ARKADI GAIDAR

TIMUR

AND

HIS SQUAD

STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW
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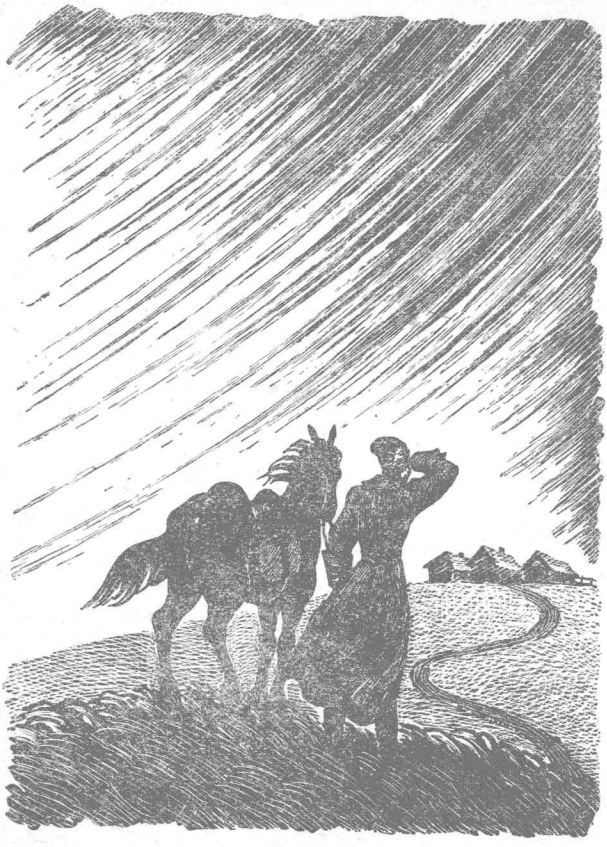
SCHOOL



SCHOOL

Chapter One

MY HOME town of Arzamas was a quiet, green little place, a town of gardens. Behind their rickety fences grew a great number of cherry and apple trees, berry bushes and red peonies. The gardens merged with one another to form a sea of green, noisy with the incessant chirruping of tomtits, goldfinches, bullfinches and robbins.

Green, stagnant ponds, in which all the self-respecting fish had died long ago, trailed through the town past the gardens; only slimy eels and inedible little anglers lived in the ponds. At the foot of the hill trickled the tiny Tesha River.

With its thirty churches and four monasteries, the town was very like a monastery itself. We had many miracle-working icons in Arzamas. As a matter of fact, there seemed to be more miracle-working icons than plain ones. But somehow very few miracles occurred in our town. Perhaps this was because the famous Sarov Monastery, with its patron saints, was situated some sixty kilometres away, and the patron saints lured all the miracles to that place.

Time and again we heard that in Sarov a blind man had regained his sight, a cripple had begun to walk, a hunchback had straightened up. But nothing of the kind ever happened at our icons.

Once we heard tell that Mitka the Gypsy, a vagrant and a notorious drunkard who used to immerse himself in the river through a hole in the ice at Epiphany every year for a bottle of vodka, had had a vision, and that he had given up drinking, had repented, and was to take the vows at the Monastery of Our Saviour. People rushed to the monastery in droves. Sure enough, Mitka was standing there by the choir bowing zealously to the ground and repenting loudly of his sins; he actually confessed that the year before he had stolen merchant Bebeshin's goat and swapped it for vodka. Merchant Bebeshin was so moved he gave Mitka a silver ruble to buy a candle for the salvation of his soul. Many were the tears then shed at the sight of a sinful man forsaking the road to ruin for the straight and narrow path of righteousness.

This went on for a whole week, but just before taking the vows Mitka must have had some vision to the opposite effect, or perhaps something else happened; at any rate, he did not turn up in church. And then whispers went about among the members of the congregation that

Mitka lay sprawled in a ditch on Novoplotinnaya Street with an empty vodka bottle beside him.

Deacon Pafnuti and merchant Sinyugin, the churchwarden, were sent to the scene of the disaster to reason with Mitka, but they soon returned, declaring indignantly that Mitka indeed was as dead to the world as a slaughtered cow; a second empty half-pint already lay by his side, and when they finally managed to rouse him, he cursed and said that he had changed his mind about taking the vows because he was sinful and unworthy.

Our little town was a quiet and patriarchal sort of place. Before holidays, especially around Easter, when the bells of all thirty churches began to peal, the din that rose over the town could be heard distinctly in villages within a radius of twenty kilometres.

The bell of the Church of the Annunciation drowned out all the others. The bell of the Monastery of Our Saviour was cracked, and it clanged spasmodically in a hoarse bass. The shrill bells of the Monastery of St. Nicholas tinkled away in a high key. These three main bells were backed up by all the others; even the bleak little prison church huddled at the edge of town joined in the general discordant chorus.

I used to love to climb up the belfries. We boys were allowed to do this only at Easter. You

wound up and up the dark, narrow stairway for what seemed hours. In the stone niches pigeons softly cooed. The endless turns would make you slightly dizzy. From the top you had a view of the whole town, with its patchwork of straggling ponds and its maze of gardens. At the foot of the hill lay the Tesha, the old mill, Goat Island, a copse and, farther out, gullies and the dark blue fringe of the municipal forest.

My father was a private in the 12th Siberian Rifle Regiment, which was stationed on the Riga sector of the German front.

I was in my second year at the polytechnical school. My mother, a trained nurse, was always busy, and I was left to my own devices. Once a week I brought my report card home to her. She would glance over the card and shake her head when she saw a low mark for drawing or penmanship.

"What's this?"

"That's not my fault, Ma. Can I help it if I haven't any talent for drawing? I drew a horse, Ma, and he said it was a pig. The next time I showed him my drawing I said it was a pig, but he got angry and said it wasn't a pig, or a horse either, but heaven knows what. I don't intend to be an artist anyway, Ma."

"Well, and what's the matter with your penmanship? Let me see your notebook. Goodness

me, what a mess! A blot on every line, and a squashed cockroach between the pages! Fie, how sloppy!"

"About the blot, Ma, that just happened, but about the cockroach it isn't my fault at all. Honest, I don't know why you have to make such a fuss! You don't think I put that cockroach there on purpose, do you? The fool crawled in there himself and got squashed, and I get the blame! Penmanship too — as if it really matters! I don't intend to be a writer anyway."

"What *do* you intend to be?" Mother inquired sternly, signing the report card. "A blockhead? Why does the inspector write again that you've been climbing up the fire-escape to the roof of the school? What did you do that for? Are you learning to be a chimney sweep?"

"No. I don't want to be an artist, or a writer, or a chimney sweep either. I'm going to be a sailor."

"A sailor? Whatever for?" Mother was really puzzled this time.

"A sailor and nothing but! Gee, Ma, can't you see what fun it is?"

Mother shook her head.

"Well, of all things! See you don't bring any more bad marks home, or being a sailor won't save you from a spanking."

What a fibber! Spank me? Never! Once she locked me up in the storeroom, but then the whole next day she fed me patties, and she gave me twenty kopeks to go to the movies. Just give me more punishment like that!

Chapter Two

One morning, when I dashed off to school after gulping down my tea and grabbing up my books, I met that fidgety little fellow Timka Shtukin, my classmate, on the way.

Timka Shtukin was as harmless and good-natured as they come. You could whack him on the head and he wouldn't even squeak. He willingly gobbled down the remains of our sandwiches and ran out to the corner shop for rolls for our lunches; he always shivered with fear when our homeroom teacher approached him, even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

Timka had one great passion — birds. The little lodge at the cemetery church, where he and his father, who was watchman, lived, was cluttered with bird cages. He used to buy, sell and exchange songbirds, and he caught them himself with clapnets and traps.

Once his father gave it to him hot: it seems that merchant Sinyugin visited the cemetery and

found some hempseeds and a bow-shaped net laid out on his grandmother's gravestone.

Sinyugin complained to the watchman, who gave Timka a hiding. And at our next bible class Father Gennadi said reprovingly:

"Gravestones are set up in memory of the deceased, and not for any other purpose, and to place traps and sundry other contraptions on gravestones is improper, sinful and blasphemous."

He followed this up with a few instances from the history of mankind when similar blasphemy had invoked the terrible wrath of Heaven upon the head of the culprit.

It must be said that Father Gennadi was a wizard at citing examples. I'm sure that if he were to find out that I, for instance, had gone to the movies the week before without permission, he would have fished about in his memory and doubtlessly found a case in history when a person who had committed a similar crime had had deserved punishment meted out to him from on high while yet on this side of the grave.

Timka was walking along whistling in imitation of a thrush. When he saw me he winked in greeting and at the same time glanced distrustfully at me to see whether I was coming up toward him just like that or with some trick up my sleeve.

"Timka!" I said. "We'll be late for class.

Honest, cross my heart, we will. We still might make the class — but it's a sure thing we'll be late to prayers."

"Maybe they won't notice it," he quavered.

"Sure they will. So what? They'll only make us stay in after school, that's all." I teased him with studied indifference, knowing how afraid he was of receiving reprimands.

Timka quailed. He began to walk faster, and said plaintively:

"But it ain't my fault, really. Pa went off to open up the church. He told me to stay home for a minute — and then forgot to come back. All because of the service. Valka Spagin's mother had a service for him."

"How do you mean for him?" I gaped. "Do you mean . . . he's dead?"

"No, this wasn't a burial service; it's to find him."

"Find him?" My voice began to tremble. "What are you talking about, Timka? You better look out or I'll smack you one. . . . Listen, Timka, I wasn't in school yesterday, I was running a temperature."

"Ping-ping . . . ta-ra-rah . . . tu-u. . . ." Timka whistled the tomtit's tune and hopped on one foot in glee because I knew nothing about the affair.

"That's right, you weren't in school yesterday. Oh boy, if you only knew what happened! . . ."