



READ BY ALAN DAVIS DRAKE

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A Tripping Tongue

Anton Chekhov

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Natalya Mijalovna, a young married lady who had arrived in the morning from Yalta, was having her dinner, and in a never-ceasing flow of babble was telling her husband of all the charms of the Crimea. Her husband, delighted, gazed tenderly at her enthusiastic face, listened, and from time to time put in a question.

"But they say living is dreadfully expensive there?" he asked, among other things.

"Well, what shall I say? To my thinking this talk of its being so expensive is exaggerated, hubby. The devil is not as black as he is painted. Yulia Petrovna and I, for instance, had very decent and comfortable rooms for twenty rubles a day. Everything depends on knowing how to do things, my dear. Of course if you want to go up into the mountains... to Aie-Petri for instance... if you take a horse, a guide, then of course it does come to something. It's awful what it comes to! But, Vassitchka, the mountains there! Imagine high, high mountains, a thousand times higher than the church... At the top — mist, mist, mist... At the bottom — enormous stones, stones, stones And pines. Ah, I can't bear to think of it!"

"By the way, I read about those Tatar guides there, in some magazine while you were away... such abominable stories! Tell me is there really anything out of the way about them?"

Natalya Mihalovna made a little disdainful grimace and shook her head.

"Just ordinary Tatars, nothing special..." she said, "though indeed I only had a glimpse of them in the distance. They were pointed out to me, but I did not take much notice of them. You know, hubby, I always had a prejudice against all such Circassians, Greeks... Moors!"

"They are said to be terrible Don Juans."

"Perhaps! There are shameless creatures who..."

Natalya Mihalovna suddenly jumped up from her chair, as though she had thought of something dreadful; for half a minute she looked with frightened eyes at her husband and said, accentuating each word:

"Vassitchka, I say, the im-mo-ral women there are in the world! Ah, how immoral! And it's not as though they were working-class or middle-class people, but aristocratic ladies, priding themselves on their *bon-ton*! It was simply awful, I could not believe my own eyes! I shall remember it as long as I live! To think that people can forget themselves to such a point as... ach, Vassitchka, I don't like to speak of it! Take my companion, Yulia Petrovna, for example... Such a good husband, two children... she moves in a decent circle, always poses as a saint — and all at once, would you believe it... Only, hubby, of course this is *entre nous*... Give me your word of honour you won't tell a soul?"

"What next! Of course I won't tell."

"Honour bright? Mind now! I trust you..."

The little lady put down her fork, assumed a mysterious air, and whispered:

"Imagine a thing like this... That Yulia Petrovna rode up into the mountains... It was glorious weather! She rode on ahead with her guide, I was a little behind. We had ridden two or three miles, all at once, only fancy, Vassitchka, Yulia cried out and clutched at her bosom. Her Tatar put his arm round her waist or she would have fallen off the saddle... I rode up to her with my guide. 'What is it? What is the matter?' 'Oh,' she cried, 'I am dying! I feel faint! I can't go any further' Fancy my alarm! 'Let us go back then,' I said. 'No, *Natalie*,' she said, 'I can't go back! I shall die of pain if I move another step! I have spasms.' And she prayed and besought my Suleiman and me to ride back to the town and fetch her some of her drops which always do her good."

"Stay. I don't quite understand you," muttered the husband, scratching his forehead. "You said just now that you had only seen those Tatars from a distance, and now you are talking of some Suleiman."

"There, you are finding fault again," the lady pouted, not in the least disconcerted. "I can't endure suspiciousness! I can't endure it! It's stupid, stupid!"

"I am not finding fault, but... why say what is not true? If you rode about with Tatars, so be it, God bless you, but... why shuffle about it?"

"H'm! you are a queer one!" cried the lady, revolted. "He is jealous of Suleiman! as though one could ride up into the mountains without a guide! I should like to see you do it! If you don't know the ways there, if you don't understand, you had better hold your tongue! Yes, hold your tongue. You can't take a step there without a guide."

"So it seems!"

"None of your silly grins, if you please! I am not a Yulia. I don't justify her but I... !

Though I don't pose as a saint, I don't forget myself to that degree. My Suleiman never overstepped the limits. No-o! Mametkul used to be sitting at Yulia's all day long, but in my room as soon as it struck eleven: 'Suleiman, march! Off you go!' And my foolish Tatar boy would depart. I made him mind his p's and q's, hubby! As soon as he began grumbling about money or anything, I would say 'How? Wha-at? Wha-a-a-t?' And his heart would be in his mouth directly. Ha-ha-ha! His eyes, you know, Vassitchka, were as black, as black, like coals, such an amusing little Tatar face, so funny and silly! I kept him in order, didn't I just!"

"I can fancy..." mumbled her husband, rolling up pellets of bread.

"That's stupid, Vassitchka! I know what is in your mind! I know what you are thinking... But I assure you even when we were on our expeditions I never let him overstep the limits. For instance, if we rode to the mountains or to the U-Chan-Su waterfall, I would always say to him, 'Suleiman, ride behind! Do you hear!' And he always rode behind, poor boy. Even when we... even at the most dramatic moments I would say to him, 'Still, you must not forget that you are only a Tatar and I am the wife of a civil councillor!' Ha-ha..."

The little lady laughed, then, looking round her quickly and assuming an alarmed expression, whispered:

"But Yulia! Oh, that Yulia! I quite see, Vassitchka, there is no reason why one shouldn't have a little fun, a little rest from the emptiness of conventional life! That's all right, have your fling by all means — no one will blame you, but to take the thing seriously, to get up scenes... no, say what you like, I cannot understand that! Just fancy, she was jealous! Wasn't that silly? One day Mametkul, her *grande passion*, came to see her... she was not at home... Well, I asked him into my room... there was conversation, one thing and another... they're awfully amusing, you know! The evening passed without our noticing it. All at once Yulia rushed in. She flew at me and at Mametkul — made such a scene... Fi! I can't understand that sort of thing, Vassitchka."

Vassitchka cleared his throat, frowned, and walked up and down the room.

"You had a gay time there, I must say," he growled with a disdainful smile.

"How stu-pid that is!" cried Natalya Mihalovna, offended. "I know what you are thinking about! You always have such horrid ideas! I won't tell you anything! No, I won't!"

The lady pouted and said no more.

NOTES

- **bon-ton**: good style
- **entre nous**: between us
- **civil councillor**: Rank 5 in the Civil Service, and entitled to be called "Your Excellency"
- **grande passion**: great passion

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