How A Song Was Composed

This is how two women composed a song to the accompaniment of the mournful ringing of church bells, one summer’s day. It was in a quiet street in Arzamas, just before sundown, on a seat outside the house in which I lived. The town was dozing in the sultry silence of a June day. Sitting at the window with a book, I was listening to my cook, plump, pock-marked Ustinya, talking quietly to the housemaid of my neighbour, the rural prefect.

“And what else do they write?” she asked in her masculine, but very flexible voice.

“Oh, nothing else,” answered the housemaid in a low, pensive drawl. She was a dark, thin girl, with small, fixed, frightened eyes.
“And so—accept our greetings and send us money—is that it?”

“That’s it...”

“As for how you’re living—who cares? Ekh!...”

In the pond, beyond the back gardens of our street, the frogs were croaking, emitting queer glasy sounds. The ringing of the church bells came floating over with annoying persistence, disturbing the sultry silence. Somewhere in a backyard a saw was snorting, and it seemed as though my neighbour’s old house had fallen asleep and was snoring, gasping for breath in the heat.

“Relations,” said Ustinya in a sad tone mingled with anger.

“But go only three versts away from them and you feel like a twig broken off a tree! It was the same with me the first year I lived in town. I was awfully homesick. I felt as if I was only half alive; as if half of me was here and half had remained in the village. And day and night I used to think and worry: How are they getting on? How are they managing?”

Her words seemed to be accompanied by the church bells, and she seemed to be deliberately speaking in the same key in which they were ringing. The housemaid sat clasping her angular knees, and swaying her head in its white kerchief from side to side and biting her lips, she seemed to be listening intently. Ustinya’s deep voice now sounded scornful and angry and now soft and sad.

“Sometimes the longing for my village was so fierce that I could neither see nor hear what was going on around me—and yet I have nobody there. Father was burnt to death when the house caught fire. He was drunk at the time. My uncle died of cholera. I have two brothers, but one has remained in the army—he was made a corporal; the other is a bricklayer and lives in Boigorod. It seems as though they’ve all been swept away by a flood....”

The lurid sun, sinking to the west, hung in the misty sky suspended from golden rays. The low voice of the woman, the tinkling of the bells and the glassy croaking of the frogs were the only sounds that disturbed the silence of the town at that particular moment. They floated low over the ground, like swallows before the coming rain; and above and around them there was stillness, all-absorbing, like death.

An absurd idea entered my head. It seemed to me that the town had been inserted into a large bottle that was lying on its side and was closed with a fiery cork, and that somebody was lazily and softly beating the heated glass on the outside.

Suddenly Ustinya said in a cheerful but businesslike way:

“Now, Mashutka, help me....”

“Help you with what?”

“To make up a song.”

Heaving a loud sigh, Ustinya began to sing in a hurried tone:

_In the daytime when the sun shines bright_
_And at night in the light of the moon...._

Hesitantly picking up the tune, the housemaid continued the song in a low timid voice:

_Lonely I feel and all forlorn...._

Ustinya confidently, but in a very moving tone, capped the verse with:

_My heart by longing is torn._

Then she said merrily, and a little boastfully:

“There, that’s the beginning! I’ll teach you how to make up songs, my dear, as easy as spinning yarn.... Now, then, let’s go on.”
Remaining silent for a moment as if listening to the mournful croaking of the frogs and the lazy ringing of the church bells, she once again deftly picked up words and music:

*Neither fierce winter's storms
Nor rippling streams in the spring...*

The housemaid shifted close up to Ustinya, and resting her white kerchiefed head on Ustinya's plump shoulder, she closed her eyes and, now more boldly, continued the verse in her thin and tremulous voice:

*A word of tiding from home
To console me doth bring...*

"There you are!" said Ustinya triumphantly, slapping her knee. "When I was younger I could make up even better songs than this! The girls used to say: 'Go on, Ustyusha, start a song!' Ekh, didn't I let myself go! Well, how is it to go now?"

"I don't know," said the housemaid, opening her eyes and smiling.

I looked at them through the flowers on the windowsill. The singers could not see me, but I could very well see Ustinya's rough, deeply-pitted cheek, her small ear, which her yellow kerchief failed to cover, her grey, animated eye, her straight nose like the beak of a jay, and her square, masculine chin. She was a sly, talkative wench, a confirmed tippler and fond of hearing the lives of the saints read. She was the biggest gossip in the street and, moreover, she seemed to be the repository of all the secrets of the town. Beside her, plump and well-fed, the lean, angular housemaid looked like a child. And the housemaid's mouth was like that of a child; she pouted her small full lips as if she had just been scolded, was afraid she would be scolded again, and was ready to burst into tears.

Swallows were darting back and forth in the street, their curved wings almost touching the ground. It was evident that the gnats were flying low—a sure sign that it would rain at night. A crow was sitting on the fence opposite my window, motionless, as if carved out of wood, watching the flitting swallows with its black eyes. The church bells had stopped ringing, but the frogs were croaking more sonorously than before; the silence seemed denser, hotter.

*The lark is singing in the sky,
The cornflowers bloom in the corn*

sang Ustinya plaintively, looking up at the sky, her arms crossed over her breast. The housemaid followed her up boldly and tunefully,

*Oh for a glimpse of my native fields,*

and Ustinya, skilfully supporting the girl's high-pitched tremulous voice, added in a velvety tone the moving words:

*And with my laddie in the woods to roam!...*

They stopped singing and sat silently for a long time, pressing close against each other. At last Ustinya said in a low pensive voice:

"It's not a bad song we made up, is it? Quite good, I think..."

"Look!" said the housemaid softly, interrupting Ustinya.

They looked across the street to the right. There, bathed in sunshine, a tall priest in a purple cassock was striding down the street with an important air, tapping the pavement with his long staff in a measured beat. The silver crook of the staff and the golden cross on his broad breast glistened in the sun.
The crow glanced sideways at the priest with its black beady eye, lazily flapped its heavy wings and flew to a branch of an ashtree, from which it dropped like a grey clot into the garden.

The women rose to their feet and bowed low to the priest. He did not even notice them. They remained standing, following him with their eyes until he turned the corner.

“Yes, little girl,” said Ustinya, adjusting the kerchief on her head. “If only I were younger, and had a prettier face....”

Somebody called angrily in a sleepy voice:

“Maria!... Mashka!...”

“Oh, they’re calling me....”

The housemaid ran off like a frightened rabbit, and Ustinya, sitting down again, smoothed her gaudy cotton frock over her knee, lost in thought.

The frogs croaked. The stifling air was as still as the water in a forest lake. The day was passing away in a riot of colour. An angry rumble came across the fields from beyond the river Tesha—it was the distant thunder growling like a bear.