

old woman . . . Ah, how soon everything in this world is over! Your honour, Pavel Ivanych! I'll make you a cigarette-case from Karelian birch, sir, my very best! I'll turn some croquet balls for you . . .'

The doctor shrugs impatiently and walks out of the ward. That's it, then, turner!

## *Romance with Double-Bass* 1886

Pitsikatoff was making his way on foot from town to Prince Bibuloff's country villa where 'a musical evening with dancing' was to take place in celebration of the engagement of the Prince's daughter. A gigantic double-bass in a leather case reposed on Pitsikatoff's back. He was walking along the bank of a river whose cooling waters rolled on if not majestically, then at least most poetically.

'How about a dip?' he thought.

In the twinkling of an eye he had taken off his clothes and immersed his body in the cooling stream. It was a glorious evening, and Pitsikatoff's poetic soul began to attune itself to the harmony of its surroundings. And imagine what sweet emotions filled his spirit when, swimming a few yards upstream, he beheld a beautiful young woman sitting on the steep bank fishing! A mixture of feelings welled up and made him stop and catch his breath: memories of childhood, regret for the past, awakening love . . . Love? But was he not convinced that for him love was no longer possible? Once he had lost his faith in humanity (his beloved wife having run off with his best friend, Sobarkin the bassoon), a sense of emptiness had filled his breast and he had become a misanthrope. More than once he had asked himself: 'What is life? What is it all for? Life is a myth, a dream . . . mere ventriloquy . . .'

But now, standing before this sleeping beauty (there could be no doubt she was asleep), suddenly, against his will, he felt stirring in his breast something akin to love. He stood a long time before her, devouring her with his gaze . . .

Then, sighing deeply, he said to himself: 'Enough! Farewell, sweet vision! It's time I was on my way to his Excellency's ball . . .'

He took one more look at the fair one and was just about to swim back when an idea flashed into his mind.

'I'll leave her a token!' he thought. 'I'll tie something to her line . . . It'll be a surprise — "from an unknown admirer".'

Pitsikatoff quietly swam to the bank, culled a large bouquet of wild flowers and waterlilies, bound them together with goosefoot and attached them to the end of the line.

The bouquet sank to the bottom, pulling the gaily painted float after it.

Good sense, the laws of Nature and the social station of my hero would seem to demand that the romance should come to an end at this point, but (alas!) the author's destiny is inexorable: because of circumstances beyond the author's control the romance did not end with the bouquet. In defiance of common sense and the entire natural order, our poor and plebeian Pitsikatoff was fated to play an important role in the life of a rich and beautiful young gentlewoman.

On reaching the bank, Pitsikatoff got a shock. His clothes were gone. Stolen . . . While he had been gazing in admiration at the fair one, anonymous villains had pinched everything except his double-bass and his top-hat.

'Accursed Fate!' he exclaimed. 'Oh Man, thou generation of vipers! It is not so much the deprivation of my garments that perturbs me (for clothing is but vanity), as the thought of having to go naked and thereby offending against public morality.'

He sat down on his instrument case and began to think how he was going to get out of this dreadful situation. 'I can't go to Prince Bibuloff's without any clothes,' he mused. 'There will be ladies present. What is more, the thieves have stolen not only my trousers, but also the rosin I had in my trouser pocket!'

He thought long and painfully, until his head ached.

'Aha!' — at last he'd got it — 'not far from here there's a little bridge surrounded by bushes. I can sit under there till nightfall and then make my way in the dark to the nearest cottage . . .'

And so, having adopted this plan, Pitsikatoff put on his top-hat, swung the double-bass onto his back and padded off towards the bushes. Naked, with his musical instrument slung over his shoulders, he resembled some ancient mythological demigod.

But now, gentle reader, while our hero sits moping under the

bridge, let us leave him for a while and turn to the young lady who was fishing. What has become of her? When the fair creature awoke and could see no sign of her float she hurriedly tugged on the line. The line tautened, but neither float nor hook appeared. Presumably Pitsikatoff's bouquet had become water-logged and turned into a dead weight.

'Either I've caught a big fish,' thought the girl, 'or the line has got entangled.'

After another couple of tugs she decided it was the latter.

'What a pity!' she thought. 'They bite so much better towards dusk. What shall I do?'

In the twinkling of an eye the eccentric young lady had cast aside her diaphanous garments and immersed her beauteous person in the cooling stream right up to her marble-white shoulders. The line was all tangled up in the bouquet, and it was no easy matter extricating the hook, but perseverance triumphed in the end, and some fifteen minutes later our lovely heroine emerged from the water all glowing and happy, holding the hook in her hand.

But a malevolent fate had been watching out for her too: the wretches who had stolen Pitsikatoff's clothing had removed hers as well, leaving behind only her jar of bait.

'What am I to do?' she wept. 'Go home in this state? No, never! I would rather die! I shall wait until nightfall, then walk as far as old Agatha's cottage in the dark and send her to the house for some clothes . . . And in the meantime I'll go and hide under the little bridge.'

Our heroine scuttled off in that direction, bending low and keeping to where the grass was longest. She crept in under the bridge, saw a naked man there with artistic mane and hairy chest, screamed, and fell down in a swoon.

Pitsikatoff got a fright too. At first he took the girl for a naiad.

'Perhaps 'tis a water-sprite,' he thought, 'come to lure me away?', and felt flattered by the notion, since he had always had a high opinion of his appearance. 'But if it is not a sprite but a human being, how is this strange metamorphosis to be explained? What is she doing here under the bridge, and what has befallen her?'

As he pondered these questions the fair one recovered consciousness.

'Do not kill me!' she whispered. 'I am the Princess Bibuloff. I beseech you! They'll give you lots of money! I was disentangling my

fishing-hook just now and some thieves stole my new dress and shoes and everything!'

'Mademoiselle,' Pitsikatoff replied plaintively, 'they've stolen my clothes too – *and* the rosin I had in my trouser pocket!'

Usually people who play the double-bass or the trombone are not very inventive, but Pitsikatoff was a pleasant exception.

'Mademoiselle,' he said after a pause, 'I see that my appearance embarrasses you. You must agree, though, that there is just as good reason for me to stay under here as for you. But I have had an idea: how would it be if you were to get into the case of my double-bass and close the lid? Then you wouldn't see me . . .'

So saying, Pitsikatoff dragged the double-bass out of its case. Just for a moment he wondered whether he might be profaning Art by using his case thus, but his hesitation did not last long. The fair one lay down in the case and curled up in a ball, while he fastened the straps with a feeling of pleasure that nature had endowed him with such intelligence.

'Now, mademoiselle, you cannot see me,' he said. 'You can lie there and relax, and when it gets dark I shall carry you to your parents' house. I can come back here for the double-bass afterwards.'

When darkness fell Pitsikatoff heaved the case with the fair one inside onto his shoulders and padded off towards Bibuloff's villa. His plan was that he should walk as he was to the nearest cottage, get some clothing there, and then go on . . .

'It's an ill wind that blows nobody good . . .' he thought, bending under his burden and stirring up the dust with his bare feet. 'No doubt Bibuloff will reward me handsomely for the deep concern that I have shown over his daughter's fate.'

'I trust you are comfortable, mademoiselle?' he enquired with a note of gallantry in his voice like that of a gentleman inviting a lady to dance a quadrille. 'Please don't stand on ceremony. Do make yourself at home in there.'

Suddenly the gallant Pitsikatoff thought he saw ahead of him two figures shrouded in darkness. Peering more closely he assured himself that it was not an optical illusion: there really were two figures walking ahead and – they were carrying bundles of some kind . . .

'The thieves!' it flashed through his mind. 'I bet that's who it is! And they're carrying something – must be our clothes!'

Pitsikatoff put the case down at the side of the road and chased after the figures.

'Stop!' he shouted. 'Stop thief!'

The figures looked round, and seeing they were pursued, took to their heels. The Princess continued to hear the sound of rapid footsteps and cries of 'Stop, stop!' for a long time, then all was quiet.

Pitsikatoff was quite carried away by the chase, and no doubt the fair one would have been lying out there at the roadside for a long time to come, had it not been for a lucky chance. It so happened that Pitsikatoff's two colleagues, Dronin the flute and Flamboisky the clarinet, were making their way along the road at that same time. Tripping over the double-bass case, they looked at each other with expressions of surprise and puzzlement.

'A double-bass!' said Dronin. 'Why, it's old Pitsikatoff's! How could it have got here?'

'Something must have happened to him,' Flamboisky decided. 'Either he's got drunk or he's been robbed. . . . Anyway we can't leave his instrument lying here. Let's take it with us.'

Dronin heaved the case onto his back and the musicians walked on.

'What a ruddy weight!' the flautist kept groaning all the way. 'I wouldn't play a monster like this for all the tea in China. . . . Phew!'

When they arrived at Prince Bibuloff's villa they deposited the case at the place reserved for the orchestra and went off to the buffet.

By now the chandeliers and candelabras were being lit. Princess Bibuloff's fiancé, Counsellor Sikofantoff, a nice handsome official from the Ministry of Communications, was standing in the drawing-room with his hands in his pockets, chatting to Count Tipplovitch. They were talking about music.

'You know, Count,' said Sikofantoff, 'in Naples I was personally acquainted with a violinist who could do absolute marvels. You'll hardly believe it, but he could get the most fantastic trills out of a double-bass – an ordinary double-bass – stupendous! He could play Strauss waltzes on the thing!'

'Come now, that's scarcely –' the Count objected.

'I assure you he could. He could even play Liszt's Hungarian rhapsody! I shared a hotel room with him and to pass the time I got him to teach me Liszt's Hungarian rhapsody on the double-bass.'

'Liszt's Hungarian. . . ? Come now. . . you're pulling my leg.'

'Ah, you don't believe me?' laughed Sikofantoff. 'Then I'll prove it to you straight away. Let's get an instrument!'

Bibuloff's prospective son-in-law and the Count made for the

orchestra. They went over to the double-bass, quickly undid the straps and . . . oh, calamity!

But at this point, while the reader gives free rein to his imagination in picturing the outcome of this musical debate, let us return to Pitsikatoff. . . . The unfortunate musician, not having caught up with the thieves, went back to the spot where he had left his case but could see no sign of his precious burden. Lost in bewilderment, he walked up and down several times in vain, and decided he must be on the wrong road. . . .

'How awful!' he thought, tearing his hair and feeling his blood run cold. 'She'll suffocate in that case. I've murdered her!'

Pitsikatoff tramped the roads till midnight in search of the case and then, exhausted, retired under the bridge.

'I'll look for it in the morning,' he decided.

But his dawn search proved equally fruitless, and he decided to stay under the bridge again until nightfall. . . .

'I shall find her!' he muttered, taking off his top-hat and tearing his hair. 'Even if it takes me a whole year – I'll find her!'

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And to this day the peasants who live in those parts will tell you that at night near the little bridge you can sometimes see a naked man all covered in hair and wearing a top-hat. . . . and occasionally from beneath the bridge you can hear the melancholy groaning of a double-bass.