

THE DARLING



Olenka, daughter of the retired collegiate assessor Plemyannikov, was sitting on the back porch in her courtyard, deep in thought. It was hot, the flies were naggingly persistent, and it was so pleasant to think that it would soon be evening. Dark rain clouds were gathering from the east, and an occasional breath of moisture came from there.

Kukin, an entrepreneur and owner of the Tivoli amusement garden, who lodged there in the yard, in the wing, was standing in the middle of the yard and looking at the sky.

“Again!” he said in despair. “Again it’s going to rain! Every day it rains, every day—as if on purpose! It’s a noose! It’s bankruptcy! Every day terrible losses!”

He clasped his hands and went on, addressing Olenka:

“There’s our life for you, Olga Semyonovna. It could make you weep! You work, you do your utmost, you suffer, you don’t sleep, thinking how to do your best—and what then? On the one hand, the public is ignorant, savage. I give them the very best in operetta, fairy pageants, excellent music-hall singers, but is that what they want? Do they understand anything about it? They want buffoonery! Give them banality! On the other hand, look at the weather. It rains almost every evening. It started on the tenth of May, and it’s gone on nonstop all of May and June—simply awful! The public doesn’t come, but don’t I pay the rent? Don’t I pay the artists?”

The next day towards evening the clouds gathered again, and Kukin said, laughing hysterically:

“Well, so? Let it rain! Let the whole garden be flooded out, and me along with it! Let me not have any happiness either in this world or in the next! Let the artists sue me! What, sue? Hard labor in Siberia! The scaffold! Ha, ha, ha!”

And the third day it was the same ...

Olenka listened to Kukin silently, seriously, and tears occasionally came to her eyes. In the end, Kukin’s misfortunes touched her, and she fell in love with him. He was small, skinny, with a yellow face and brushed-up temples; he spoke in a thin little tenor and when he spoke, his mouth went askew; and despair was always written on his face, but even so he aroused deep, true feeling in her. She forever loved someone, and could not live without it. Earlier she had loved her father, who now sat ill, in a dark room, in an armchair, and breathed heavily; she had loved her aunt, who occasionally, once or twice a year, had come from Briansk; and earlier still, while in high school, she had loved her French teacher. She was a quiet, good-natured, pitiful young lady, with meek, soft eyes, and very healthy. Looking at her plump pink cheeks, at her soft white neck with its dark birthmark, at the kind, naïve smile her face bore when she listened to something pleasant, men thought: “Yes, not bad at all ...” and also smiled, and lady visitors could not refrain from seizing her hand in the middle of the conversation and saying, in a burst of pleasure:

“You darling!”

The house, which she had lived in since the day she was born, and which had been put in her name in the will, stood at the edge of town, in the Gypsy quarter, not far from the Tivoli garden; in the evening and at night she could hear music playing in the garden; rockets burst and crackled, and it seemed to her that it was Kukin wrestling with his fate and taking by storm his chief enemy—the indifferent public; her heart sank with sweetness, she did not feel sleepy at all, and when he came home towards morning, she tapped softly on her bedroom window and, showing him only her face and one shoulder through the curtains, smiled tenderly ...

He proposed, and they were married. And when he had a proper look at her neck and her plump, healthy shoulders, he clasped his hands and said:

“You darling!”

He was happy, but since it rained on the day of the wedding and later that night, the look of despair never left his face.

After the wedding they had a good life. She sat in his box office, looked after things in the garden, recorded the expenses, handed out the pay, and her pink cheeks and sweet, naïve, radiant-looking smile flashed now in the box-office window, now backstage, now in the buffet. And she told her acquaintances that the most remarkable, the most important and necessary thing in the world was the theater, and that only in the theater could one find true pleasure and become educated and humane.

“But does the public understand that?” she said. “They want buffoonery! Yesterday we showed *Faust Inside Out*, and nearly all the boxes were empty, but if Vanechka and I produced some sort of banality, believe me, the theater would be packed. Tomorrow Vanechka and I are showing *Orpheus in the Underworld*.¹ Do come.”

And whatever Kukin said about the theater and actors, she repeated. She despised the public just as he did, for its ignorance and indifference to art; she interfered at rehearsals, corrected the actors, looked after the conduct of the musicians, and when the local newspaper spoke disapprovingly of the theater, she wept, and then went to the editorial offices for an explanation.

The actors loved her and called her “Vanechka and I” and “the darling.” She felt sorry for them and would lend them small sums of money, and if they happened to cheat her, she merely wept quietly, but did not complain to her husband.

In the winter they also had a good life. They rented the town theater for the whole winter and leased it for short terms, now to a Ukrainian troupe, now to a conjuror, now to local amateurs. Olenka gained weight and was all radiant with contentment, while Kukin grew skinnier and yellower and complained about terrible losses,

though business was not bad all winter. He coughed at night, and she gave him raspberry and linden-blossom infusions, rubbed him with eau de cologne, and wrapped him in her soft shawls.

“Aren’t you my sweetie!” she said with complete sincerity, smoothing his hair. “Aren’t you my pretty one!”

During Lent he went to Moscow to recruit a company, and without him she could not sleep, but sat all night at the window and looked at the stars. And during that time she compared herself to the hens, who also do not sleep all night and feel anxious when the cock is not in the chicken coop. Kukin was detained in Moscow and wrote that he would come for Easter, and in his letters gave orders concerning the Tivoli. But on the eve of Holy Monday, late at night, there suddenly came a sinister knocking at the gate; someone banged on the wicket as on a barrel: boom! boom! boom! The sleepy cook, splashing barefoot through the puddles, ran to open.

“Open up, please!” someone outside the gates said in a muted bass. “There’s a telegram for you!”

Olenka had received telegrams from her husband before, but now for some reason she went numb. With trembling hands she opened the telegram and read:

“Ivan Petrovich died unexpectedly today mirst awaiting orders huneral Tuesday.”

That was how it was written in the telegram—“huneral” and also the incomprehensible word “mirst.” It was signed by the director of the operetta troupe.

“My little dove!” wept Olenka. “My sweet Vanechka, my little dove! Why did I meet you? Why did I know and love you? How could you go and leave your poor Olenka, poor, wretched me? ...”

Kukin was buried on Tuesday, in Moscow, at the Vagankovo cemetery; Olenka came back on Wednesday, and as soon as she entered her room, she collapsed on the bed and wept so loudly that it could be heard in the street and the neighboring courtyards.

“The darling!” said the neighbor women, crossing themselves. “Darling Olga Semyonovna, the dear heart, how she grieves!”

Three months later Olenka was returning from church one day, sad, in deep mourning. One of her neighbors, Vassily Andreich Pustovalov, manager of the merchant Babakaev’s lumberyard, happened to be walking beside her, also returning from church. He was wearing a straw hat and a white waistcoat with a gold chain, and looked more like a landowner than a dealer.

“There is order in all things, Olga Semyonovna,” he said gravely, with sympathy in his voice, “and if one of our relations dies, it means that it’s God’s will, and in that case we must recollect ourselves and bear it with submission.”

Having accompanied Olenka to the gate, he said good-bye and went on. After that she heard his grave voice all day, and the moment she closed her eyes, she pictured his dark beard. She liked him very much. And apparently she had also made an impression on him, because shortly afterwards an elderly lady with whom she was barely acquainted came to have coffee with her, and had only just sat down at the table when she immediately began talking about Pustovalov, what a good, solid man he was, and how any bride would be pleased to marry him. Three days later Pustovalov himself came for a visit; he did not stay long, about ten minutes, and spoke little, but Olenka fell in love with him, so much so that she did not sleep all night and burned as in a fever, and in the morning sent for the elderly lady. The match was soon made, after which came the wedding.

Pustovalov and Olenka, once they were married, had a good life. He usually sat in the lumberyard till dinnertime, then left on business and was replaced by Olenka, who sat in the office till evening and there kept the accounts and filled orders.

“Nowadays the price of lumber goes up twenty percent a year,” she would say to customers and acquaintances. “Gracious, before we dealt in local lumber, and now every year Vasechka has to go for

lumber to Mogilev province. And the taxes!” she said, covering both cheeks with her hands in horror. “The taxes!”

It seemed to her that she had been dealing in lumber for a very, very long time, that lumber was the most important and necessary thing in life, and for her there was something dear and touching in the sound of the words beam, post, board, plank, batten, slat, lath, slab ... At night, when she slept, she dreamed of whole mountains of boards and planks, of long, endless lines of carts carrying lumber somewhere far out of town; she dreamed of a whole regiment of ten-yard-long, ten-inch-thick logs marching upended against the lumberyard, of beams, posts, and slabs striking together, making the ringing sound of dry wood, all falling and rising up again, piling upon each other. Olenka cried out in her sleep, and Pustovalov said tenderly to her:

“Olenka, dear, what’s the matter? Cross yourself!”

Whatever her husband thought, she thought, too. If he thought the room was hot or business was slow, she thought the same. Her husband did not like entertainment of any sort and stayed at home on Sundays, and so did she.

“You’re always at home or in the office,” her acquaintances said. “You should go to the theater, darling, or to the circus.”

“Vasechka and I have no time for going to theaters,” she replied gravely. “We’re working people, we can’t be bothered with trifles. What’s the good of these theaters?”

On Saturdays she and Pustovalov went to the evening vigil, on Sundays to the early liturgy, and returning from church, they walked side by side, looking moved, a nice smell came from both of them, and her silk dress rustled pleasantly; and at home they had tea with fancy bread and various preserves, and then ate pastry. Each day at noon, in the yard and in the street outside the gates, there was a savory smell of borscht and roast lamb or duck, or, on fast days, of fish, and one could not pass the gate without feeling hungry. The samovar was always boiling in the office, and customers were

treated to tea and bagels. Once a week the spouses went to the baths and came back side by side, both bright red.

“Still, we have a good life,” Olenka said to her acquaintances, “thank God. God grant everyone a life like Vasechka’s and mine.”

When Pustovalov left for Mogilev province to buy lumber, she missed him very much and at night did not sleep but wept. Sometimes in the evening the regimental veterinarian Smirnin, a young man who was renting her wing, came to visit her. He told her some story or played cards with her, and that diverted her. Especially interesting were his stories about his own family life; he was married and had a son, but he was separated from his wife, because she had been unfaithful to him, and now he hated her and sent her forty roubles every month for his son’s keep. And, listening to that, Olenka sighed and shook her head, and felt sorry for him.

“Well, God save you,” she said, seeing him to the stairs with a candle as he took his leave. “Thank you for sharing my boredom, God grant you good health, and may the Queen of Heaven ...”

And she always spoke so gravely, so sensibly, imitating her husband; the veterinarian was already disappearing through the door below when she called out to him and said:

“You know, Vladimir Platonych, you ought to make peace with your wife. Forgive her, if only for your son’s sake! ... The boy must understand everything.”

And when Pustovalov came back, she told him in a low voice about the veterinarian and his unhappy family life, and they both sighed and shook their heads, and talked about the boy, who probably missed his father, and then, by some strange train of thought, they both stood before the icons, bowed to the ground, and prayed to God to send them children.

And so the Pustovalovs lived quietly and placidly, in love and perfect harmony, for six years. Then one winter day Vassily Andreich, after drinking hot tea in the lumberyard, went out to deliver some lumber, caught cold, and fell ill. He was treated by the best

doctors, but the disease took its toll, and after four months of illness, he died. And Olenka was widowed again.

“Why did you go and leave me, my little dove?” she wept, having buried her husband. “How am I to live without you now, wretched and unhappy as I am? Good people, have pity on me, an orphan ...”

She went about in a black dress with weepers, and forever gave up wearing a hat and gloves, rarely left the house, except to go to church or visit her husband’s grave, and lived at home like a nun. And only when six months had passed did she remove the weepers and begin opening the shutters of her windows. Occasionally she was seen in the morning, going to market for provisions with her cook, but how she lived now and what went on in her house could only be guessed. Guessed, for instance, from the fact that she was seen having tea in the garden with the veterinarian, while he read the newspaper aloud to her, or that, on meeting a lady of her acquaintance in the post office, she said:

“There’s no proper veterinarian supervision in our town, and that results in many diseases. You keep hearing of people getting sick from milk or catching infections from horses and cows. In fact, the health of domestic animals needs as much care as the health of people.”

She repeated the veterinarian’s thoughts, and was now of the same opinion as he about everything. It was clear that she could not live without an attachment even for one year, and had found her new happiness in her own wing. Another woman would have been condemned for it, but no one could think ill of Olenka, and everything was so clear in her life. She and the veterinarian told no one about the change that had occurred in their relations and tried to conceal it, but they did not succeed, because Olenka could not keep a secret. When he had guests, his colleagues from the regiment, she would start talking about cattle plague, or pearl disease, or the town slaughterhouses, while she poured the tea or served supper, and he would be terribly embarrassed and, when the guests left, would seize her by the arm and hiss angrily:

“I asked you not to talk about things you don’t understand! When we veterinarians are talking among ourselves, please don’t interfere. It’s tedious, finally!”

But she would look at him in amazement and alarm and ask:

“Volodechka, what then am I to talk about?”

And with tears in her eyes she would embrace him, beg him not to be angry, and they would both be happy

However, this happiness did not last long. The veterinarian left with his regiment, left forever, because his regiment was transferred to somewhere very far away, almost to Siberia. And Olenka was left alone.

Now she was completely alone. Her father had died long ago; his armchair was lying in the attic, dusty, one leg missing. She lost weight and lost her looks, and those who met her in the street no longer looked at her as before and no longer smiled at her; obviously, the best years were already past, left behind, and now some new life was beginning, unknown, of which it was better not to think. In the evenings Olenka sat on the back porch, and could hear music playing in the Tivoli and rockets bursting, but that called up no thoughts in her. She gazed indifferently at her empty courtyard, thought of nothing, wanted nothing, and later, when night fell, went to sleep and dreamed of her empty courtyard. She ate and drank as if against her will.

But chiefly, which was worst of all, she no longer had any opinions. She saw the objects around her and was aware of all that went on around her, but she was unable to form an opinion about anything and did not know what to talk about. And how terrible it was to have no opinions! You see, for instance, that a bottle is standing there, or that it is raining, or that a peasant is driving a cart, but why the bottle, the rain, or the peasant are there, what sense they make, you cannot say and even for a thousand roubles you could not say anything. With Kukin and Pustovalov, and later with the veterinarian, Olenka had been able to explain everything and give her opinion on anything you like, but now in her thoughts and in her heart there was the

same emptiness as in her courtyard. And it felt as eerie and bitter as if she had eaten wormwood.

The town was gradually expanding on all sides; the Gypsy quarter was already called a street, and houses grew up and many lanes appeared where the Tivoli garden and the lumberyard used to be. How quickly time flies! Olenka's house darkened, the roof rusted, the shed slumped, and the whole courtyard was overgrown with weeds and prickly nettles. Olenka herself aged and lost her looks. In summer she sits on her porch, and as usual in her soul it is empty, and tedious, and smells of wormwood, and in winter she sits at the window and looks at the snow. There is a breath of spring, the ringing of the cathedral bells is borne on the wind, and suddenly a flood of memories from the past comes, her heart is sweetly wrung, and abundant tears flow from her eyes, but this lasts only a minute, and then again there is emptiness, and she does not know why she is alive. The little black cat Bryska rubs against her and purrs softly, but Olenka is not touched by the cat's tenderness. Is that what she needs? She needs such love as would seize her whole being, her whole soul and mind, would give her thoughts, a direction in life, would warm her aging blood. And she shakes the black Bryska off her lap and says to her in vexation:

“Go, go ... You've no business here!”

And so it went, day after day, year after year—and not one joy, and no opinions of any sort. Whatever the cook Mavra said was good enough.

One hot July day, towards evening, when the town herd was being driven down the street and the whole yard was filled with clouds of dust, someone suddenly knocked at the gate. Olenka herself went to open, looked, and was dumbstruck: outside the gate stood the veterinarian Smirnin, gray-haired now and in civilian dress. She suddenly remembered everything, could not help herself, burst into tears, and laid her head on his chest without saying a word, and was so shaken that she did not notice how they both went into the house then, how they sat down to tea.

“My little dove!” she murmured, trembling with joy. “Vladimir Platonych! Where did God bring you from?”

“I want to settle here for good,” he told her. “I’ve retired and am here to try my luck on my own, to live a sedentary life. And it’s time my son went to school. He’s a big boy. You know, I made peace with my wife.”

“Where is she?” asked Olenka.

“She’s in the hotel with my son, and I’m going around looking for lodgings.”

“Lord, dear heart, take my house! Isn’t that lodgings? Oh, Lord, I won’t even take anything from you,” Olenka became excited and again began to cry “Live here, and I’ll be content with the wing. Lord, what joy!”

The next day the roof of the house was being painted and the walls whitewashed, and Olenka, arms akimbo, strode about the yard giving orders. The former smile lit up on her face, and she became all alive, fresh, as if she had awakened after a long sleep. The veterinarian’s wife came, a thin, plain lady with short hair and a capricious expression, and with her came Sasha, small for his years (he was going on ten), plump, with bright blue eyes and dimples on his cheeks. And as soon as the boy came into the yard, he ran after the cat, and immediately his merry, joyful laughter rang out.

“Auntie, is that your cat?” he asked Olenka. “When she has kittens, please give us one. Mama’s very afraid of mice.”

Olenka talked with him, gave him tea, and the heart in her breast suddenly warmed and was wrung sweetly, as if this boy were her own son. And when he sat in the dining room that evening repeating his lessons, she looked at him with tenderness and pity and whispered:

“My little dove, my handsome one ... My little child, you came out so smart, so fair!”

“An island,” he read, “is a piece of dry land surrounded on all sides by water.”

“An island is a piece of dry land ...” she repeated, and this was the first opinion she uttered with conviction after so many years of silence and emptiness in her thoughts.

And she had her own opinions now and over dinner talked with Sasha’s parents about how difficult it was for children to study in school, but that all the same classical education was better than modern, because after school all paths are open: if you wish, you can be a doctor, if you wish, an engineer.

Sasha started going to school. His mother went to Kharkov to visit her sister and did not come back; his father went somewhere every day to inspect the herds, and sometimes was away from home for three days, and it seemed to Olenka that Sasha was completely abandoned, that he was not wanted in the house, that he was starving to death; and she moved him to her wing and set him up in a little room there.

And for six months now Sasha has been living with her in the wing. Each morning Olenka goes into his room; he is fast asleep, his hand under his cheek, breathing lightly. She is sorry to wake him up.

“Sashenka,” she says sadly, “get up, dear heart! It’s time for school.”

He gets up, dresses, says his prayers, then sits down to tea. He drinks three cups of tea and eats two big bagels and half a French roll with butter. He has not quite recovered from sleep and is therefore cross.

“You haven’t learned your fable well, Sashenka,” says Olenka, looking at him as if she were seeing him off on a long journey. “You worry me so. You must do your best, dear heart, study ... Listen to your teachers.”

“Oh, leave me alone, please!” says Sasha.

Then he marches down the street to school, a little boy, but in a big visored cap, with a satchel on his back. Olenka noiselessly follows him.

“Sashenka-a!” she calls.

He turns around, and she puts a date or a caramel in his hand. When they turn down the lane where his school is, he gets embarrassed that this tall, stout woman is following after him; he turns around and says:

“Go home, auntie, I can get there myself now.”

She stops and looks after him without blinking, until he disappears through the doors of the school. Ah, how she loves him! Of all her former attachments, none was so deep, never before had her soul submitted so selflessly, so disinterestedly, and with such delight as now, when the maternal feeling burned in her more and more. For this boy who was not her own, for the dimples on his cheeks, for his visored cap, she would give her whole life, give it joyfully, with tears of tenderness. Why? Who knows why?

Having seen Sasha off to school, she slowly returns home, so content, so calm, so full of love; her face, which has grown younger in the last six months, smiles and beams; meeting her, looking at her, people feel pleasure and say to her:

“Good morning, darling Olga Semyonovna! How are you, darling?”

“School studies are getting difficult nowadays,” she says at the market. “It’s no joke, yesterday they gave the first-year students a fable to learn by heart, and a Latin translation, and a problem ... It’s hard for a little boy!”

And she starts talking about teachers, lessons, textbooks—saying all the same things that Sasha says about them.

Between two and three they have dinner together, in the evening they do his homework together and weep. As she puts him to bed, she spends a long time making the cross over him and whispering a prayer. Then, going to sleep, she dreams of the far-off, misty future when Sasha has finished his studies, has become a doctor or an engineer, has his own big house, horses, a carriage, gets married, has children ... She falls asleep and keeps thinking about the same thing, and from her closed eyes tears flow down her cheeks. And the little black cat lies beside her and purrs:

“Purr ... purr ... purr ...”

Suddenly there is a loud knocking at the gate. Olenka wakes up, breathless with fear; her heart pounds hard. Half a minute goes by and there is more knocking.

“It’s a telegram from Kharkov,” she thinks, beginning to tremble all over. “Sasha’s mother wants him in Kharkov ... Oh, Lord!”

She is in despair; her head, her feet, her arms go numb, and it seems that no one in the whole world is unhappier than she. But another minute goes by, she hears voices: it is the veterinarian coming home from the club.

“Well, thank God,” she thinks.

The weight gradually lifts from her heart, she feels light again; she lies down and thinks about Sasha, who is fast asleep in the next room and occasionally murmurs deliriously:

“I’ll sh-show you! Get out! No fighting!”

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