

a fair, clear complexion, and a pleasant if somewhat arch smile with a row of even white teeth — and whether they were all her own or not, there was no sign of stainless steel. The young man's smile, however, when he finally relaxed enough to show it, was disfigured by two large stainless-steel teeth.

Ivan was bursting with curiosity but the young lady, although flirtatious enough and expert in the exercise of her azure orbs, was chary of information about herself. It had to be extracted bit by bit. She said that her name was Tatiana Nikolayevna, but refused to divulge her surname. When Ivan asked if she was on the stage, she admitted that she occasionally appeared in vaudeville but would not say what she did. The young man's name was Aleksei. He could not drive himself and was nervous of his cousin's driving. She was such a *likhach* (daredevil). She had hurt her back in a fall from a motorcycle and still had to have massage treatments. (Aleksei had finally condescended to join the group but had haughtily refused any of our refreshments.) She adored motorcycles, she said, and it finally emerged that she had at one time ridden a motorcycle in the circus.

Tatiana and Aleksei were driving to Yalta for a holiday and like us were planning to spend that night at a hotel in Kharkov. Since they had so kindly helped us out, I asked if they would not have dinner with us at the Intourist Hotel. Aleksei made various objections, but Tatiana overruled them and accepted.

Kharkov changed

Kharkov was a sad sight when I first saw it in 1950. It had changed hands several times during the war and been bombed by both sides and, although many new buildings had been constructed, there were still whole streets of empty shells. It looks infinitely more cheerful now. There has been a tremendous amount of reconstruction, including, of course, many grandiose official and institutional buildings. Streets have been widened and much space formerly built on has been used for squares and gardens and the banks of the rivers have been or are being turned into parks. The population was given as 833,000 in 1939 and is probably well over a million now.

As we were having breakfast in the dining-room the next morning, our highway acquaintances walked in and sat down at a table. Ivan was up like a shot and invited them to join us. They had had a slight automobile accident since we had last seen them. A truck had suddenly come out on to the highway from a side-road and Tatiana had jammed on the brakes so hard that the car had almost turned over. Aleksei had been sitting in the back seat studying his French grammar and did not know what had hit him. Both had bad bruises and cuts on arms and legs and were feeling the shock. The *Pobyeda* was in a Kharkov garage for minor repairs. If Tatiana had been a second later in braking, they would probably both have been killed . . .

Tatiana's spirits had been much restored by a good Kharkov steak for breakfast, and it had been agreed that we should have a picnic lunch somewhere along the road and that they should be our guests for dinner at Zelyonny Gai in the evening. Ivan and I stopped for a dip in the Oryel (not related to the word Oryol) River. Ivan pointed to the prevalence of bathing suits at the various swimming holes in the region as a sign of advancing culture.

As we finished, the green car pulled up beside ours and we agreed to lunch at the first shade-trees we found. Large

trees were scarce in this region. There was nothing but the steppes, like a sea of grain, for miles and we had to drive almost 100 kilometres before we found a small grove on the edge of a little village consisting entirely of small white-washed, thatch-roofed cottages. Ivan persuaded the housewife in the nearest cottage to boil some water for us so that we could use our Nescafé. Although the cottage was small and had a rather tumbledown look from the outside, Ivan said that it was clean and tidy inside. At first the woman had feared that it would take some time to get the water boiled because she had let the fire go out, but Ivan spotted a primus stove in a corner and they used that. Aleksei bought a jar of buttermilk from an old man who lived alone in another cottage. His cow was tethered on the roadside in front of the house and his little mongrel dog was keeping watch. As in all these little villages, there were chickens and geese wandering along the side of the road. All the men and girls were away at work on the *kolkhoz* haying or harvesting.

At lunch Ivan was able to add a little more to his stock of information about Tatiana. She was 34 and had been married and divorced some years ago. She had since remarried — that was to say, they had not yet registered their marriage but lived together as man and wife. They had had a quarrel before she left. Her husband had not wanted her to go to Yalta and had agreed only on condition that her cousin go along to keep her out of mischief. She and Ivan found that they had several mutual acquaintances in Moscow, among them one of the leading ballerinas of the Stanislavsky Theatre, Natasha Konius. Ivan was a little concerned about this, as Miss Konius was quite well informed on some of his flirtations with the Stanislavsky ballerinas. Tatiana was still indisposed to talk about her theatrical activities, but Aleksei told us that she had played the leading role in the film *Aviators* some years ago.

We had dinner in a pleasant open-air restaurant at Zelyonny Gai. It was the kind of clear, silent moonlight night one reads of in Gogol and after dinner Ivan and Tatiana wandered off to a secluded arbour in the garden. My role was clearly indicated and as I walked Tatiana's watchdog around the property I found out a little more about Aleksei.

He was 28 and a graduate of Moscow University in law. On graduating he had entered the Ministry of Education and was now an assistant to the Minister. He had also graduated from a linguistic institute in French, which he spoke fairly fluently and was eager to practice, and had taught himself German. He had never attempted English. Both his parents were university graduates and so was Tatiana's father, but I gathered that he had made what the family considered a misalliance and that Tatiana's mother had had more looks than brains or education. Aleksei was well read in Russian literature. (So, for that matter, was Tatiana; she knew a great deal of poetry by heart and recited almost professionally several poems by her favourite poet Yessenin.) He had also read widely in French literature (Anatole France was one of his favourite authors) and could quote Schiller and Heine quite creditably in German. Except for Shakespeare, Sheridan, Wilde, and Shaw, who are constantly played in the Moscow theatres, he did not seem to know much about English literature. Nor did he know any modern French authors except Romain Rolland, Barbusse, Aragon, Sartre and others approved by the régime.