

**CLASSICS TO GO**  
**THE RIVER**  
**OF LIFE**  
**AND OTHER STORIES**

**ALEKSANDR KUPRIN**

# **The River of Life**

**And Other Stories**

**Aleksandr Kuprin**

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

ALEXANDER KUPRIN was born in 1870. He attended the Cadet School and the Military College at Moscow, and entered the Russian Army as a lieutenant in 1890. Seven years later he resigned his commission to devote himself to literature.

He achieved fame by a novel, *The Duel*, in which he described with a ruthless realism the army life in a garrison town upon the Western Frontier. The book, which in reality falls into line with the rest of his work as a severely objective presentation of a life which he has found vivid and rich, was, fortunately for his success, interpreted as an indictment of the Russian Army and the ill-starred Manchurian campaign. He was accepted by the propagandists as one of themselves, and though he protested vigorously against his unsought reputation, his position was thenceforward assured.

But the interest of Kuprin's talent is independent of the accidents of his material. He is an artist who has found life wide and rich and inexhaustible. He has been fascinated by the reality itself rather than by the problems with which it confronts a differently sensitive mind. Therefore he has not held himself aloof, but plunged into the riotous waters of the River of Life. He has swum with the stream and battled against it as the mood turned in him; and he has emerged with stories of the joy he has found in his own eager acceptance. Thus Kuprin is alive as none of his contemporaries is alive, and his stories are stories told for the delight of the telling and of the tale. They may not be profound with the secrets of the universe; but they are, within their compass, shaped by the perfect art of one to

whom the telling of a story of life is an exercise of his whole being in complete harmony with the act of life itself.

J. M. M.

I

## THE RIVER OF LIFE

I

THE landlady's room in the 'Serbia.' Yellow wallpaper; two windows with dirty muslin curtains; between them an oval squinting mirror, stuck at an angle of forty-five degrees, reflects a painted floor and chair legs; on the window-sills dusty, pimply cactuses; a cage with a canary hangs from the ceiling. The room is partitioned off by red screens of printed calico: the smaller part on the left is the bedroom of the landlady and her children; that on the right is blocked up with varied odds and ends of furniture—bedridden, rickety, and lame. In the corners all kinds of rubbish are in chaotic cobwebbed heaps: a sextant in a ginger leather case, and with it a tripod and a chain, some old trunks and boxes, a guitar without strings, hunting boots, a sewing machine, a 'Monopan' musical box, a camera, about five lamps, piles of books, dresses, bundles of linen, and a great many things besides. All these things had been detained at various times by the landlady for rent unpaid, or left behind by runaway lodgers. You cannot move in the room because of them.

The 'Serbia' is a third-rate hotel. Permanent lodgers are a rarity, and those are prostitutes. Mostly they are casual passengers who float up to town on the Dnieper: small farmers, Jewish commission agents, distant provincials, pilgrims, and village priests who come to town to inform, or are returning home when the information has been lodged.

Rooms in the 'Serbia' are also occupied by couples from the town for the night or a few days.

Spring. About three in the afternoon. The curtains of the open windows stir gently, and the room smells of kerosene and baked cabbage. It is the landlady warming up on her stove a *bigoss à la Polonaise* of cabbage, pork fat, and sausage, with a great deal of pepper and bay leaves. She is a widow between thirty-six and forty, a strong, quick, good-looking woman. The hair that she wears in curls over her forehead has a strong tinge of grey; but her face is fresh, her big sensual mouth red, and her young dark eyes moist and playfully sly. Her name is Anna Friedrichovna. She is half German, half Pole, and comes from the Baltic Provinces; but her close friends call her Friedrich simply, which suits her determined character better. She is quick-tempered, scolds and talks bawdy. Sometimes she fights with her porters and the lodgers who have been on the spree; she drinks as well as any man, and has a mad passion for dancing. She changes from abuse to laughing in a second. She has but small respect for the law, receives lodgers without passports, and with her own hands, as she says, 'chucks into the street' those who don't pay up—that is, she unlocks his door while he is out, and puts all his things in the passage or on the stairs, and sometimes in her own room. The police are friendly with her for her hospitality, her cheerful character, and particularly for the gay, easy, unceremonious, disinterested complaisance with which she responds to man's passing emotions.

She has four children. The two eldest, Romka and Alychka, have not yet come back from school, and the younger, Adka, seven, and Edka, five, strong brats with cheeks mottled with mud, blotches, tear-stains, and the sunburn of early spring, are always to be found near their mother. Both of them hold on to the table leg and beg. They are perpetually hungry, because their mother does not pay

much attention to food; they eat anyhow, at different times, sending into a little general shop for anything they want. Sticking out his lips in a circle, frowning, and looking out under his forehead, Adka roars in a loud bass: 'That's what you're like. You won't give me a taste.' 'Let me try,' Edka speaks through his nose, scratching his calf with his bare foot.

At the table by the window sits Lieutenant Valerian Ivanovich Tchijhevich of the Army Reserve. Before him is the register, in which he enters the lodgers' passports. But after yesterday's affair the work goes badly; the letters wave about and crawl away. His trembling fingers quarrel with the pen. There is a roaring in his ears like the telegraph poles in autumn. At times it seems to him that his head is beginning to swell, to swell ... and the table, the book, the inkstand, and the lieutenant's hand go terribly far away and become quite tiny. Then again the book comes up to his very eyes, the inkstand grows and repeats itself, and his head grows small, turns to queer strange sizes.

Lieutenant Tchijhevich's appearance speaks of former beauty and lost position; his black hair bristles, and a bald patch shows on the nape of his neck. His beard is fashionably trimmed to a sharp point. His face is lean, dirty, pale, dissipated. On it is, as it were written, the full history of the lieutenant's obvious weaknesses and secret diseases.

His situation in the 'Serbia' is complicated. He goes to the magistrates on Anna Friedrichovna's behalf. He hears the children's lessons and teaches them deportment, keeps the house register, makes out the lodgers' accounts, reads the newspaper aloud in the morning and talks of politics. He usually sleeps in one of the vacant rooms and, in case of an influx of guests, in the passage on an ancient sofa, whose springs and stuffing stick out together. When this happens the lieutenant carefully hangs all his property on nails above



the sofa: his overcoat, cap, his morning coat, shiny with age and white in the seams but tolerably clean, a 'Monopole' paper collar, an officer's cap with a blue band; but he puts his notebook and his handkerchief with some one else's initials under his pillow.

The widow keeps her lieutenant under her thumb. 'Marry me and I'll do anything for you,' she promises. 'Full equipment, all the linen you want, a fine pair of boots and goloshes as well. You'll have everything, and on holidays I'll let you wear my late husband's watch with the chain.' But the lieutenant is still thinking about it. He values his freedom, and sets high store by his former dignity as an officer. However, he is wearing out some of the older portions of the deceased's linen.



## II

FROM time to time storms break out in the landlady's room. Sometimes it happens that the lieutenant, with the assistance of his pupil Romka, sells a heap of somebody else's books to a second-hand dealer. Sometimes he takes advantage of the landlady's absence to intercept the payment for a room by day. Or he secretly begins to have playful relations with the servant-maid. Just the other day the lieutenant abused Anna Friedrichovna's credit in the public-house over the way. This came to light, and a quarrel raged, with abuse and a fight in the corridor. The doors of all the rooms opened, and men and women poked their heads out in curiosity. Anna Friedrichovna shouted so loud that she was heard in the street:

'You get out of here, you blackguard, get out, you tramp! I've spent on you every penny of the money I've earned by sweating blood. You fill your belly with the farthings I sweat for my children!'

'You fill your belly with our farthings,' squalled the schoolboy Romka, making faces at him from behind his mother's skirt.

'You fill your belly!' Adka and Edka accompanied from a distance.

Arseny the porter, in stony silence, pressed his chest against the lieutenant. From room No. 9, the valiant possessor of a magnificently parted black beard leaned out to his waist in his underclothes, with a round hat for some reason perched on his head, and resolutely gave his advice:

'Arseny, give him one between the eyes.'

Thus the lieutenant was driven to the stairs; but there was a broad window opening on to these very stairs from

the corridor. Anna Friedrichovna hung out of it and still went on shouting after the lieutenant:

‘You dirty beast ... you murderer ... scoundrel ... Kiev gutter-sweeping!’

‘Gutter-sweeping!’ ‘Gutter-sweeping!’ the brats in the corridor strained their voices, shouting.

‘Don’t come eating here any more! Take your filthy things away with you. Take them. Take them!’

The things the lieutenant had left upstairs in his haste descended on him: a stick, his paper collar, and his notebook. The lieutenant halted on the bottom stair, raised his head, and brandished his fist. His face was pale, a bruise showed red beneath his left eye.

‘You just wait, you scum. I tell everything in the proper quarter. Ah! ah.... They’re a lot of pimps, robbing the lodgers!’

‘You just sling your hook while you’ve got a whole skin,’ said Arseny sternly, pressing on the lieutenant from behind and pushing him with his shoulder.

‘Get away, you swine! You’ve not the right to lay a finger on an officer,’ the lieutenant proudly exclaimed. ‘I know about everything! You let people in here without passports! You receive—you receive stolen goods.... You keep a broth ——’

At this point Arseny seized the lieutenant adroitly from behind. The door slammed with a shattering noise. The two men rolled out into the street together like a ball, and thence came an angry: ‘Brothel!’

This morning, as it had always happened before, Lieutenant Tchijhevich came back penitent, with a bouquet of lilac torn out of somebody’s garden. His face was weary. A dim blue surrounded his hollow eyes. His forehead was

yellow, his clothes unbrushed, and there were feathers in his hair. The reconciliation goes slowly. Anna Friedrichovna hasn't yet had her fill of her lover's submissive look and repentant words. Besides, she is a little jealous of the three nights her Valerian has passed, she knows not where.

'Anna, darling, ... where ...' the lieutenant began in an extraordinarily meek and tender falsetto, slightly tremulous even.

'Wha-at! Who's Anna darling, I'd like to know,' the landlady contemptuously cut him short. 'I'm not Anna darling to any scum of a road sweeper!'

'But I only wanted to ask what address I was to write for "Praskovia Uvertiesheva, 34 years old," there's nothing written down here.'

'Put her down at the Rag-market, and put yourself there, too. You're a pretty pair. Or put yourself in a doss-house.'

'Dirty beast,' thinks the lieutenant, but he only gives a deep, submissive sigh. 'You're very nervous to-day, Anna, darling!'

'Nervous! Whatever I am, I know I'm an honest, hard-working woman.... Get out of the way, you bastards,' she shouts at the children, and suddenly, 'Shlop, shlop'—two well-aimed smacks with the spoon come down on Adka's and Edka's foreheads. The boys begin to snivel.

'There's a curse on my business, and on me,' the landlady growls angrily. 'When I lived with my husband I never had any sorrows. Now, all the porters are drunkards, and all the maids are thieves. Sh! you cursed brats!... That Proska ... she hasn't been here two days when she steals the stockings from the girl in No. 12. Other people go off to pubs with other people's money, and never do a stroke....'

The lieutenant knew perfectly who Anna Friedrichovna was speaking about, but he maintained a concentrated silence. The smell of the *bigoss* inspired him with some faint hopes. Then the door opened and Arseny the porter entered without taking off his hat with the three gold braids. He looks like an Albino eunuch, and his dirty face is pitted. This is at least the fortieth time he has had this place with Anna Friedrichovna. He keeps it until the first fit of drinking, when the landlady herself beats him and puts him into the streets, first having taken away the symbol of his authority, his three-braided cap.

Then Arseny puts a white Caucasian fur hat on his head and a dark blue pince-nez on his nose, and swaggers in the public-house opposite until he's drunk everything on him away, and at the end of his spree he will cry on the bosom of the indifferent waiter about his hopeless love for Friedrich and threaten to murder Lieutenant Tchijhevich. When he sobers down he comes to the 'Serbia' and falls at his landlady's feet. And she takes him back again, because the porter who succeeded Arseny had already managed in this short time to steal from her, to get drunk, to make a row and be taken off to the police station.

'You ... have you come from the steamer?' Anna Friedrichovna asked.

'Yes. I've brought half a dozen pilgrims. It was a job to get 'em away from Jacob—the "Commercial." He was just leading them off, when I comes up to him and says, "It's all the same to me, I says, go wherever you like. But as there are people who don't know these places, and I'm very sorry for you, I tell you straight you'd better not go with that man. In their hotel last week they put some powder in a pilgrim's food and robbed him." So I got them away. Afterwards Jacob shook his fist at me in the distance, and called out: "You just

wait, Arseny. I'll get you. You won't get away from me!" But when that happens, I'll do it myself....'

'All right,' the landlady interrupted. 'I don't care twopence about your Jacob. What price did you fix?'

'Thirty kopeks. I did my best, but I couldn't make them give more.'

'You fool. You can't do anything.... Give them No. 2.'

'All in the one room?'

'You fool. Two rooms, each.... Of course, all in one room. Bring three mattresses from the old ones, and tell them that they're not to lie on the sofa. These pilgrims have always got bugs. Get along!'

When he had gone the lieutenant said in a tender and solicitous undertone: 'Anna, darling, I wonder why you allow him to enter the room in his hat. It is disrespectful to you, both as a lady and proprietress. And then—consider my position. I'm an officer in Reserve, and he is a private. It's rather awkward.'

But Anna Friedrichovna leapt upon him in fresh exasperation: 'Don't you poke your nose in where it's not wanted. Of-ficer indeed! There are plenty of officers like you spending the night in a shelter. Arseny's a working man. He earns his bread ... not like.... Get away, you lazy brats, take your hands away!'

'Ye-es, but give us something to eat,' roars Adka.

'Give us something to eat....'

Meanwhile the *bigoss* is ready. Anna Friedrichovna clatters the dishes on the table. The lieutenant keeps his head busily down over the register. He is completely absorbed in his business.

'Well, sit down,' the landlady abruptly invited him.

‘No thanks, Anna, darling. Eat, yourself. I’m not very keen,’ Tchijhevich said, without turning round, in a stifled voice, loudly swallowing.

‘You do what you are told.... He’s giving himself airs, too.... Come on!’

‘Immediately, this very minute. I’ll just finish the last page. “The certificate issued by the Bilden Rural District Council ... of the province ... number 2039....” Ready.’ The lieutenant rose and rubbed his hands. ‘I love working.’

‘H’m. You call that work,’ the landlady snorted in disdain. ‘Sit down.’

‘Anna, darling, just one ... little....’

‘You can manage without.’

But since peace is already almost restored, Anna Friedrichovna takes a small, fat-bodied cut-glass decanter from the cupboard, out of which the deceased’s father used to drink. Adka spreads his cabbage all over his plate and teases his brother because he has more. Edka is upset and screams:

‘Adka’s got more. You gave him——’

Shlop! Edka gets a sounding smack with the spoon upon his forehead. Immediately Anna Friedrichovna continues the conversation as if nothing had happened:

‘Tell us another of your lies. I bet you were with some woman.’

‘Anna, darling!’ the lieutenant exclaimed reproachfully. Then he stopped eating and pressed his hands—in one of which was a fork with a piece of sausage—to his chest. ‘I ... oh, how little you know me. I’d rather have my head cut off than let such a thing happen. When I went away that time, I felt so bitter, so hard! I just walked in the street, and you

can imagine, I was drowned in tears. My God,' I thought, 'and I've let myself insult that woman—the one woman whom I love sacredly, madly....'

'That's a pretty story,' put in the landlady, gratified, but still somewhat suspicious.

'You don't believe me,' the lieutenant replied in a quiet, deep, tragic voice. 'Well, I've deserved it. Every night I came to your window and prayed for you in my soul.' The lieutenant instantly tipped the glass into his mouth, took a bite, and went on with his mouth full and his eyes watering:

'I was thinking that if a fire were to break out suddenly or murderers attack, I would prove to you then.... I'd have given my life joyfully. Alas! my life is short without that. My days are numbered....'

Meanwhile the landlady fumbled in her purse.

'Go on!' she replied, coquettishly. 'Adka, here's the money. Run to Vasily Vasilich's and get a bottle of beer. But tell him it's got to be fresh. Quick!'

Breakfast is finished, the *bigoss* eaten, and the beer all drunk, when Romka, the depraved member of the preparatory class of the gymnasium, appears covered in chalk and ink. Still standing at the door he pouts and looks angrily. Then he flings his satchel down on the floor and begins to howl:

'There!... you've been and eaten everything without me. I'm as hungry as a do-og.'

'I've got some more. But I shan't give you any,' Adka teases him, showing him his plate across the room.

'There!... it's a dirty trick,' Romka drags out the words. 'Mother, tell Adka——'



‘Be *quiet!*’ Anna Friedrichovna cries in a piercing voice. ‘Dawdle till it’s dark, why don’t you? Take twopence. Buy yourself some sausage. That’ll do for you.’

‘Ye-es, twopence! You and Valerian Ivanich eat *bigoss*, and you make me go to school. I’m just like a do-o-o-g.’

‘Get *out!*’ Anna Friedrichovna shouts in a terrible voice, and Romka precipitately disappears. Still he managed to pick his satchel up from the floor. A thought had suddenly come into his head. He would go and sell his books in the Rag-market. In the doorway he ran into his elder sister Alychka, and seized the opportunity to pinch her arm very hard. Alychka entered grumbling aloud:

‘Mamma! tell Romka not to pinch.’

She is a handsome girl of thirteen, beginning to develop early, a swarthy, olive brunette, with beautiful dark eyes, which are not at all childish. Her lips are red, full and shining, and on her upper lip, which is lightly covered with a fine black down, there are two delightful moles. She is a general favourite in the house. The men give her chocolates, often invite her into their rooms, kiss her and say impudent things to her. She knows as much as any grown-up, but in these cases she never blushes, but just casts down her long black eyelashes which throw a blue shade on her amber cheeks, and smiles with a strange, modest, tender yet voluptuous, and somehow expectant smile. Her best friend is the woman Eugenia who lives in No. 12—a quiet girl, punctual in paying for her room, a stout blonde, who is kept by a timber merchant, but on her free days invites her cavaliers from the street. Anna Friedrichovna holds her in high esteem, and says of her: ‘Well, what does it matter if Eugenia is not quite respectable, she’s an independent woman anyhow.’

Seeing that breakfast is over Alychka gives one of her constrained smiles and says aloud in her thin voice, rather theatrically: 'Ah! you've finished already. I'm too late. Mamma! may I go to Eugenia Nicolaievna?'

'Go wherever you like!'

*'Merci!'*

She goes away. After breakfast complete peace reigns. The lieutenant whispers the most ardent words into the widow's ear, and presses her generous knee under the table. Flushing with the food and beer, she presses her shoulder close to him, then pushes him away and sighs with nervous laughter.

'Yes, Valerian. You're shameless. The children!'

Adka and Edka look at them, with their fingers in their mouths and their eyes wide open. Their mother suddenly springs upon them.

'Go for a run, you ruffians. Sitting there like dummies in a museum. Quick march!'

'But I don't want to,' roars Adka.

'I don' wan'——'

'I'll teach you "Don't want to." A half-penny for candy, and out you go.'

She locks the door after them, sits on the lieutenant's knee, and they begin to kiss.

'You're not cross, my treasure?' the lieutenant whispers in her ear.

But there is a knock at the door. They have to open. The new chambermaid enters, a tall, gloomy woman with one eye, and says hoarsely, with a ferocious look:

'No. 12 wants a samovar, some tea, and some sugar.'

Anna Friedrichovna impatiently gives out what is wanted. The lieutenant says languidly, stretched on the sofa:

‘I would like to rest a bit, Anna, dear. Isn’t there a room empty? People are always knocking about here.’

There is only one room empty, No. 5, and there they go. Their room is long, narrow, and dark, like a skittle-alley, with one window. A bed, a chest of drawers, a blistered brown washstand, and a commode are all its furniture. The landlady and the lieutenant once more begin to kiss; and they moan like doves on the roof in springtime.

‘Anna, darling, if you love me, send for a packet of ten “Cigarettes Plaisir,” six kopeks,’ says the lieutenant coaxingly, while he undresses.

‘Later——’

The spring evening darkens quickly, and it is already night. Through the window comes the whistling of the steamers on the Dnieper, and with it creeps a faint smell of hay, dust, lilac and warm stone. The water falls into the washstand, dripping regularly. There is another knock.

‘Who’s there? What the devil are you prowling about for?’ cries Anna Friedrichovna awakened. She jumps barefoot from the bed and angrily opens the door. ‘Well, what do you want?’

Lieutenant Tchijhevich modestly pulls the blanket over his head.

‘A student wants a room,’ Arseny says behind the door in a stage whisper.

‘What student? Tell him there’s only one room, and that’s two roubles. Is he alone, or with a woman?’

‘Alone.’

‘Tell him then: passport and money in advance. I know these students.’

The lieutenant dressed hurriedly. From habit he takes ten seconds over his toilette. Anna Friedrichovna tidies the bed quickly and cleverly. Arseny returns.

‘He’s paid in advance,’ he said gloomily. ‘And here’s the passport.’

The landlady went out into the corridor. Her hair was dishevelled and a fringe was sticking to her forehead. The folds of the pillow were imprinted on her crimson cheeks. Her eyes were unnaturally brilliant. The lieutenant, under cover of her back, slipped into the landlady’s room as noiseless as a shadow.

The student was waiting by the window on the stairs. He was already no longer a young man. He was thin and fair-haired, and his face was long and pale, tender and sickly. His good-natured, short-sighted blue eyes, with the faintest shade of a squint, look out as through a mist. He bowed politely to the landlady, at which she smiled in confusion and fastened the top hook of her blouse.

‘I should like a room,’ he said softly, as if his courage was ebbing. ‘I have to go on from here. But I should be obliged for a candle and pen and ink.’

He was shown the skittle-alley.

‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t want anything better. It’s wonderful here. Just let me have a pen and ink, please.’ He did not require tea or bed-linen.

### III

THE lamp was burning in the landlady's room. Alychka sat Turkish fashion in the open window, watching the dark heavy mass of water, lit by electric lamps, wavering below, and the gentle motion of the scant dead green of the poplars along the quay. Two round spots of bright red were burning in her cheeks, and there was a moist and weary light in her eyes. In the cooling air the petulant sound of a valse gracefully floated from far away on the other side of the river, where the lights of the café chantant were shining.

They were drinking tea with shop bought raspberry jam. Adka and Edka crumbled pieces of black bread into their saucers, and made a kind of porridge. They smeared their faces, foreheads, and noses with it. They blew bubbles in their saucers. Romka, returned with a black eye, was hastily taking noisy sups of tea from a saucer. Lieutenant Tchijhevich had unbuttoned his waistcoat, extruding his paper dickey, and half lay on the sofa, perfectly happy in this domestic idyll.

'Thank God, all the rooms are taken,' Anna Friedrichovna sighed dreamily.

'You see, it's all due to my lucky touch,' said the lieutenant. 'When I came back, everything began to look up.'

'There, tell us another.'

'No, really, my touch is amazingly lucky. By God, it is! In the regiment, when Captain Gorojhevsky took the bank, he always used to make me sit beside him. My God! how those men used to play! That same Gorojhevsky, when he was still a subaltern, at the time of the Turkish War, won twelve thousand. Our regiment came to Bukarest. Of course, the