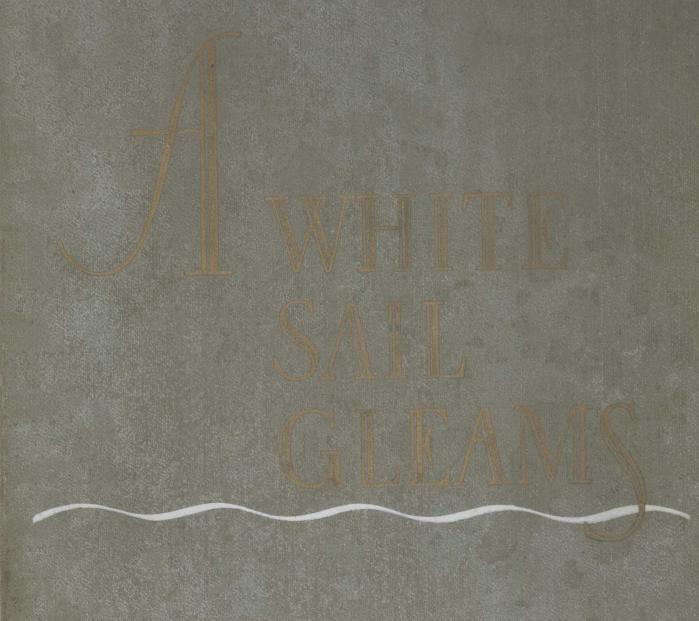
Valentin Katayev



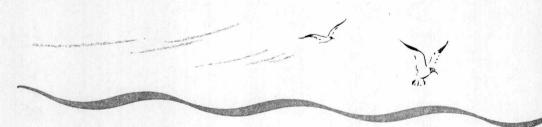
SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

VALENTIN KATAYEV
A WHITE SAIL GLEAMS

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В АЛЕНТИН КАТАЕВ

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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ МОСКВА 1954

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V A L E N T I N K A T A Y E V



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ZIAMITA IIAZ



1

THE FAREWELL

The blast of the horn came from the farm-yard at about five o'clock in the morning.

A piercing, penetrating sound that seemed split into hundreds of musical strands, it flew out through the apricot orchard into the deserted steppe and towards the sea, where its rolling echo died mournfully along the bluff.

That was the first signal for the departure of the coach.

It was all over. The bitter hour of farewell had come.

Strictly speaking, there was no one to bid farewell to. The few summer residents, frightened by recent events, had begun to leave in mid-season.

The only guests now remaining at the farm were Vasili Petrovich Batchei, an Odessa schoolmaster, and his two sons, one three and a half years old and the other eight and a half. The elder was called Petya, and the younger Pavlik. To-day they too were leaving for home.

It was for them the horn had been blown and the big black horses led out of the stable.

Petya woke up long before the horn. He had slept fitfully. The twittering of the birds roused him, and he dressed and went outside.

The orchard, the steppe, and the farm-yard all lay in a chill shadow. The sun was rising out of the sea, but the high bluff still hid it from view.

Petya wore his city Sunday suit, which he had quite outgrown during the summer: a navy-blue woollen sailor blouse with a white-edged collar, short trousers, long lisle stockings, button-shoes, and a broad-brimmed straw hat.

Shivering from the cold, he walked slowly round the farm, saying goodbye to the places where he had spent such a wonderful summer.

All summer long Petya had run about practically naked. He was now as brown as an Indian and could walk barefoot over burrs and thorns. He had gone swimming three times a day. At the beach he used to smear himself from head to foot with the red marine clay and then scratch out designs on his chest. That made him really look like a Red Indian, especially when he stuck into his hair the blue feathers of those marvellously beautiful birds—real fairy-tale birds—which built their nests in the bluff. And now, after all that wealth and freedom, to have to walk about in a tight woollen sailor blouse, in prickly stockings, in shoes that pinched, and in a big straw hat with an elastic that rubbed against his ears and pressed into his neck!

Petya lifted his hat and pushed it back so that it dangled on his shoulders like a basket.

Two fat ducks waddled past, quacking busily. They threw a look of scorn at this foppish boy, as though he were a stranger, and then dived under the fence one after the other.

Whether they had deliberately snubbed him or simply failed to recognize him, Petya could not be sure, yet all of a sudden he felt so sad and heavy-hearted that he wanted to cry.

Straight to his heart cut the feeling that he was a complete stranger in this cold and deserted world of early morning. Even the pit in the corner of the garden—the deep, wonderful pit where it was such thrilling fun to bake potatoes in a camp-fire—even that seemed unbelievably strange, unfamiliar.

The sun was rising higher.

The farm-yard and orchard still lay in the shade, but the bright, cold, early rays were already gilding the pink, yellow, and blue pumpkins set out on the reed roof of the clay hut where the watchman lived.

The sleepy-eyed cook, in a home-spun checkered skirt and a blouse of unbleached linen embroidered in black and red cross-stitch, with an iron comb in her dishevelled hair, was knocking yesterday's dead coals out of the samovar, against the door-step.

Petya stood in front of the cook watching the string of beads jump up and down on her old, wrinkled neck.

"Going away?" she asked indifferently.

"Yes," the boy replied. His voice shook.

"Good luck to you."

She went over to the water-barrel, wrapped the hem of her checkered skirt round her hand, and pulled out the spigot.

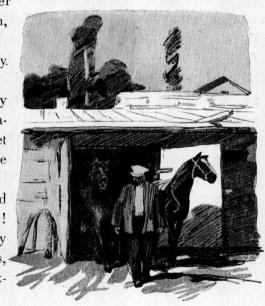
A thick stream of water arched out and struck the ground. Sparkling round drops scattered, enveloping themselves in powdery grey dust.

The cook set the samovar under the stream. It mound as the fresh, heavy water poured into it.

No, not a particle of sympathy. from anybody!

There was the same unfriendly silence and the same air of desolation everywhere—on the croquet square, in the meadow, in the arbour.

Yet how gay and merry it had been here such a short while ago! How many pretty girls and naughty boys! How many pranks, scenes, games, fights, quarrels, peace-makings, kisses, friendships!



What a wonderful party the owner of the farm, Rudolf Karlovich, had given for the summer residents on the birthday of his wife, Luiza Frantsevna!

Petya would never forget that celebration.

In the morning a huge table with bouquets of wild flowers on it was set under the apricot-trees. In the centre lay a cake as big as a bicycle wheel.

Thirty-five lighted candles, by which one could tell Luiza Frantsevna's age, had been stuck into that rich, thickly-frosted cake.

All the summer residents were invited to morning tea under the apricot-trees.

The day continued as merrily as it had begun. It ended in the evening with a costume ball for the children, with music and fire-works.

All the children put on the fancy dress that had been made for them. The girls turned into mermaids and Gipsies, the boys into Red Indians, robbers, Chinese mandarins, sailors. They all wore splendid, bright-coloured cotton or paper costumes.

There were rustling tissue-paper skirts and cloaks, artificial roses swaying on wire stems, and tambourines with floating silk ribbons.

Naturally—how could it be otherwise!—the very best costume was Petya's. Father himself had spent two days making it. His pince-nez kept falling off his nose while he worked; he was near-sighted, and every time he upset the bottle of glue he muttered into his beard frightful curses at the people who had arranged "this outrage" and generally expressed his disgust with "this nonsensical idea."

But of course, he was simply playing safe. He was afraid the costume might turn out a failure, he was afraid of disgracing himself. How he tried! But then the costume—say what you will!—was a remarkable one.

It was a real knight's suit of armour, made of strips of gold and silver Christmas-tree paper cleverly pasted together and stretched over a wire frame. The helmet was decorated with a flowing plume and looked exactly like the helmet of a knight out of Sir Walter Scott. What is more, the visor could be raised and lowered.

In short, it was so magnificent that Petya was placed beside Zoya to make up the second couple. Zoya was the prettiest girl at the farm, and she wore the pink costume of a Good Fairy.

Arm in arm they walked round the garden, which was hung with Chinese lanterns. Here and there in the mysterious darkness loomed trees and bushes unbelievably bright in the flare of red and green Bengal lights.

In the arbour, by the light of candles under glass shades, the grown-ups had their supper. Moths flew to the light from all sides and fell, singed, to the table-cloth.

Four hissing rockets rose out of the thick smoke of the Bengal lights and climbed slowly into the sky.

There was a moon, too. Petya and Zoya discovered this fact only when they found themselves in the very farthest part of the garden. Moonlight so bright and magic shone through the leaves that even the whites of the girl's eyes were a luminous blue—the same blue that danced in the tub of dark water under the old apricot-tree, in which a toy-boat floated.

Here, before they knew it, the boy and girl kissed. Then they were so embarrassed that they dashed off headlong with wild shouts, and they ran and ran until they landed in the back-yard. There the farm labourers who had come to congratulate the mistress were having their own party.

On a pine table brought from the servants' kitchen stood a keg of beer, two jugs of vodka, a bowl of fried fish, and a wheaten loaf. The drunken cook, in a new print blouse with frills, was angrily serving the merry-makers portions of fish and filling their mugs. A concertina-player, his coat unbuttoned and his knees spread apart, swayed from side to side on a stool as his fingers rambled over the bass keys of the wheezing instrument.

Two straight-backed fellows with impassive faces had taken each other by the waist and were stamping out a polka, with much flourishing of the heels. Several women labourers in brand-new kerchiefs and tight kid pumps, their cheeks smeared with the juice of pickled tomatoes—for coquetry and to soften the skin—stood with their arms round one another.

Rudolf Karlovich and Luiza Frantsevna were backing away from one of the labourers.

He was as drunk as a lord. Several men were holding him back. He strained to get free. Blood spurted from his nose on his Sunday shirt, which was ripped down the middle. He was swearing furiously.

Sobbing and choking over his frenzied words, and grinding his teeth the way people do in their sleep, he shouted: "Three rubles and fifty kopeks for two months of slaving! Miser! Let me get at the bastard! Just let me get at him! I'll choke the life out of him! Matches, somebody! Let me get at the straw! I'll give them a birthday party! If only Grishka Kotovsky* was here, you rat!"

The moonlight gleamed in his rolling eyes.

"Now, now," muttered the master, backing away. "You look out, Gavrila. Don't go too far. You can be hanged nowadays for that sort of talk."

"Go ahead, hang me!" the labourer shouted, panting. "Why don't you? Go ahead, blood-sucker!"

This was so terrifying, so puzzling, and, above all, so out of keeping with the spirit of the wonderful party, that the children ran back, screaming that Gavrila wanted to cut Rudolf Karlovich's throat and set fire to the farm.

The panic that broke out is difficult to imagine.

The parents led the children to their rooms. They locked all the doors and closed all the windows, as though a storm were brewing. The rural prefect Chuvyakov, who had come to spend a few days with his family, marched across the croquet square, kicking out the hoops and scattering the balls and mallets.

He carried a double-barrelled gun at the ready.

In vain did Rudolf Karlovich plead with the summer residents to be calm. In vain did he assure them that there was no danger, that Gavrila was now bound and locked up in the cellar, and that to-morrow the constable would come for him.

* Grigori Kotovsky (1887-1925) was active in the agrarian movement in Bessarabia in 1905-1906; he was a leader of the Bessarabian peasants' partisan actions against the landowners. In 1918-1920 this son of the people was an army leader and Civil War hero.—Tr.