

The Prodigal Daughter

The Postmaster

by

Alexander Pushkin

THE POSTMASTER

*This tyrant, a collegiate recorder,
Still keeps the posting station in good order.*

Prince Vyazemsky

Who has not cursed postmasters, who has not quarreled with them? Who, in a moment of anger, has not demanded from them the fatal book in order to record in it unavailing complaints of their extortions, rudeness and carelessness? Who does not look upon them as monsters of the human race, equal to the attorneys of old, or, at least, the Murom highwaymen? Let us, however, be just; let us place ourselves in their position, and perhaps we shall begin to judge them with more indulgence. What is a postmaster? A veritable martyr of the fourteenth class,¹ protected by his rank from blows only, and that not always (I appeal to the conscience of my readers). What is the function of this tyrant, as Prince Vyazemsky jokingly calls him? Is he not an actual galley-slave? He has no rest either day or night. All the vexation accumulated during the course of a wearisome journey the traveler vents upon the postmaster. Should the weather prove intolerable, the road abominable, the driver obstinate, the horses stubborn—the postmaster is to blame. Entering into his poor abode, the traveler looks upon him as an enemy, and the postmaster is fortunate if he succeeds in soon getting rid of his unbidden guest; but if there should happen to be no horses!... Heavens! what volleys of abuse, what threats are showered upon his head! When it rains, when it is muddy, he is compelled to run about the village; during times of storm and bitter frost, he is glad to seek shelter in the entry, if only to enjoy a minute's repose from the shouting and jostling of incensed travelers.

A general arrives: the trembling postmaster gives him the two last *troikas*, including that intended for the courier. The general drives off without uttering a word of thanks. Five minutes afterwards—a bell!...and a courier throws down upon the table before him his order for fresh post-horses!... Let us hear all this well in mind, and, instead of anger, our hearts will be filled with sincere compassion. A few words more. During a period of twenty years I have traversed

1. The officials of Russia were divided into fourteen classes, the fourteenth being the lowest.
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

THE POSTMASTER

Russia in every direction; I know nearly all the post roads, and I am acquainted with several generations of drivers. There are very few postmasters that I do not know personally, and few with whom I have not had something to do. I hope shortly to publish the curious observations that I have noted down during my travels. For the present I will only say that the class of postmasters is presented to the public in a very false light. These much-calumniated officials are generally very peaceful persons, obliging by nature, disposed to be sociable, modest in their pretensions to honors and not too greedy. From their conversation (which traveling gentlemen very unreasonably scorn) much may be learnt that is both curious and instructive. For my own part, I confess that I prefer their talk to that of some official of the sixth class traveling on government business.

It may easily be supposed that I have friends among the honorable body of postmasters. Indeed, the memory of one of them is precious to me. Circumstances once brought us together, and it is of him that I now intend to tell my amiable readers.

In the month of May of the year 1816, I happened to be traveling through the X. Government, along a route that has since been abandoned. I then held an inferior rank, and I traveled by post stages, paying the fare for two horses. As a consequence, the postmasters treated me with very little ceremony, and I often had to take by force what, in my opinion, belonged to me by right. Being young and hot-tempered, I was indignant at the baseness and cowardice of the postmaster, when the latter harnessed to the coach of some gentleman of rank, the horses prepared for me. It was a long time, too, before I could get accustomed to being served out of my turn by a discriminating flunkey at the governor's dinner. Today the one and the other seem to me to be in the natural order of things. Indeed, what would become of us, if, instead of the generally observed rule: "Let rank honor rank," another were to be brought into use, as for example: "Let mind honor mind!" What disputes would arise! And whom would the butler serve first? But to return to my story.

The day was hot. About three versts from the N. station a drizzling rain came on, and in a few minutes it began to pour down in torrents and I was drenched to the skin. On arriving at the station, my first care was to change my clothes as quickly as possible, my second to ask for some tea.

"Hi! Dunya!"¹ cried the postmaster: "prepare the samovar and go and get some cream."

At these words, a young girl of about fourteen years of age appeared from behind the partition, and ran out into the entry. Her beauty struck me.

"Is that your daughter?" I inquired of the postmaster.

"That is my daughter," he replied, with a look of gratified pride; "and she is so sharp and sensible, just like her late mother."

1. Diminutive of *Adoty*.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

Then he began to register my traveling passport, and I occupied myself with examining the pictures that adorned his humble but tidy abode. They illustrated the story of the Prodigal Son. In the first, a venerable old man, in a night-cap and dressing-gown, was taking leave of the restless lad, who was the prodigal, and a bag of money. In the next picture, the prodigal, with a look of desperate haste, was depicted in vivid colors: he was reprehensible conduct of the young man was depicted in vivid colors: he was reprehensible sitting at table surrounded by false friends and shameless women. Furred ther on, the ruined youth, in rags and a three-cornered hat, was tending swine and sharing with them their food; his face expressed deep grief and repentance. The last picture represented his return to his father: the good old man, in the same night-cap and dressing-gown, runs forward to meet him; the prodigal same night-cap and dressing-gown, runs forward to meet him; the prodigal is on his knees; in the distance the cook is killing the fatted calf, and the elder brother is asking the servants the cause of all the rejoicing. Under each picture I read some suitable German verses. All this I have preserved in my memory to the present day, as well as the little pots of balsamine, the bed with gay curtains, and the other objects with which I was then surrounded. I can see, as though he were before me, the host himself, a man of about fifty years of age, healthy and vigorous, in his long green coat with three medals on faded ribbons.

I had scarcely settled my account with my old driver, when Dunya returned with the samovar. The little coquette saw at the second glance the impression she had produced upon me; she lowered her large blue eyes; I began to talk to her; she answered me without the least timidity, like a girl who has seen the world. I offered her father a glass of punch, to Dunya herself I gave a cup of tea, and then the three of us began to converse together, as if we were old acquaintances.

The horses had long been ready, but I felt reluctant to take leave of the postmaster and his daughter. At last I bade them good-bye, the father wished me a pleasant journey, the daughter accompanied me to the coach. In the entry I stopped and asked her permission to kiss her: Dunya consented. ... I can reckon up a great many kisses

Since first I chose this occupation,

but not one which has left behind such a long, such a pleasant recollection.

Several years passed, and circumstances led me to the same route, and to the same neighborhood.

"But," thought I, "Perhaps the old postmaster has been changed, and Dunya may already be married."

The thought that one or the other of them might be dead also flashed through my mind, and I approached the N. station with a sad foreboding. The horses drew up before the little post-house. On entering the room, I immediately recognized the pictures illustrating the story of the Prodigal Son. The table and the bed stood in the same places as before, but the flowers were no longer on the window-sills, and everything around indicated decay and neglect.

The postmaster was asleep under his sheep-skin coat; my arrival awoke him, and he stood up ... It was certainly Samson Vyryn, but how aged! While he was preparing to register my traveling passport, I gazed at his gray hair, his bent back, and I was astonished to see how three or four years had been able to transform a vigorous individual into a feeble old man.

"Do you recognize me?" I asked him: "we are old acquaintances."

"Maybe," replied he sullenly; "this is a high road and many travelers have stopped here."

"Is your Dunya well?" I continued.

The old man frowned.

"God knows," he replied.

"Probably she is married?" said I.

The old man pretended not to have heard my question, and went on reading my passport in a low tone, I ceased questioning him and ordered some tea. Curiosity began to torment me, and I hoped that the punch would loosen the tongue of my old acquaintance.

I was not mistaken; the old man did not refuse the proffered glass. I observed that the rum dispelled his sullenness. At the second glass he began to talk; he remembered me, or appeared to do so, and I heard from him a story, which at the time, deeply interested and affected me.

"So you knew my Dunya?" he began. "But who did not know her? Ah, Dunya, Dunya! What a girl she was! Everybody who passed this way praised her; no body had a word to say against her. The ladies used to give her presents—now a handkerchief, now a pair of earrings. The gentlemen used to stop on purpose as if to dine or to take supper, but in reality only to take a longer look at her. However angry a gentleman might be, in her presence he grew calm and spoke graciously to me. Would you believe it, sir: couriers and government messengers used to talk to her for half an hour at a stretch. It was she held the home together; she put everything in order, got everything ready, and looked after everything. And I, like an old fool, could not look at her enough, could not idolize her enough. Did I not love my Dunya? Did I not indulge my child? Was not her life a happy one? But no, there is no escaping misfortune: there is no evading what has been decreed."

Then he began to tell me the story of his trouble in detail. Three years earlier, one winter evening, when the postmaster was ruling a new register, and his daughter behind the partition was sewing a dress, a troika drove up, and a traveler in a Circassian cap and military cloak, and enveloped in a shawl, entered the room and demanded horses. The horses were all out. On being told this, the traveler raised his voice and whip; but Dunya, accustomed to such scenes, ran out from behind the partition and graciously inquired of the traveler whether he would not like something to eat and drink.

The appearance of Dunya produced the usual effect. The traveler's anger subsided; he consented to wait for horses, and ordered supper. Having taken off his wet shaggy cap, and divested himself of his shawl and cloak, the traveler was seen to be a tall, young Hussar with a small black mustache. He stilled down, and began to converse gaily with the postmaster and his daughter. Supper was served. Meanwhile the horses returned, and the postmaster ordered them, without being fed, to be harnessed immediately to the traveler's *kibitka*. But on returning to the room, he found the young man lying almost unconscious on the bench; he had been taken ill, his head ached, it was impossible for him to continue his journey. What was to be done? The postmaster gave up his own bed to him, and it was decided that if the sick man did not get better, they would send next day to S—for the doctor.

The next day the Hussar was worse. His servant rode to town for a doctor. Dunya bound round his head a handkerchief soaked in vinegar, and sat with her needlework beside his bed. In the presence of the postmaster, the sick man groaned and scarcely uttered a word; but he drank two cups of coffee, and, ordered dinner. Dunya gave him a jug of lemonade prepared by her for something to drink, and Dunya gave him a glass of wine, he felt himself. The sick man moistened his lips, and each time, on returning the jug, he feebly pressed Dunya's hand in token of gratitude.

About dinner time the doctor arrived. He felt the sick man's pulse, spoke to him in German, and declared in Russian that he only needed rest, and that in about a couple of days he would be able to set out on his journey. The Hussar gave him twenty-five rubles for his visit, and invited him to dinner; the doctor consented. They both ate with great appetite, drank a bottle of wine, and separated very well satisfied with each other.

Another day passed, and the Hussar felt quite himself again. He was extraordinarily gay, joked unceasingly, now with Dunya, now with the postmaster, whistled tunes, chatted with the travelers, copied their passports into the register, and the worthy postmaster took such a fancy to him that when the third day arrived, it was with regret that he parted with his amiable guest.

The day was Sunday; Dunya was preparing to go to mass. The Hussar's *kibitka* stood ready. He took leave of the postmaster, after having generously recompensed him for his board and lodging, bade farewell to Dunya, and offered to drive her as far as the church, which was situated at the edge of the village. Dunya hesitated.

"What are you afraid of?" asked her father. "His Excellency is not a wolf: he won't eat you. Drive with him as far as the church."

Dunya seated herself in the *kibitka* by the side of the Hussar, the servant sprang upon the box, the driver whistled, and the horses started off at a gallop.

The poor postmaster could not understand how he could have allowed his Dunya to drive off with the Hussar, how he could have been so blind, and what had become of his senses at that moment. A half-hour had not elapsed,

before his heart began to ache, and uneasiness took possession of him to such a degree, that he could contain himself no longer, and started off for mass himself. On reaching the church, he saw that the people were already beginning to disperse, but Dunya was neither in the churchyard nor in the porch. He hastened into the church; the priest was leaving the chancel, the sexton was blowing out the candles, two old women were still praying in a corner, but Dunya was not in the church. The poor father was still praying in a corner, when upon sufficient resolution to ask the sexton if she had been to mass, the sexton replied that she had not. The postmaster returned home neither alive nor dead. One hope alone remained to him: Dunya, in the thoughtlessness of youth, might have taken it into her head to go on as far as the next station, where her godmother lived. In agonizing agitation he awaited the return of the evening, the driver arrived alone and intoxicated, with the terrible news: "Dunya was on with the Hussar from the next station."

The old man could not bear his misfortune: he immediately took to that very same bed where, the evening before, the young deceiver had lain. Taking that the illness had been a mere pretence, the postmaster now came to the conclusion fever; he was removed to S—, and in his place another person was appointed for the time being. The same doctor, who had attended the Hussar, attended him also. He assured the postmaster that the young man had been perfectly well, and that at the time of his visit he had suspected him of some evil intention, but that he had kept silent through fear of his whip. Whether the German spoke the truth or only wished to boast of his perspicacity, his communication afforded no consolation to the poor invalid. Scarcely had the latter recovered from his illness, when he obtained from the postmaster of S— two months' leave of absence, and without saying a word to anybody of his intention, he set out on foot in search of his daughter.

From the traveling passport he knew that Captain Minsky was journeying from Smolensk to St. Petersburg. The driver with whom he had gone off said that Dunya had wept the whole of the way, although she seemed to go of her own free will.

"Perhaps," thought the postmaster, "I shall bring my lost lamb home again."

With this thought he reached St. Petersburg, stopped in the neighborhood of the Izmailovsky barracks, at the house of a retired corporal, an old comrade of his and began his search. He soon discovered that Captain Minsky was in St. Petersburg, and was living at Demoute's inn. The postmaster resolved to call upon him.

Early in the morning he went to Minsky's antechamber, and requested that His Excellency might be informed that an old soldier wished to see him. The orderly, who was just then polishing a boot on a boottree, informed him that his master was still asleep, and that he never received anybody before eleven o'clock. The postmaster retired and returned at the appointed time. Minsky himself came out to him in his dressing-gown and red skull-cap.

"Well, brother, what do you want?" he asked

The old man's heart was wrung, tears started to his eyes, and he was only able to say in a trembling voice:

"Your Excellency! ... do me the great favor! ... Minsky glanced quickly at him, flushed, took him by the hand, led him into his study and locked the door.

"Your Excellency!" continued the old man: "what has fallen from the load is lost; give me back at least my poor Dunya. You have had your pleasure with her; do not ruin her for nothing."

"What is done cannot be undone," said the young man, in the utmost confusion; "I am guilty before you, and am ready to ask your pardon, but do not think that I could forsake Dunya: she will be happy, I give you my word of honor. Why do you want her? She loves me; she has become unaccustomed to her former way of living. Neither you nor she will forget what has happened."

Then, pushing something into the old man's cuff, he opened the door, and the postmaster, without remembering how, found himself in the street again.

For a long time he stood motionless; at last he observed in the cuff of his sleeve a roll of papers; he drew them out and unrolled several fifty-ruble notes. Tears again filled his eyes, tears of indignation! He crushed the notes into a ball, flung them upon the ground, stamped upon them with the heel of his boot, and then walked away ... After having gone a few steps, he stopped, reflected, and returned ... but the notes were no longer there. A well-dressed young man, noticing him, ran toward a *droszky*, jumped in hurriedly, and cried to the driver: "Go on!"

The postmaster did not pursue him. He resolved to return home to his station, but before doing so he wished to see his poor Dunya once. For that purpose, he returned to Minsky's lodgings a couple of days later, but when he came the orderly told him roughly that his master received nobody, pushed him out of the ante-chamber and slammed the door in his face. The postmaster stood waiting for a long time, then he walked away.

That same day, in the evening, he was walking along Liteinaia Street, having been to a service at the Church of Our Lady of All the Sorrowing. Suddenly a smart *droszky* flew past him, and the postmaster recognized Minsky. The *droszky* stopped in front of a three-story house, close to the entrance, and the Hussar ran up the steps. A happy thought flashed through the mind of the postmaster. He returned, and, approaching the coachman:

"Whose horse is this, my friend?" asked he: "Doesn't it belong to Minsky?"

"Exactly so," replied the coachman: "what do you want?"

"Well, your master ordered me to carry a letter to his Dunya, and I have forgotten where his Dunya lives."

"She lives here, on the second floor. But you are late with your letter, my friend; he is with her himself just now."

"That doesn't matter," replied the postmaster, with an indescribable emotion. "Thanks for your information. I shall do as I was told." And with these words he ascended the staircase.

The door was locked; he rang. There was a painful delay of several seconds. The key rattled, and the door was opened.

"Does Avdotya Samsonovna live here?" he asked.

"Yes," replied a young maidservant: "what do you want with her?"

The postmaster, without replying, walked into the room.

"You mustn't go in, you mustn't go in!" the servant cried out after him: "Avdotya Samsonovna has visitors."

But the postmaster, without heeding her, walked straight on. The first two rooms were dark; in the third there was a light. He approached the open door and paused. In the room, which was beautifully furnished, sat Minsky in deep thought. Dunya, attired in the most elegant fashion, was sitting upon the arm of his chair, like a lady rider upon her English saddle. She was gazing tenderly at Minsky, and winding his black curls round her dazzling fingers. Poor postmaster! Never had his daughter seemed to him so beautiful; he admired her against his will.

"Who is there?" she asked, without raising her head.

He remained silent. Receiving no reply, Dunya raised her head ... and with a cry she fell upon the carpet. The alarmed Minsky hastened to pick her up, but suddenly catching sight of the old postmaster in the doorway, he left Dunya and approached him, trembling with rage.

"What do you want?" he said to him, clenching his teeth. "Why do you steal after me everywhere, like a thief? Or do you want to murder me? Be off!" and with a powerful hand he seized the old man by the collar and pushed him out onto the stairs.

The old man returned to his lodgings. His friend advised him to lodge a complaint, but the postmaster reflected waded his hand, and resolved to abstain from taking any further steps in the matter. Two days afterward he left St. Petersburg and returned to his station to resume his duties.

"This is the third year," he concluded, "that I have been living without Dunya, and I have not heard a word about her. Whether she is alive or not—God only knows. So many things happen. She is not the first, nor yet the last, that a traveling scoundrel has seduced, kept for a little while, and then abandoned.

There are many such young fools in St. Petersburg, today in satin and velvet, and tomorrow sweeping the streets along with the riff-raff of the dram-shops. Sometimes, when I think that Dunya also may come to such an end, then, in spite of myself, I sin and wish her in her grave. ..."

Such was the story of my friend, the old postmaster, a story more than once interrupted by tears, which he picturesquely wiped away with the skirt of his coat, like the zealous Terentuch in Dmitriyev's beautiful ballad. These tears were partly induced by the punch, of which he had drunk five glasses during the course of his narrative, but for all that, they moved me deeply. After taking leave of him, it was a long time before I could forget the old postmaster, and for a long time I thought of poor Dunya. ...

Passing through the little town of X, a short time ago, I remembered my friend. I heard that the station, over which he ruled, had been done away with. To my question: "Is the old postmaster still alive?" nobody could give me a satisfactory reply. I resolved to pay a visit to the familiar place, and having hired horses, I set out for the village of N—.

It was in the autumn. Gray clouds covered the sky; a cold wind blew across the reaped fields, carrying along with it the red and yellow leaves from the trees that it encountered. I arrived in the village at sunset, and stopped at the little post-house. In the entry (where Dunya had once kissed me) a stout woman came out to meet me, and in answer to my questions replied, that the old postmaster had been dead for about a year, that his house was occupied by a brewer, and that she was the brewer's wife. I began to regret my useless journey, and the seven rubles that I had spent in vain.

"Of what did he die?" I asked the brewer's wife.

"Of drink, sir," she replied.

"And where is he buried?"

"On the outskirts of the village, near his late wife."

"Could somebody take me to his grave?"

To be sure! Hi, Vanka, you have played with that cat long enough. Take this gentleman to the cemetery, and show him the postmaster's grave."

At these words a ragged lad, with red hair, and blind in one eye, ran up to me and immediately began to lead the way toward the burial-ground.

"Did you know the dead man?" I asked him on the road.

"Yes, indeed! He taught me how to cut whistles. When he came out of the dram-shop (God rest his soul!) we used to run after him and call out: 'Grandfather! grandfather! some nuts!' and he used to throw nuts to us. He always used to play with us."

"And do the travelers remember him?"

"There are very few travelers now; the assessor passes this way sometimes, but he doesn't trouble himself about dead people. Last summer a lady passed through here, and she asked after the old postmaster, and went to his grave."

"What sort of a lady?" I asked with curiosity.
 "A very beautiful lady," replied the lad. "She was in a carriage with six horses, and had along with her three little children, a nurse, and a little black lapdog; and when they told her that the old postmaster was dead, she began to cry, and said to the children: 'Sit still, I will go to the cemetery.' I offered to show her the way. But the lady said: 'I know the way.' And she gave me a five-copeck piece. ... such a kind lady!"

We reached the cemetery, a bare place, with no fence around it, dotted life with wooden crosses, which were not shaded by a single tree. Never in my

"This is the old postmaster's grave," said the lad to me, leaping upon a heap of sand, in which was planted a black cross with a bronze ikon.

"And did the lady come here?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Vanka; "I watched her from a distance. She cast herself down here, and remained lying down for a long time. Then she went back to the village, sent for the priest, gave him some money and drove off, after giving me a five-copeck piece ... such a kind lady!"

And I, too, gave the lad a five-copeck piece, and I no longer regretted the journey nor the seven rubles that I had spent on it.

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