A Living Relic

By Iván Turgénieff

A French proverb says that “a dry fisherman and a wet hunter are a sorry sight.” Never having had any taste for fishing, I cannot decide what are the fisherman’s feelings in fine bright weather, and how far in bad weather the pleasure derived from the abundance of fish compensates for the unpleasantness of being wet. But for the sportsman rain is a real calamity. It was to just this calamity that Yermolaï and I were exposed on one of our expeditions after grouse in the Byelevsky district. The rain never ceased from early morning; What didn’t we do to escape it? We put mackintosh capes almost right over our heads, and stood under the trees to avoid the raindrops. . . . The waterproof capes, to say nothing of their hindering our shooting, let the water through in the most shameless fashion; and under the trees, though at first, certainly, the rain did not reach us, afterwards the water collected on the leaves suddenly rushed through, every branch dripped on us like a waterspout, a. chill stream made its way under our neckties, and trickled down our spines. . . . This was “quite unpleasant,” as Yermolaï expressed it. “No, Piotr Petrovitch,” he cried at last; “we can’t go on like this. . . . There’s no shooting to-day. The dogs’ scent is drowned. The guns miss fire. . . Pugh! What a mess!”

“What’s to be done?” I queried.

“Well, let’s go to Aleksyevka. You don’t know it, perhaps—there’s a settlement of that name belonging to your mother; it’s seven miles from here. We’ll stay the night there, and to-morrow. . . .”

“Come back here?”

“No, not here. . . . I know of some places beyond Aleksyevka . . . ever so much better than here for grouse!”

I did not proceed to question my faithful companion why he had not taken me to those parts before, and the same day we made our way to my mother’s peasant settlement, the existence of which, I must confess, I had not even suspected up till then. At this settlement, it turned out, there was a little lodge. It was very old, but, as it had not been inhabited, it was clean; I passed a fairly tranquil night in it.

The next day I woke up very early. The sun had only just risen; there was not a single cloud in the sky; everything around shone with a double brilliance—the brightness of the fresh morning rays and of yesterday’s downpour. ‘While they were harnessing me a cart, I went for a stroll about a small orchard, now neglected and run wild, which inclosed the little lodge on all sides with its fragrant, sappy growth. Ah, how sweet it was in the open air, under the bright sky, where the larks were trilling, whence their bell-like notes rained down like silvery beads! On their wings, doubtless, they had carried off drops of dew, and their songs seemed steeped in dew. I took my cap off my head and drew a glad deep breath. . . . On the slope of a shallow ravine, close to the hedge, could be seen a beehive; a narrow path led to it, winding like a snake between dense walls of high grass and nettles, above which struggled up, God knows whence brought, the pointed stalks of dark-green hemp.

I turned along this path; I reached the beehive. Beside it stood a little wattled shanty, where they put the beehives for the winter. I peeped into the half-open door; it was dark, still, dry within; there was a scent of mint and balm. In the corner were some trestles fitted together, and on them, covered with a quilt, a little figure of some sort. . . . I was walking away. . . .

“Master, master! Piotr Petrovitch!” I heard a voice, faint, slow, and hoarse, like the whispering of marsh rushes.

I stopped.

“Piotr Petrovitch! Come in, please!” the voice repeated. It came from the corner where were the trestles I had noticed.

I drew near, and was struck dumb with amazement. Before me lay a living human being; but what sort of a creature was it?

A head utterly withered, of a uniform coppery hue—like some very ancient holy picture, yellow with age; a sharp nose like a keen-edged knife; the lips could barely be seen—only the teeth flashed white and the eyes; and from under the kerchief some thin wisps of yellow hair straggled on to the forehead. At the chin, where the quilt was folded, two tiny hands of the same coppery hue were moving, the fingers slowly twitching like little sticks. I looked more intently; the face, far from being ugly, was positively beautiful, but strange and dreadful; and the face seemed the more dreadful to me that on it—on its metallic cheeks—I saw, struggling . . . struggling, and unable to form itself—a smile.

“You don’t recognize me, master?” whispered the voice again: it seemed to be breathed from the almost unmoving lips. “And, indeed, how should you? I’m Lukerya... Do you remember, who used to lead the dance at your mother’s, at Spasskoye? . . . Do you remember, I used to be leader of the choir, too?”

“Lukerya!” I cried. “Is it you? Can it be?”

“Yes, it’s I, master—I, Lukerya.”

I did not know what to say, and gazed in stupefaction at the dark motionless face with the clear, deathlike eyes fastened upon me. Was it possible? This mummy Lukerya—the greatest beauty in all our household—that tall, plump, pink-and-white, singing, laughing, dancing creature! Lukerya, our smart Lukerya, whom all our lads were courting, for whom I heaved some secret sighs—I, a boy of sixteen!

“Mercy, Lukerya!” I said at last; “what is it has happened to you?”

“Oh, such a misfortune befell me! But don’t mind me, sir; don’t let my trouble revolt you; sit there on that little tub—a little nearer, or you won’t be able to hear me. I’ve not much of a voice nowadays! . . . Well, I am glad to see you! What brought you to Aleksyevka?”

Lukerya spoke very softly and feebly, but without pausing.

“Yermolai, the huntsman, brought me here. But you tell me . . .”

“Tell you about my trouble? Certainly, sir. It happened to me a long while ago now—six or seven years. I had only just been betrothed then to Vassily Polyakov—do you remember, such a fine-looking fellow he was, with curly hair?—he waited at table at your mother’s. But you weren’t in the country then; you had gone away to Moscow to your studies. We were very much in love, Vassily and me; I could never get him out of my head; and it was in the spring it all happened. Well, one night . . . not long before sunrise, it was . . . I couldn’t sleep; a nightingale in the garden was singing so wonderfully sweet! . . . I could not help getting up and going out on to the steps to listen. It trilled and trilled . . . and all at once I fancied some one called me; it seemed like Vassya’s voice, so softly, ‘Lusha!’ . . . I looked round, and being half asleep, I suppose, I missed my footing and fell straight down from the top-step, and flop on to the ground! And I thought I wasn’t much hurt, for I got up directly and went back to my room. Only it seems something inside me—in my body—was broken. . . Let me get my breath . . . half a minute . . . sir.”

Lukerya ceased, and I looked at her with surprise. What surprised me particularly was that she told her story almost cheerfully, without sighs and groans, not complaining nor asking for sympathy.

"Ever since that happened," Lukerya went on, "I began to pine away and get thin; my skin got dark; walking was difficult with me; and then—I lost the use of my legs altogether; I couldn't stand or sit; I had to lie down all the time. And I didn't care to eat or drink; I got worse and worse. Your mamma, in the kindness of her heart, made me see doctors, and sent me to a hospital. But there was no curing me. And not one doctor could even say what my illness was. What didn't they do to me?—they burned my spine with hot irons, they put me in lumps of ice, and it was all no good. I got quite numb in the end. . . . So the gentlemen decided it was no use doctoring me any more, and there was no sense in keeping cripples up at the great house . . . well, and so they sent me here—because I've relations here. So here I live, as you see."

Lukerya was silent again, and again she tried to smile.

"But this is awful—your position!" I cried . . . and not knowing how to go on, I asked: "and what of Vassily Polyakov?" A most stupid question it was.

Lukerya turned her eyes a little away.

"What of Polyakov? He grieved—he grieved for a bit—and he is married to another, a girl from Glinnoe. Do you know Glinnoe? It's not far from us. Her name's Agrafena. He loved me dearly—but, you see, he's a young man! he couldn't stay a bachelor. And what sort of a helpmeet could I be? The wife he found for himself is a good, sweet woman—and they have children. He lives here; he's a clerk at a neighbor's; your mamma let him go off with a passport, and he's doing very well, praise God."

"And so you go on lying here all the time?" I asked again.

"Yes, sir, I've been lying here seven years. In the summer time I lie here in this shanty, and when it gets cold they move me out into the bath house: I lie there."

"Who waits on you? Does anyone look after you?"

"Oh, there are kind folks here as everywhere; they don't desert me. Yes, they see to me a little. As to food, I eat nothing to speak of; but water is here, in the pitcher; it's always kept full of pure spring water. I can reach to the pitcher myself: I've one arm still of use. There's a little girl here, an orphan; now and then she comes to see me, the kind child. She was here just now. . . . You didn't meet her? Such a pretty, fair little thing. She brings me flowers. We've some in the garden—there were some-but they've all disappeared. But, you know, wild flowers, too, are nice; they smell even sweeter than garden flowers. Lilies of the valley, now . . . what could be sweeter?"

"And aren't you dull and miserable, my poor Lukerya?"

"Why, what is one to do? I wouldn't tell a lie about it. At first it was very wearisome; but later on I got used to it, I got more patient—it was nothing; there are others worse off still."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, some haven't a roof to shelter them, and there are some blind or deaf; while I, thank God, have splendid sight, and hear everything—everything. If a mole burrows in the ground—I hear even that. And I can smell every scent, even the faintest! When the buckwheat comes into flower in the meadow, or the lime-tree in the garden—I don't need. to be told of it, even; I'm the first to know directly. Anyway, if there's the least bit of a wind blowing from that quarter. No, he who stirs God's wrath is far worse off than me. Look at this, again: anyone in health may easily fall into sin; but I'm cut off even from sin. The other day, Father Aleksy, the priest, came to give me the sacrament, and he says: 'There's no need,' says he, 'to confess you; you can't fall into sin

in your condition, can you?' But I said to him: 'How about sinning in thought, father?' 'Ah, well,' says he, and he laughed himself, 'that's no great sin.'

"But I fancy I'm no great sinner even in that way, in thought," Lukerya went on, "for I've trained myself not to think, and above all, not to remember. The time goes faster."

I must own I was astonished. "You're always alone, Lukerya: how can you prevent the thoughts from coming into your head? or are you constantly asleep?"

"Oh, no, sir! I can't always sleep. Though I've no great pain, still I've an ache, there, right inside, and in my bones too; it won't let me sleep as I ought. No . . . but there, I lie by myself; I lie here and lie here, and don't think: I feel that I'm alive, I breathe; and I put myself all into that. I look and listen. The bees buzz and hum in the hive; a dove sits on the roof and coos; a hen comes along with her chickens to peck up crumbs; or a sparrow flies in, or a butterfly—that's a great treat for me. Last year some swallows even built a nest over there in the corner, and brought 'up their little ones. Oh, how interesting it was! One would fly to the nest, press close, feed a young one, and off again. Look again: the other would be in her place already. Sometimes it wouldn't fly in, but only fly past the open door; and the little ones would begin to squeak, and open their beaks directly. . . . I was hoping for them back again the next year, but they say a sportsman here shot them with his gun. And what could he gain by it? It's hardly bigger, the swallow, than a beetle. . . . What wicked men you are, you sportsmen!"

"I don't shoot swallows," I hastened to remark.

"And once," Lukerya began again, "it was comical, really. A hare ran in, it did really! The hounds, I suppose, were after it; anyway, it seemed to tumble straight in at the door! . . . It squatted quite near me, and sat so a long while; it kept sniffing with its nose, and twitching its whiskers—like a regular officer! and it looked at me. It understood, to be sure, that I was no danger to it. At last it got up, went hop-hop to the door, looked round in the doorway; and what did it look like? Such a funny fellow it was!"

Lukerya glanced at me, as much as to say, "Wasn't it funny?" To satisfy her, I laughed. She moistened her parched lips.

"Well, in the winter, of course, I'm worse off, because it's dark: to burn a candle would be a pity, and what would be the use? I can read, to be sure, and was always fond of reading, but what could I read? There are no books of any kind, and even if there were, how could I hold a book? Father Aleksy brought me a calendar to entertain me, but he saw it was no good, so he took and carried it away again. But even though it's dark, there's always something to listen to: a cricket chirps, or a mouse begins scratching somewhere. That's when it's a good thing—not to think!

"And I repeat the prayers, too," Lukerya went on, after taking breath a little; "only I don't know many of them—the prayers, I mean. And besides, why should I weary the Lord God? What can I ask Him for? He knows better than I what I need. He has laid a cross upon me: that means that He loves me. So we are commanded to understand. I repeat the Lord's Prayer, the Hymn to the Virgin, the Supplication of all the Afflicted, and I lie still again, without any thought at all, and am all right!"

Two minutes passed by. I did not break the silence, and did not stir on the narrow tub which served me as a seat. The cruel stony stillness of the living, unlucky creature lying before me communicated itself to me; I, too, turned, as it were, numb.

"Listen, Lukerya," I began at last; "listen to the suggestion I'm going to make to you. Would you like me to arrange for them to take you to a hospital—a good hospital in the town? Who knows, perhaps you might yet be cured; anyway, you would not be alone. . ."

Lukerya's eyebrows fluttered faintly. "Oh, no, sir," she answered in a troubled whisper; "don't move me into a hospital; don't touch me. I shall only have more agony to bear there! How could they cure me now? . . . Why, there was a doctor came here once; he wanted to examine me. I begged him, for Christ's sake, not to disturb me. It was no use. He began turning me over, pounding my hands and legs, and pulling me about. He said, 'I'm doing this for Science; I'm a servant of Science—a scientific man! And you,' he said, 'really oughtn't to oppose me, because I've a medal given me for my labors, and it's for you simpletons I'm toiling.' He mauled me about, told me the name of my disease—some wonderful long name—and with that he went away; and all my poor bones ached for a week after. You say 'I'm all alone; always alone.' Oh, no, I'm not always; they come to see me—I'm quiet—I don't bother them. The peasant girls come in and chat a bit; a pilgrim woman will wander in, and tell me tales of Jerusalem, of Kiev, of the holy towns. And I'm not afraid of being alone. Indeed, it's better—aye, aye! Master, don't touch me, don't take me to the hospital. . . . Thank you, you are kind; only don't touch me, there's a dear!"

"Well, as you like, as you like, Lukerya. You know, I only suggested it for your good."

"I know, master, that it was for my good. But, master dear, who can help another? Who can enter into his soul? Every man must help himself! You won't believe me, perhaps. I lie here sometimes so alone . . . and it's as though there were no one else in the world but me. As if I alone were living! And it seems to me as though something were blessing me. . . . I'm carried away by dreams that are really marvelous!"

"What do you dream of, then, Lukerya?"

"That, too, master, I couldn't say; one can't explain. Besides, one forgets afterwards. It's like a cloud coming over and bursting, then it grows so fresh and sweet; but just what it was, there's no knowing! Only my idea is, if folks were near me, I should have nothing of that, and should feel nothing except my misfortune."

Lukerya heaved a painful sigh. Her breathing, like her limbs, was not under her control.

"When I come to think, master, of you," she began again, "you are very sorry for me. But you mustn't be too sorry, really! I'll tell you one thing; for instance, 1 sometimes, even now. . . . Do you remember how merry I used to be in my time? A regular madcap! . . . So do you know what? I sing songs even now."

"Sing? . . . You?"

"Yes; I sing the old songs, songs for choruses, for feasts, Christmas songs, all sorts! I know such a lot of them, you see, and I've not forgotten them. Only dance songs I don't sing. In my state now, it wouldn't suit me."

"How do you sing them? . . . to yourself?"

"To myself, yes; and aloud, too. I can't sing loud, but still one can understand it. I told you a little girl waits on me. A clever little orphan she is. So I have taught her; four songs she has learned from me already. Don't you believe me? Wait a minute, I'll show you directly. . . ."

Lukerya took breath. . . . The thought that this half-dead creature was making ready to begin singing raised an involuntary feeling of dread in me. But before I could utter a word, a long-drawn-out, hardly audible, but pure and true note, was quivering in my ears... . it was followed by a second and a third. "In the meadows," sang Lukerya. She sang, the expression of her stony face unchanged, even her eyes riveted on one spot. But how touchingly tinkled out that poor struggling little voice, that wavered like a thread of smoke: how she longed to pour out all her soul in it! . . . I felt no dread now; my heart throbbed with unutterable pity.

"Ah, I can't!" she said suddenly. "I've not the strength. I'm so upset with joy at seeing you."

She closed her eyes.

I laid my hand on her tiny, chill fingers. . . . She glanced at me, and her dark lids, fringed with golden eyelashes, closed again, and were still an ancient statue's. An instant later they glistened in the half-darkness. . . . They were moistened by a tear.

As before, I did not stir.

"How silly I am!" said Lukerya suddenly, with unexpected force, and opened her eyes wide: she tried to wink the tears out of them. "I ought to be ashamed! What am I doing? It's a long time since I have been like this . . . not since that day when Vassya-Polyakov was here last spring. While he sat with me and talked, I was all right; but when he had gone away, how I did cry in my loneliness! Where did I get the tears from? But, there! we girls get our tears for nothing. Master," added Lukerya, "perhaps you have a handkerchief. . . . If you won't mind, wipe my eyes."

I made haste to carry out her desire, and left her the handkerchief. She refused it at first. . . . "What good's such a gift to me?" she said. The handkerchief was plain enough, but clean and white. Afterwards she clutched it in her weak fingers, and did not loosen them again. As I got used to the darkness in which we both were, I could clearly make out her features, could even perceive the delicate flush that peeped out under the coppery hue of her face, could discover in the face, so at least it seemed to me, traces of its former beauty.

"You asked me, master," Lukerya began again, "whether I sleep. I sleep very little, but every time I fall asleep I've dreams—such splendid dreams! I'm never ill in my dreams; I'm always so well, and young. . . . There's one thing's sad: I wake up and long for a good stretch, and I'm all as if I were in chains. I once had such an exquisite dream! Shall I tell it you? Well, listen. I dreamed I was standing in a meadow, and all round me was rye, so tall, and ripe as gold! . . . and I had a reddish dog with me—such a wicked dog; it kept trying to bite me. And I had a sickle in my hands; not a simple sickle; it seemed to be the moon itself—the moon as it is when it's the shape of a sickle. And with this same moon I had to cut the rye clean. Only I was very weary with the heat, and the moon blinded me, and I felt lazy; and cornflowers were growing all about, and such big ones! And they all turned their heads to me. And I thought in my dream I would pick them; Vassya had promised to come, so I'd pick myself a wreath first; I'd still time to plait it. I began picking cornflowers, but they kept melting away from between my fingers, do what I would. And I couldn't make myself a wreath. And meanwhile I heard some one coming up to me, so close, and calling, 'Lush! Lusha!' . . . 'Ah,' I thought, 'what a pity I hadn't time!' No matter, I put that moon on my head instead of corn-flowers. I put it on like a tiara, and I was all brightness directly; I made the whole field light around me. And, behold! over the very top of the ears there came gliding very quickly toward me, not Vassya, but Christ Himself! And how I knew it was Christ I can't say; they don't paint Him like that—only it was He! No beard, tall, young, all in white, only His belt was golden; and He held out His hand to me. 'Fear not,' said He; 'My bride adorned, follow Me; you shall lead the choral dance in the heavenly kingdom, and sing the songs of Paradise.' And how I clung to His hand! My dog at once followed at my heels.., but then we began to float upward! He in front. . . . his wings spread wide over all the sky, long like a sea-gull's—and I after Him! And my dog had to stay behind. Then only I understood that that dog was my illness, and that in the heavenly kingdom there was no place for it."

Lukerya paused a minute.

"And I had another dream, too," she began again; "but may be it was a vision. I really don't know. It seemed to me I was lying in this very shanty, and my dead parents, father and mother,

come to me and bow low to me, but say nothing. And I asked them, ‘Why do you bow down to me, father and mother?’ ‘Because,’ they said, ‘you suffer much in this world, so that you have not only set free your own soul, but have taken a great burden from off us, too. And for us in the other world it is much easier. You have made an end of your own sins; now you are expiating our sins.’ And having said this, my parents bowed down to me again, and I could not see them; there was nothing but the walls to be seen. I was in great doubt afterwards what had happened with me. I even told the priest of it in confession. Only he thinks it was not a vision, because visions come only to the clerical gentry.”

“And I’ll tell you another dream,” Lukerya went on. “I dreamed I was sitting on the high-road, under a willow; I had a stick, had a wallet on my shoulders, and my head tied up in a kerchief, just like a pilgrim woman! And I had to go somewhere, a long, long way off, on a pilgrimage. And pilgrims kept coming past me; they came along slowly, all going one way; their faces were weary, and all very much like one another. And I dreamed that moving about among them was a woman, a head taller than the rest, and wearing a peculiar dress, not like ours—not Russian. And her face, too, was peculiar—a worn face and severe. And all the others moved away from her; but she suddenly turns, and comes straight to me. She stood still, and looked at me; and her eyes were yellow, large, and clear as a falcon’s. And I ask her, ‘Who are you?’ And she says to me, ‘I’m your death.’ Instead of being frightened, it was quite the other way. I was as pleased as could be; I crossed myself! And the woman, my death, says to me: ‘I’m sorry for you, Lukerya, but I can’t take you with me. Farewell!’ Good God! how sad I was then! . . . ‘Take me,’ said I, ‘good mother, take me, darling!’ And my death turned to me, and began speaking to me. . . . I knew that she was appointing me my hour, but indistinctly, incomprehensibly. ‘After St. Peter’s day,’ said she. . . . With that I awoke. . . . Yes, I have such wonderful dreams!”

Lukerya turned her eyes upward . . . and sank into thought. . . .

“Only the sad thing is, sometimes a whole week will go by without my getting to sleep once. Last year a lady came to see me, and she gave me a little bottle of medicine against sleeplessness; she told me to take ten drops at a time. It did me so much good, and I used to sleep; only the bottle was all finished long ago. Do you know what medicine that was, and how to get it?”

The lady had obviously given Lukerya opium. I promised to get her another bottle like it, and could not refrain from again wondering aloud at her patience.

“Ah, master!” she answered, “why do you say so? What do you mean by patience? There, Simeon Stylites now had patience certainly, great patience; for thirty years be stood on a pillar! And another saint had himself buried in the earth, right up to his breast, and the ants ate his face. . . . And I’ll tell you what I was told by a good scholar: there was once a country, and the Ishmaelites made war on it, and they tortured and killed all the inhabitants; and do what they would, the people could not get rid of them. And there appeared among these people a holy virgin; she took a great sword, put on armor weighing eighty pounds, went out against the Ishmaelites and drove them all beyond the sea. Only when she had driven them out, she said to them: ‘Now burn me, for that was my vow, that I would die a death by fire for my people.’ And the Ishmaelites took her and burned her, and the people have been free ever since then! That was a noble deed, now! But what am I!”

I wondered to myself whence and in what shape the legend of Joan of Arc had reached her, and after a brief silence, I asked Lukerya how old she was.

“Twenty-eight . . . or nine. . . . It won’t be thirty. But why count the years! I’ve something else to tell you. . . .”

Lukerya suddenly gave a sort of choked cough, and groaned. .

"You are talking a great deal," I observed to her; "it may be bad for you."

"It's true," she whispered, hardly audibly; "it's time to end our talk; but what does it matter! Now, when you leave me, I can be silent as long as I like. Anyway, I've opened my heart. . ."

I began bidding her good-by. I repeated my promise to send her the medicine, and asked her once more to think well and tell me—if there wasn't anything she wanted?

"I want nothing; I am content with all, thank God!" she articulated with very great effort, but with emotion; "God give good health to all! But there, master, you might speak a word to your mamma—the peasants here are poor— if she could take the least bit off their rent! They've not land enough, and no advantages. . . . They would pray to God for you. . . . But I want nothing; I'm quite contented with all."

I gave Lukerya my word that I would carry out her request, and had already walked to the door. . . . She called me back again.

"Do you remember, master," she said, and there was a gleam of something wonderful in her eyes and on her lips, "what hair I used to have? Do you remember, right down to my knees! It was long before I could make up my mind to it. . . . Such hair as it was! But how could it be kept combed? In my state! . . . So I had it cut off. . . . Yes. . . Well, good-by, master! I can't talk any more. . . ."

That day, before setting off to shoot, I had a conversation with the village constable about Lukerya. I learned from him that in the village they called Lukerya the "Living Relic"; that she gave them no trouble, however; they never heard complaint or repining from her. "She asks nothing, but, on the contrary, she's grateful for everything; a gentle soul, one must say, if any there be. Stricken of God," so the constable concluded, "for her sins, one must suppose; but we do not go into that. And as for judging her, no— no, we do not judge her. Let her be!"

* * *

A few weeks later I heard that Lukerya was dead. So her death had come for her . . . and "after St. Peter's day." They told me that on the day of her death she kept hearing the sound of bells, though it was reckoned over five miles from Aleksyevka to the church, and it was a week-day. Lukerya, however, had said that the sounds came not from the church, but from above! Probably she did not dare to say—from heaven.