THE POSTMASTER

BY

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PRINCE VIAZEMSKII

Who has not cursed stationmasters? Who has not quarreled with them frequently? Who has not demanded the fateful book from them in moments of anger, in order to enter in it a useless complaint against their highhandedness, rudeness, and negligence? Who considers them anything but a blemish on the human race, as bad as the chancery clerks of yore or at least as the robbers of the Murom Forest?

Let us be fair, however, and try to imagine ourselves in their position: then, perhaps, we shall judge them with more lenience. What is a stationmaster? A veritable martyr of the fourteenth class, whose rank is enough to shield him only from physical abuse, and at times not even from that. (I appeal to my reader's conscience What are the duties of this despot, as Prince Viazemskii playfully calls him? Are they not tantamount to penal servitude?

Day or night, he does not have a moment's quiet. The traveler takes out on him all the irritation accumulated during a tedious ride. Should the weather be unbearable, the highway abominable, the coachdriver intractable, should the horses refuse to pull fast enough–it is all the stationmaster's fault. Entering the stationmaster's poor abode, the traveler looks on him as an enemy; the host is lucky if he can get rid of his unwanted guest fast, but what if he happens to have no horses available?

God! What abuses, what threats shower on his head! He is obliged to run about the village in rain and slush; he will go out on his porch even in a storm or in the frost of the twelfth day of Christmas just to seek a moment's rest from the shouting, pushing, and shoving of exasperated travelers. A general arrives: the trembling stationmaster lets him have the last two teams of horses, including the one that should be reserved for couriers. The general rides off without a word of thanks.

Five minutes have scarcely gone by when bells tinkle and a state courier tosses his order for fresh horses on the stationmaster's desk!… Let us try to comprehend all this in full, and our hearts will be filled with sincere compassion instead of resentment. Just a few more words: in the course of twenty years I have traveled Russia in all directions; I know almost all the postal routes; I have been acquainted with several generations of coachdrivers; it is a rare postmaster whose face I do not recognize, and there are few I have not had dealings with. In the not too distant future I hope to publish a curious collection of observations I have made as a traveler; for now I will only say that postmasters as a group are usually presented to the public in an unfair light.

These maligned public servants are usually peaceable people, obliging by nature, inclined to be sociable, modest in their expectations of honors, and not too greedy for money. From their conversations (which traveling gentlemen are wrong to ignore) one can derive a great deal that is interesting and instructive. For my part, I must confess that I would rather talk with them than with some official of the sixth class traveling on government business.

It will not be difficult to guess that I have some friends among the honorable estate of stationmasters. The memory of one of them is indeed precious to me. Circumstances drew us together at one time, and it is he of whom I now intend to talk to my amiable readers.

In I 8 I 6, in the month of May, I happened to be traveling through N.Guberniia, along a route that has since been abandoned. Of low rank at the time, I traveled by post, hiring two horses at each stagers As a result, stationmasters treated me with little ceremony, and I often had to take by force what I thought should have been given me by right. Being young and hotheaded, I felt indignant over the baseness and pusillanimity of the stationmaster who gave away to some high-ranking nobleman the team of horses that had been prepared for me.

It also took me a long time to get used to being passed over by a snobbish flunkey at the able of a governor. Nowadays both the one and the other seem to me to be in the order of things. Indeed what would become of us if the rule convenient to all, “Let rank yield to rank,” were to be replaced by some other, such as “Let mind yield to mind”? What arguments would arise? And whom would the butler serve first? But let me return to my story.

It was a hot day. When we were still three versts away from the station of P. it started sprinkling, and in a minute a shower drenched me to the skin. On my arrival at the station, my first concern was to change into dry clothes as soon as possible, and the second, to ask for some tea.

“Hey, Dunia!” called out the stationmaster. “Light the samovar and go get some cream.” As these words were pronounced, a little girl aged about fourteen appeared from behind the partition and ran out on the porch. I was struck by her beauty.

“Is that your daughter?” I asked the stationmaster.

“Aye, truly she is,” answered he, with an air of satisfaction and pride, “and what a sensible, clever girl, just like her late mother.”

He started copying out my order for fresh horses, and I passed the time by looking at the pictures that adorned his humble but neat dwelling. They illustrated the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the first one, a venerable old man, in nightcap and dressing gown, was bidding farewell to a restless youth who was hastily accepting his blessing and a bag of money. The second one depicted the young man’s lewd behavior in vivid colors: he was seated at a table, surrounded by false friends and shameless women.

Farther on, the ruined youth, in rags and with a three-cornered hat on his head, was tending swine and sharing their meal; 30 deep sorrow and repentance were reflected in his features. The last picture showed his return to his father: the warmhearted old man, in the same nightcap and dressing gown, was running forward to meet him; the Prodigal Son was on his knees; in the background the cook was killing the fatted calf, and the elder brother was asking the servants about the cause of all the rejoicings Under each picture I read appropriate verses in German.

All this has remained in my memory to this day, together with the pots of balsam, the motley curtain of the bed, and other surrounding objects. I can still see the master of the house himself as if he were

right before me: a man about fifty years of age, still fresh and agile, in a long green coat with three medals on faded ribbons.

I had scarcely had time to pay my driver for the last stage when Dunia was already returning with the samovar. The little coquette only had to take a second glance at me to realize what an impression she had made on me; she cast down her big blue eyes; but as I started up a conversation with her she answered without the slightest bashfulness, like a young woman who has seen the world. I offered a glass of rum punch to her father and a cup of tea to her, and the three of us conversed as if we had long been acquainted.

The horses had been ready for quite some time but I did not feel like parting with the stationmaster and his daughter. At last I said good-bye to them; the father wished me a pleasant journey, and the daughter came to see me to the cart. On the porch I stopped and asked her to let me kiss her; she consented… I have accumulated many recollections of kisses but none has made such a lasting and delightful impression on me as the one I received from Dunia.

Some years went by, and circumstances brought me once more to the same places, along the same route. I remembered the old stationmaster's daughter, and the thought of seeing her again gave me joy. I told myself that the old stationmaster might well have been replaced, and that Dunia was likely to have married. It even occurred to me that one or the other might have died, and I approached the station with rueful premonitions.

The horses stopped by the small building of the station. As I entered the room, I immediately recognized the pictures illustrating the parable of the Prodigal Son; the table and the bed stood in their former places; but there were no longer any flowers on the windowsills, and everything around betrayed dilapidation and neglect. The stationmaster himself slept under a fur coat; my arrival woke him; he got up…

It was indeed Samson Vyrin, but how he had aged! While he set about entering my order for horses, I looked at his gray hair, the deep furrows lining his face, which had not been shaven for a long time, his hunched back, and I could hardly believe that three or four years could have changed a stalwart fellow into such a feeble old man.

"Do you recognize me?" I asked him. "You and I are old acquaintances."

"That may well be," he answered sullenly; "this is a busy highway; many travelers come and go."

"How's your Dunia?" I pursued the conversation. The old man frowned.

"God knows," he answered.

"So she's married, is she? " I asked.

The old man pretended not to have heard my question and continued muttering details of my travel document. I refrained from further questions and had the kettle put on for tea. Burning with curiosity, I hoped that some rum punch might loosen my old acquaintance's tongue.

I was right; the old man did not refuse the glass I offered him. The rum noticeably dissipated his gloom. Over the second glass he became talkative: he either remembered me or pretended to, and I heard from him, the following story, which captured my imagination and deeply moved me at the time.

“So you knew my Dunia? ” he began. “Aye, verily, who didn’t know her? Oh, Dunia, Dunia! What a fine lass she was! No matter who’d pass through here, in the old days, they’d all praise her; no one ever said a word against her. The ladies would give her presents, now a kerchief, now a pair of earrings. Gentlemen passing through would deliberately stay on, as if to dine or sup, but really only to look at her a little longer. It often happened that a gentleman, however angry he was, would calm down in her presence and talk to me kindly.

Faith, sir, couriers, government emissaries, would converse with her for as long as half an hour at a time. The whole household rested on her: be it cleaning or cooking, she’d see to it all. And I, confound me for a fool, just doted on her, just did not know how to treasure her enough; who’d dare say I didn’t love my Dunia, didn’t cherish my child? Who had a good life if she didn’t? But no, you cannot drive off evil by curses: you cannot escape your fate.”

He began telling me about his grief in detail. Three years before, one winter evening when the stationmaster was lining his new register with a ruler and Dunia was sewing a dress behind the partition, a troika drove up, and a traveler, wearing a Circassian hat and military coat, and wrapped in a scarf, came into the room demanding horses. All the horses were out. Hearing this news, the traveler was about to raise both his voice and his whip, but Dunia, who was used to such scenes, ran out from behind the partition and sweetly asked the man if he would like to have something to eat. Dunia’s appearance produced its usual effect.

The traveler’s anger dissipated; he agreed to wait for horses and ordered supper. When he had taken off his wet shaggy hat, unwound his scarf, and thrown off his coat, he turned out to be a slim young hussar with a little black mustache. He made himself at home at the stationmaster’s, and was soon merrily conversing with him and his daughter. Supper was served. In the meanwhile some horses arrived, and the stationmaster gave orders to harness them to the traveler’s carriage immediately, without even feeding them; but when he returned to the house he found the young man lying on the bench almost unconscious; he was feeling sick, he had a headache, he could not travel on… What could you do? The stationmaster yielded his own bed to him, and it was resolved that if he did not get any better by the morning, they would send to the town of S. for the doctor.

The hussar felt even worse the next day. His orderly rode to town to fetch the doctor. Dunia wrapped a handkerchief soaked in vinegar around the hussar’s head and sat by his bed with her sewing. In the stationmaster’s presence, the patient groaned and could hardly utter a word; but he drank two cups of coffee nonetheless and, groaning, ordered himself dinner. Dunia did not leave his bedside. He kept asking for something to drink, and Dunia brought him a jug of lemonade prepared by her own hand.

The sick man took little sips, and every time he returned the jug to Dunia, he squeezed her hand with his enfeebled fingers in token of gratitude. The physician arrived by dinner time. He felt the patient’s

pulse and spoke with him in German; in Russian he declared that all the sick man needed was rest, and he would be well enough to continue his journey in a couple of days. The hussar handed him twenty-five rubles in payment for his visit and invited him to stay for dinner; the physician accepted; both ate with excellent appetite, drank a bottle of wine, and parted highly satisfied with each other.

Another day passed, and the hussar recovered entirely. He was extremely cheerful; joked incessantly, now with Dunia, now with her father; whistled little tunes; talked with the travelers; entered their orders in the postal register; and made himself so agreeable to the warmhearted stationmaster that on the third day he was sorry to part with his amicable lodger. It was a Sunday: Dunia was preparing to go to mass. The hussar's carriage drove up. He took leave of the stationmaster, generously rewarding him for his bed and board; he said goodbye to Dunia, too, and offered to take her as far as the church, which was on the edge of the village. Dunia stood perplexed.

"What are you afraid of?" said her father. "His Honor's not a wolf; he won't eat you: go ahead, ride with him as far as the church."

Dunia got into the carriage next to the hussar, the orderly jumped up next to the driver, the driver whistled, and the horses started off at a gallop.

Later the poor stationmaster could not understand how he could have permitted Dunia to go off with the hussar; what had blinded him? what had deprived him of reason? Half an hour had scarcely passed when his heart began to ache and ache, and anxiety overwhelmed him to such a degree that he could no longer resist setting out for the church himself. He could see as he approached the church that the congregation was already dispersing, but Dunia was neither in the churchyard nor on the porch.

He hurried into the church: the priest was leaving the altar, the sexton extinguishing the candles, and two old women still praying in a corner; but Dunia was not there. Her poor father could hardly bring himself to ask the sexton if she had been to mass. She had not, the sexton replied. The stationmaster went home more dead than alive. The only hope he had left was that Dunia, with a young girl's capricious impulse, might have decided to ride as far as the next station, where her godmother lived. He waited in a state of harrowing agitation for the return of the team of horses that had driven her off. But the driver did not come back for a long time. At last toward evening he arrived, alone and drunk, with the appalling news: "Dunia went on with the hussar past the next station."

The old man could not bear his misfortune: right there and then, he took to the same bed in which the young deceiver had lain the night before. Turning all the circumstances over in his mind, he could now guess that the hussar had only feigned illness. The poor old man developed a high fever; he was taken to S. and temporarily replaced by another person at the station. The same physician who had been to see the hussar was treating him. He assured the stationmaster that the young man had been perfectly healthy, and that he, the doctor, had guessed his evil intentions even then but had kept his silence, fearing the young man's whip.

Whether the German spoke the truth or just wished to boast of his foresight, what he said certainly did not console the poor patient. The latter, having scarcely recovered from his illness, asked the

district postmaster in S. for a two-month leave of absence, and without saying a word to anyone about his intentions, set out on foot to find his daughter. He knew from the travel document that Captain Minskii had been traveling from Smolensk to Petersburg. The driver who had driven them said that Dunia had wept during the whole journey, though it did seem that she was going of her own free will.

“Perchance,” the stationmaster said to himself, “I shall bring my lost sheep home.”

He arrived in Petersburg with this in mind, put up in the barracks of the Izmailovskii Regiment, at the lodging of a retired noncommissioned officer who was a former comrade, and began his search. He soon found out that Captain Minskii was in Petersburg and lived at the Hotel Demuth. The stationmaster decided to call on him.

He presented himself at the captain’s anteroom early one morning and asked the orderly to announce to His Honor that an old soldier begged to see him. The orderly, who was cleaning a boot on a last, declared that his master was asleep, and that he never received anybody before eleven o’clock. The stationmaster went away and came back at the appointed time. Minskii himself came out to him in his dressing gown and red skullcap.

“What can I do for you, brother?” he asked.

The old man’s heart seethed with emotion, tears welled up in his eyes, and he could only utter in a trembling voice, “Your Honor!… Do me the Christian favor!…”

Minskii took a quick glance at him, flushed, seized him by the hand, led him to his study, and locked the door.

“Your Honor,” continued the old man, “what is done cannot be undone but at least give me back my poor Dunia. You have had your fun with her; do not ruin her needlessly.”

“What can’t be cured must be endured,” said the young man in extreme embarrassment. “I stand guilty before you and I ask for your pardon, but don’t think I could abandon Dunia: she will be happy, I give my word of honor. What would you want her for? She loves me; she has grown away from her former station in life. Neither you nor she could ever forget what has happened.”

Then, thrusting something into the cuff of the stationmaster’s sleeve, he opened the door, and the old man found himself on the street again, though he could not remember how he had got there.

He stood motionless for a long time; at last he took notice of a roll of some kind of paper in the cuff of his sleeve; he pulled it out, and unrolling it, discovered several crumpled five- and ten-ruble notes. Tears welled up in his eyes once more, tears of indignation. He pressed the notes into a lump, threw them on the ground, trampled on them with his heel, and walked away… Having gone a few steps, however, he stopped, thought for a while… returned… but by then the banknotes were gone.

A well-dressed young man ran up to a cab as soon as he noticed the stationmaster returning, got in quickly, and shouted: “Go!” The stationmaster did not chase after him.47 He decided to return home to his station, but before doing so, he wished to see his poor Dunia just once more. To this end, he

returned to Minskii after a couple of days, but the orderly told him sternly that his master was not receiving anybody, gave him a push with his chest to get him out of the anteroom, and slammed the door in his face. The stationmaster stood there for a while, but finally went away.

In the evening of that same day, having attended service at the Church of All the Afflicted, he walked along Liteinaia Street. Suddenly a garish droshky dashed by him, and he recognized Minskii seated in it. It stopped before the entrance of a three-story building, and the hussar ran up the steps. A felicitous thought flashed through the stationmaster's mind. He walked back, and when he came alongside the driver, he said:

"Whose horse is this, my good man? Isn't it Minskii's?"

"Just so," answered the driver, "and what do you want? "

"Here's what: your master gave me a note to take to his Dunia, but I went and forgot where this Dunia lives."

"She lives right here, on the second floor. But you're tardy with your note, brother: he himself is up there now."

"No matter,'} rejoined the stationmaster, with an inexpressible leap of the heart. "Thanks for telling me, but I'll do my job anyway." With these words he went up the stairs. The door was locked; he rang, and a few seconds of painful anticipation followed. The clanking of a key could be heard, and the door opened.

"Does Avdotia Samsonovna live here?" he asked.

"Yes, she does," answered the young maidservant. "What do you want with her?" The stationmaster went through to the hall without answering. "You can't, you mustn't!" shouted the maid after him. "Avdotia Samsonovna has visitors."

But the stationmaster pressed forward, paying no attention. The first two rooms were dark, but there was a light in the third one. He walked up to the open door and stopped. In the room, which was elegantly furnished, he saw Minskii seated, deep in thought. Dunia, dressed in all the finery of the latest fashion, sat on the arm of his easy chair like a lady rider on an English saddle. She was looking at Minskii with tenderness, winding his dark locks around her fingers, which glittered with rings. Poor stationmaster! Never had his daughter appeared so beautiful to him; he could not help admiring her.

"Who is there?" she asked without raising her head. He remained silent. Receiving no answer, Dunia raised her head… and fell to the carpet with a shriek. Minskii, alarmed, rushed to lift her up, but when he caught sight of the old stationmaster standing in the doorway, he left Dunia and came up to him, trembling with rage.

"What do you want? " he hissed at him, clenching his teeth. "Why do you steal after me like a brigand? Do you intend to cut my throat? Get out of here!" and with his strong hand he grabbed the old man by the collar and flung him out on the staircase.

The old man returned to his lodgings. His friend advised him to file a complaint, but the station master after considering the matter, gave it up as a lost cause and decided to retreat. In another two days he left Petersburg for his post station, and took up his duties once more.

“It’s almost three years now,” he concluded, “that I’ve been living without Dunia, having no news of her whatsoever. Whether she is alive or dead, God only knows. Anything can happen. She is not the first, nor will she be the last, to be seduced by some rake passing through, to be kept for a while and then discarded. There are many of them in Petersburg, of these foolish young ones: today attired in satin and velvet, but tomorrow, verily I say, sweeping the streets with the riffraff of the alehouse. Sometimes, when you think that Dunia may be perishing right there with them, you cannot help sinning in your heart and wishing her in the grave…”

Such was the story of my friend, the old stationmaster, a story often interrupted by tears, which he wiped away with the skirt of his coat in a graphic gesture, like the zealous Terentich in Dmitriev’s beautiful ballad. These tears were partly induced by the five glasses of rum punch that he had swilled down while he told his story; but for all that they deeply moved my heart. After I parted with him, I could not forget the old stationmaster, nor could I stop thinking about poor Dunia for a long time…

Just recently, passing through the small town of R., I remembered my old friend; I was told, however, that the station he had ruled over had been abolished. To my question, “Is the old stationmaster still alive?” nobody could give a satisfactory answer. I decided to visit the place I had known so long, hired private horses, and set out for the village of P.

This took place in the fall. Grayish clouds covered the sky; a cold wind blew from the reaped fields, stripping the roadside trees of their red and yellow leaves. I arrived in the village at sundown and stopped before the building of the former station. A fat woman came out on the porch Where poor Dunia had at one time kissed me) and explained in response to my questions that the old stationmaster had died about a year before, that a brewer had settled in his house, and that she was the brewer’s wife. I began to regret the useless journey and the seven rubles I had spent in vain.

“What did he die of?” I asked the brewer’s wife.

“A glass or two too many, Your Honor,” answered she.

“And where is he buried?”

“Yonder past the village, next to his late wife.”

“Could somebody lead me to his grave? “

“That’d be easy enough. Hey, Vanka! Leave that cat alone and take the gentleman to the graveyard, show him where the stationmaster’s buried.”

At these words a red-haired, one-eyed little boy in tatters ran up and led me straight to the edge of the village.

“Did you know the late station master I asked him on the way.

“Aye, sir, I did. He taught me how to whittle flutes, he did. Sometimes (Lord bless him in his grave! I he’d be coming from the pothouse and we’d be after him, ‘Grandpa, grandpa, give us nuts!’ and he’d just scatter nuts among us. He used to always play with us.”

“And do any of the travelers mention him?”

“There’s few travelers nowadays; the assessor’ll turn up sometimes, but his mind is nowise on the dead. There was a lady, though, traveled through these parts in the summer: she did ask after the old station master and went a-visiting his grave.”

“What sort of a lady?” I asked with curiosity.

“A wonderful lady,” replied the urchin; “she was traveling in a coach-and-six with three little masters, a nurse, and a black pug; when they told her the old stationmaster’d died, she started weeping and said to the children, ‘You behave yourselves while I go to the graveyard.’ I offered to take her, I did, but the lady said, ‘I know the way myself.’ And she gave me a silver five-kopeck piece–such a nice lady!“

We arrived at the graveyard, a bare place, exposed to the winds, strewn with wooden crosses, without a single sapling to shade it. I had never seen such a mournful cemetery.

“Here’s the old stationmaster’s grave,” said the boy to me, jumping on a mound of sand with a black cross bearing a brass icon.

“And the lady came here, did she?” I asked.

“Aye, she did,” replied Vanka; “I watched her from afar. She threw herself on the grave and lay there for a long time. Then the lady came back to the village, sent for the priest, gave him some money, and went on her way, and to me she gave a silver five-kopeck piece–a wonderful lady!”

I too gave five kopecks to the urchin, and no longer regretted either the journey or the seven rubles spent on it.