

A May Evening

Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol

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THERE were sounds of merriment in the village, and a chorus of song murmured, stream-like, through its single street. It was the hour when lads and lasses, after their hard day's work, meet in the mellow gloaming to express their feelings in melodies which, though glad, are never without a strain of sadness. The pensive eventide was dreamily embracing the blue heaven, and transforming every visible object into something vague, shadowy, and ghost-like. The brooding gloom settled into night, and still the stream of song flowed on without surcease.

Guitar in hand, the eldest son of the village headman steals away from his comrades, and makes toward a house that is half hidden by a screen of pink-blossomed cherry-trees. As he walks, the young Cossack strikes a few notes on the instrument, and steps a measure to his own music. When he reaches the house, he stops, and, after a short pause, touches his guitar again, and sings a song of love, soft and low:

"The sun is low, the night is near,

Come, oh, come to me, sweetheart, dear!"

"No use," murmured the Cossack when he had finished his song, at the same time drawing near to the window. "My darling is asleep. Hahn! Hahn! are you asleep, or don't you like to expose your pretty face to the cold? Or maybe you won't come out for fear we may be seen together. But there is nothing to fear. The night is warm, and there is nobody near. And if anybody does come, I will hide you in my arms, and none shall see you. And if the wind blows cold, I will press you to my heart, warm you with kisses, and put my cap on your tiny feet, my darling. Only look out for one moment: put your hand out of the window that I may touch your rosy fingers.

"No, you're not asleep!" he adds, passionately, after waiting in vain for an answer. "You are laughing at me. Well, laugh if it pleases you. Good-bye!"

He turns round, throws back his cap, and, still gently touching his guitar, draws a few paces away. Almost at the same moment the wooden handle of the door begins to stir, the door opens with a squeak, and a girl in the spring of seventeen appears on the threshold, and, still holding the handle, she looks furtively around. Her eyes shine in the dusk like little stars, and even the pink flush on her cheeks is not unobserved by the young Cossack.

"How impatient you are!" she whispers. "You were actually getting angry! Why did you come when there were so many people about? I am all of a tremble."

"Never mind, my darling; come closer to me," replied the lover, laying aside his guitar, and sitting down on the door-step. "You know that to be one hour without seeing you is a great trial for me."

"Do you know what I am thinking?" interrupts the girl, looking at him pensively. "I am thinking something tells me that in the future we shall not be able to see each other so often. I don't think the people hereabouts are good people. The lasses look jealous; and as for the young men My mother, too, she has begun to watch me more of late. I own I was happier amongst strangers before I came here." And a shade of sadness settled for a moment on her beautiful face.

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"Only two short months in your native village, and you are already unhappy! Perhaps you are getting tired of it and of me?"

"Oh, no; I am not tired of you," she answers, with a smile. "I love you, you dark-browed Cossack! I love you for your hazel eyes; and when they look into mine, my soul answers back, and I feel happy and glad. And I like to hear you play on your guitar, and see you walk about the street. Oh, I like it so much!"

"My own Hahn!" exclaims the Cossack, in an ecstasy, kissing the girl and drawing her closer to him.

"Wait, Leoko! That is enough. Now, tell me, did you speak to my father?"

"Wha-at!" he asks, as if suddenly waking from a dream. "Speak to your father! Yes, I said that I wanted to marry to have you for my wife. Yes, I spoke to him."

The words "I spoke" seemed to fall from his lips reluctantly and almost sadly.

"Well?"

"What can you make of him? The old curmudgeon pretends to be deaf. He won't hear, and keeps scolding because I go about with the boys. But don't think about it, Hahn. On the word of a Cossack, I'll bend him to my will before I've done."

"You have only to say a word, Leoko. It shall be as you wish. I know that by myself. At any other time I should not have listened. Now, in spite of myself, I could not help doing whatever you ask me."

"Look! look!" she went on, resting her head on his shoulder and raising her eyes to the warm sky. "Look there! Far, far away are glimmering little stars: one, two, three, four, five. Is it not true that those are angels, opening the windows of their bright little homes, and looking down on us? Is it not so, my Leoko? Are they not looking on our earth? What if men had wings, and could fly up there! Yet, not one of our trees reaches the heavens. Still, people say there is a land where grows a tree whose topmost branches touch the sky, and that, on Ascension Day, God comes down by it to earth."

"No, Hahn! God has a ladder which stretches from Heaven to earth. On Ascension Day holy angels let down this ladder, and, as soon as God puts his foot on the first rung, all evil spirits take to flight and fall headlong into hell. That is why, on the Lord's Day, there are no evil spirits on earth."

"How gently stirs the water just like a babe in a cradle!" says Hanna, pointing to a pool hard by, begirt with weeping willows, whose melancholy branches drooped in the water.

On a hillock near a pine wood, slumbered an old wooden house, with closed shutters; the roof was covered with moss and weeds, the windows were half hidden with apple-trees, the dark pines veiled it with shadows and gave it a weird and specter-like look.

"I remember as though it were a dream," went on Hanna, keeping her eyes on Leoko, "that long, long ago, when I was very, very little and lived with mother, I used to hear terrible stories about that house. I am sure, Leoko, you know all about it."

"God be with it, my darling! Don't mind what old women and fools say. You would only be frightened and would not sleep if I told you."

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"Oh, no; go on and tell me, like a dear good boy!" she said, throwing her arms round his neck, and pressing her cheek to his. "You don't love me; I know you don't: you only pretend. You have another sweetheart; I am sure you have. You must tell me about the old house. I shall not be afraid, and I shall sleep all the same. But if you don't tell me, I shall not sleep a bit; I shall be thinking, thinking all the night through. Do tell me, Leoko!"

"I shall think soon that what people say is true: every woman is possessed by her own peculiar devil of curiosity. Well, listen. Long, long ago there lived in that house an old man, who had an only daughter. She was handsome; her face was as white as snow just like yours. Her father was a widower, on the look-out for a second wife. 'Will you continue to love me as you do now when you marry again, father?' she would ask him. And then he would say: 'I shall, my daughter; I shall love you more ardently than ever, and go on giving you earrings and ornaments as I have always done.'

"The old man married and brought home his young wife. She was a fine woman, that wife of his, with a blooming red-and-white complexion and big black eyes; but she cast such an evil glance at her step-daughter that the girl shrieked in deadly fear, but not a word did the step-mother speak to her all day long. When night came and the father and his wife retired, the girl locked herself up in her own room, and, feeling sad, bent her head and fell a-weeping. A little while after, happening to look around, she spied a fierce-looking black cat creeping toward her. Its fur was all a-flame, and its claws struck on the floor like iron. In her terror the girl jumped on a chair; the cat followed her. She sprang into bed; the cat sprang after her, and, flying at her throat, began to choke her. Tearing the creature away, with a cry she flung it on the ground; but the next moment it was again crawling toward her, its savage eyes burning with rage. Rendered desperate by terror, the girl seized her father's sword, which hung on the wall, and with a single stroke cut off the cat's left paw; whereupon the cat immediately disappeared.

"All the following day and the day after, the young wife kept her room. When she came out on the third day, her left hand was bandaged, and she carried the arm in a sling. Then the poor girl knew that her mother was a witch, and that she had cut off her hand. On the fourth day the old man ordered his daughter to hew wood, draw water, and scrub the floors, as if she was a menial servant or a common peasant. On the fifth he chased her from the house, without giving her either shoes for her feet or bread of money for a journey. The poor girl could bear it no longer, and, covering her face with her hands, she wept bitter tears.

"'You have ruined your daughter, my father!' she cried. 'The witch has cast her spell over you, and wrecked your soul. May God forgive you! As for me, He has not willed that I should remain much longer in the world.'

"And look!" went on Leoko, pointing toward the house. "Do you see that high bank? Well, from that bank she threw herself into the pool, and since then she belongs no more to the world. That, Hahn, is what the old folks say; but they say so many things! The present owner wants to sell the house, and they talk about turning it into a brewery. But I think I hear voices. The lads and lasses are coming home. Good night, darling; don't think about that old woman's tale. I dare say it is all nonsense."

And then, after embracing and kissing her, he went away.

"Good night, Leoko!" answered Hanna, whose gaze was still fixed on the dark pine wood.

As she looked, a great fiery ball rose slowly from the shadows, and seemed to fill the earth with a triumphant splendor. The pool was lighted up with a shower of sparks, and the pine wood on the hill began to stand out from the background of dark green.

When the merry-makers had passed, and their voices had died in the distance, every sound was hushed, night covered the earth with a mantle of silence, and Hanna, after a last, wistful glance in the direction taken by her lover, drew back into the house, and closed and bolted the door.