth in a grin. Her mother would dash after her, skirt tucked up, grab a stick or a lump of brick as she ran and growl in rage:

"I'll kill you, you see if I don't, curse you."

Nyurka would jump nimbly out of the way and screech:

"Pashka, just look how mad Mother is!"

Then suddenly she would let out a cry of alarm:

"Mum, whose washing's been pinched over there?"

Darya would stop in her tracks as if she had been shot and ask in a concerned voice:

"Where? In the orchard or near the house?"

And she would swing round to the gate in the fence.

Pashka came home filthy every evening, his hands blue, his face grim and scowling. In his deep voice he would rap out an order like a grown-up:

"Warm up the soup, Mum."

Then he would walk across to a tin wash-stand nailed to a post in the fence.

"Bring me my soap and towel, Nyurka."

Lifting the hem of her little shift with her fingers Nyurka would break into a swaying

dance. With a broad grin on her face she would sing in time to her movements:

Tear not my aching heart,
Thou'll not know whom I love.
Many my arms have held,
But one I'll ne'er forget.

It did not become Pashka the skilled workman to pay any heed to her: he would go on splashing and spluttering at the wash-stand.

Occasionally an open carriage would draw up outside the house at the back and from it would descend a stout middle-aged man with an imposing air and bloated eyes, dressed in an oddly long coat and a shiny top hat. This was Nikolai Nikolayevich Kanivetsky. He lived in town, in a house of his own. He was the only person in the whole town to wear a top hat and a coat of that cut and this gave him a foreign look. Everybody thought this haughty, unapproachable gentleman looked rather odd as he walked along the street with his gold-banded walking-stick and his thick cigar.

Our cottage adjoined the wall of a long stone building the central part of which was hidden from us by the neglected orchard on the other side of the broken-down fence. One

room in the side of the house that jutted into our yard was let to a worker named Osip Surepin, a sturdily built, short-legged fellow whose tow head looked quite grey from a distance and whose eyes too were a dull white. Surepin considered himself handsome and was always running a comb through his hair and his fluffy beard. His wife, Mashenka, a snub-nosed, rosy-cheeked, flirtatious woman, spoke with a burr and walked with a mincing gait, playing the pampered little girl. They provided bed and board to a tall, lean, thoughtful-looking young man whom everyone called Stepan Ivanych. Osip and Stepan Ivanych both worked at Palasov's big mill where my father worked. Father and Osip used to come home smothered in flour dust and Stepan Ivanych filthy from stinking mineral oil. People they passed on the road would draw aside to avoid being soiled and Osip would joke in a complacent, unsmiling way:

"Just look how they respect us! Making way for us like that."

He blew air through his teeth in a whistle. He advised others to do this too for he was certain that he had invented the right way to keep one's teeth clean. Beside the thick-set,

homespun-looking Osip, Stepan Ivanych looked quite stately and his leanness and his youthful blond beard lent his face a handsome look, not that of a workman. When he wore a hat and a short jacket he even looked more like a student. I very much liked his eyes: they were brown with gold sparks in them; they were always hot, piercing, alert. Though taciturn he would smile and answer readily in his soft bass voice if you asked him a question. To Mashenka, who in her flirtatious manner paid a good deal of attention to him over dinner, he was polite: he would thank her and seem to be a bit embarrassed when he took the plate of borsch from her hands and blush guiltily when she brought him his laundry.

Stepan Ivanych and Mashenka addressed each other in the formal second person plural. This display of good manners set them both apart from the rest of us: people treated them as though they were children. Mashenka had previously been in domestic employment and Osip was proud of her.

"She lived with the gentry. She's used to good manners. Of course, she likes to have a little of the light human touch in the hellish life we lead here. . . ."

Osip had his own way of speaking, different from workers' speech. He did not swear or drink, he did not mix with the other men on the break-rolls at the mill—common loaders, foul-mouthed drunkards—but made friends with my father who worked in the deafening din of the screen-house.

In the right-hand corner of the Surepins' room where there was an empty icon-shelf stood a table, under which was a heap of various plaster shapes and other objects. This was Stepan Ivanych's laboratory. It was here that he sat after work busy with his drawings and his clay, mixing plaster of Paris in water, pouring it into moulds and then melting lead in a crucible which he heated over three spirit burners. Osip would put on an apron and work beside him. Though they made a secret of their work everyone knew that Stepan Ivanych was inventing some sort of "flying-machine" and that he spent his wages every month on books, thick paper, lead, plaster of Paris, copper and all sorts of gadgets.

Two twelve-hour shifts were worked at the mill—from six to six. When Stepan Ivanych was on night shift, he would come home with Osip in the morning tired out, thinner