

Chapter 1: Return to the Poltava Region

“Is this truly the end? Is it an eternal farewell?” The enchanting dark-haired girl couldn’t tear her gaze away from the window. For the first time in her life, the journey felt like a tragedy.

The renowned Kiev hills, adorned with golden-domed inclusions, vanished around the bend, already obscured by a gentle green haze. Farewell, Khreschatyk Street, with your cozy pastry shops and bookstores! Farewell, student debates and concerts featuring transient celebrities! Farewell to dreams and aspirations...

For some reason, memories of riding the funicular along her favorite Route 15, tracing the slope of Saint Volodymyr Hill, came flooding back. And then, how the electric carriage offered a breathtaking view of the picturesque slopes and the sprawling Podil below, nestled by the buildings of St. Michael’s Golden-Domed Monastery.

A mundane rural existence awaited the girl. Was this truly what young Olga had envisioned when she entered the Higher Institute of Public Education, which was the amalgamation of the former Imperial University of St. Vladimir and the Higher Education Courses For Women!

Having escaped to the metropolis from the countryside, she immediately felt at home in Kiev. Despite the city’s lingering echoes of the turbulent events of the past decade, it had sprung back to life. Vibrant and dynamic, filled with literary associations, theater and dance studios, cinema and circus—all, of course, brimming with innovation and experimentation. It seemed as if the city was inundated with young people, eager to transform the world, purging it of all the sordidness and darkness left by the tumultuous and dreadful post-revolutionary years. Suffering, uncertainty, and famine—what did those matters signify? A new life and a brilliant future lay ahead!

Seventeen-year-old Olga, replete with hope, journeyed towards her coveted Kiev, oblivious to the thorny path to knowledge that lay

before her. Yet, in essence, nothing truly terrible had befallen her; such was the nature of time, casting its hardships upon all.

And then, out of the blue—expulsion! It was suddenly discovered that her older brother, Ivan Gurko, was a Yunker (the rank for a volunteer at military service in the Imperial Russian Army in 19th and 20th centuries) at the Grand Duke's Konstantin Konstantinovich Kiev Infantry Military School—an institution that had also graduated the notorious White Guard General A. Denikin. Ivan had enlisted in the Volunteer Army, defending Perekop from the assaults of the Red Cavalry, but beyond that, his fate remained unknown to his kin.

How did this information surface at the institute? Olga herself had never dabbled in politics. However, she had witnessed a great deal: the ever-changing flags at the small station, seeking refuge in the cellar from shelling and the intoxicated adherents of successive “authorities,” and her own mother, a resolute Cossack, succumbing to typhus within a matter of days.

The whirlwind of parties, ideologies, wars, and revolutions left her bewildered. Such were the thoughts of the girl. Yet, it turned out that these matters were of significance, even decisive, to others. The institutes had special commissions that identified students with unsuitable family backgrounds or socially-alien views. “Socially alien! I wonder if they themselves ever experienced hunger?”

At least she managed to secure a job referral. Her “appropriate” worker-peasant background aided her in that regard!

And there she was—almost back in her homeland. The Poltava Governorate, Lubensky Uyezd (District), and the quaint village of Lazirky. As Olga arrived at the small station, a cascade of childhood memories flashed before her eyes...

Now she found herself in an ancient Cossack village perched on the lofty banks of the Sliporid River. The school consisted of merely two clay houses, modest mud huts for the younger and older pupils. The principal, a genial and elderly figure, greeted her warmly, saying, “Make yourself at home, my daughter. Get comfortable.” At first, the locals looked upon her with a hint of wariness (as is

often the case in villages towards strangers), but overall, they were friendly, awaiting the arrival of an elementary school teacher for quite some time...

Olga prepared herself for the inevitable scrutiny and gossip, maintaining a poised and affable demeanor, with a touch of dignity. Judging by the welcoming glances, the community embraced the newcomer.

One young lad, with a short and sturdy physique, in particular, exhibited special favor. Olga had not paid much attention to the local boys upon her arrival, but this one seemed to appear near the school far too frequently. So often, in fact, that one day, when she encountered him at the gate, the teacher could not resist asking:

“Isn’t it a little late for a first-grader?”

“I actually graduated school, Mrs. Gurko,” the boy replied nonchalantly.

“And what do you do now?” Olga pondered to herself, “Impressive, he even speaks well.”

“My father owns the mill, and that’s where I work,” he answered.

The heir to the “flour-milling dynasty” was named Anton. When he escorted Olga home, he hesitated at the gate, bid her farewell, but then mustered the courage to say:

“We have dancing on Saturdays. You should come to our club.”

Olga was taken aback; this was unexpected. “You are quite bold,” she thought.

“You’re always alone. You’ve been here for three months now, and you only go to and from school, to the store, and to the river,” he observed.

“Are you stalking me?!” Olga inquired cautiously, as she cherished her moments of solace by the river, indulging in girlish reveries. Witnessing eyes were not needed.

“No, I just happen to see you,” he responded, entirely unashamed.

“He certainly has a nerve,” Olga mused.

“So, I’ll come by the day after tomorrow?”

“Please do, you’re welcome.”

Olga was surprised by how readily she accepted the invitation. It was about time she embraced this new life. The evenings had been rather lackluster... “Well, perhaps I shall become a ‘beautiful miller’...” she chuckled sadly, feeling that Kiev seemed more distant and unattainable than ever before.

Not even a month later, the situation began to take on more clarity. Olga was well aware of how swiftly news spread through the villages. Thus, she was not taken aback when Zoya, a local high school teacher, who had recently started at the Zemstvo school, requested a serious conversation.

Zoya informed her of a recent gang rampage in the vicinity. The most infamous incident was an attack on a train transporting expropriated grain. The raid was unsuccessful; the guards proved steadfast. However, a dozen Red Army soldiers and raiders lost their lives. While the instigators were apprehended, numerous others remained at large, suspected to have had a hand in the crime. Many people knew or suspected the identities of these accomplices, yet they kept their knowledge concealed.

“The miller Kravchuk certainly aided them, and his son Sasha was seen with the gang in Sotnyts’ke. He hasn’t been in Lazirky since. Nobody has provided concrete evidence against them, but their house and mill were searched. To be fair, it seems they searched everyone,” Zoya disclosed in a hushed tone. “I mean, Anton didn’t seem involved, but who can truly say? They say weapons were hidden at the mill.”

“People can be so imaginative,” Olga frowned, disliking such gossip.

“Don’t be hasty,” the teacher took offense. “He’s a sought-after suitor, well-to-do. But be aware that you might get ensnared like a chicken in a fox’s mouth.”

“Zoya, did I say I was getting married?” Olga interjected and walked out of the classroom where the heart-to-heart conversation had taken place.

Truth be told, she had no intention of getting married just yet, even though Anton had already dropped unmistakable hints. Olga responded to the advances of the “sought-after suitor” with restraint. Still, it was not the life she had dreamed of, not in the least...

It was spring once again. The March day gleamed with such brilliance that it almost dazzled Olga’s eyes. The icicles hanging from the rooftops seemed like airborne splashes and sunlit bunnies, while the roosters joyously crowed at an ungodly hour. As she approached the school, Olga reflected on her nearly year-long tenure as a teacher, and everything seemed



to be progressing well. Working with children brought her immense joy, witnessing their successes and growth. The students were naturally drawn to her serene and astute demeanor, and her undeniable beauty further captivated their attention. Respected by parents and cherished by her pupils, her professional life flourished. However, she dared not dwell on other aspects; it was best to let everything continue as it had been...

Yet, on this particular day, something felt off during the lesson. Her thoughts seemed scattered, and even while mechanically repeating the phrase, "The children are glad for spring," she sensed the restlessness of her first-graders. Whispers and fidgeting filled the classroom. Their gazes fixated on the window, where the once frosty patterns had already thawed.

"What on earth did you see out there?!" Olga exclaimed, her curiosity piqued. She turned to look outside.

Approaching the school was a slender young man, dressed in a distinctly un-rural manner. Olga could hardly believe her eyes: it was Leonid!

Chapter 2: "Stationmaster"

Since as far back as he could remember, Leonid had always fallen asleep to the soothing sounds of rolling wheels. The rhythms of the railroad, the glimmering lights, and the steam locomotive's gentle hum mesmerized him. Vast expanses, uncharted lands, and unfamiliar bustling cities called out to him. It seemed that life without the railroad was unimaginable!

This sentiment was deeply rooted in the Mirachevsky family, as they frequently had to relocate due to the zealous work ethic of its patriarch, Mikhail Mirachevsky, an esteemed employee of the Kiev-Poltava railroad. Though their stations changed (currently being Solonytska), their apartments shifted, the railroad remained a constant presence.

Similarly steadfast were the household rules established by Olga Mirachevsky, the capable young mistress of the house. The position of assistant stationmaster demanded diligence and responsibility, and Mikhail entrusted the management of their home uncondition-

ally to his wife. Despite being twenty years her senior, he guided her with affectionate tutelage, recognizing Olga's competence in handling any task. Under her watch, the house was always immaculate, and a delectable dinner awaited them each evening, complemented by a well-tended vegetable garden.

Their love for their son, Leonid, was not indulgent, yet neither were they excessively strict. The warmth of home and a sense of security was what they wholeheartedly provided him.

Mikhail was strict at work, but at home, he was kind, flexible, and exceedingly caring. With his son, he eagerly shared his knowledge and expertise during any free moment, as if keen to impart all he knew.

Fishing did not particularly captivate the young Leonid, but he delighted in crafting trains and animals from wood and clay. However, the most captivating moments were when his father began taking him along to inspect neighboring whistle-stops.

Leonid fondly recalled that spring day, shortly after Easter, when his father whispered the words at dawn:

"Rise and shine! We're in for an adventure!"

Devouring his breakfast, he eagerly inquired minute by minute: "Where are we headed? What will we be doing?"

Mikhail smiled mysteriously, heightening the sense of anticipation. Only when his father placed him onto the waiting handcar did Leonid realize that a grand journey lay ahead.

His inaugural ride on the handcar was a marvel: the rhythmic clatter of the wheels, the spring breeze caressing his face, the trees flashing by, and the clouds racing across the high blue sky! It made him want to throw back his head and shout with unbridled joy, though the rush of emotions momentarily stifled his breath...

Leonid cherished his father's stories about road construction, about the challenges of laying tunnels and building embankments and bridges. To him, being a railroader was undoubtedly the most esteemed profession in the world!

And then, there were his mother's tales, whether true accounts or folklore, Leonid listened to them with rapt attention. It was no surprise that Olga always carried herself with grace. She proudly narrated the legacy of her great-grandfather, Arkady Shpirkan, who had served as the estate manager for Count Hercule Morkoff and