

The Quiet Man
by Hamish Spiers

Elena Mihaylov lived without companionship. She shared no meals, nor laughter with friends and nor did she work. The lameness in her left leg that had troubled her since she was a child prevented her from that.

To the casual observer, the fact that she could limp to the market every day and keep food on her table and logs in the fireplace was an unsolvable mystery. But the person who watched her for some time would observe that every week she went to her letterbox, pulled out an envelope and within it, she would always find the means to survive. To keep going. And on the back of this envelope, there was never any address. Just the name of her benefactor, Iosif Yakovlev. And for the keen observer, that would be the sum of what they could ascertain with regards to the mystery of how one Elena Mihaylov, aging widow without any income of her own, could get by and make it through each day that remained to her.

As to Iosif Yakovlev, one could credit far more enigma to this man than Elena Mihaylov carried about her person, with the first striking fact being that Mrs. Mihaylov had never laid eyes on him. All she knew was that, not long after her husband had died, this man, whom she had never met, had started leaving her money and for her, he was her savior, the one man in all the world who cared for this poor ageing widow.

Feodosiy Kuznetsov smiled at his companion sitting at the table. A man, thin of build with round rimmed glasses and a neat but drab suit, he didn't look the part of a member of the society. He lacked the agile stance of Borya Mihaylov, a man who always appeared as if on the verge of swift action. Nor did he possess the great bulk, so suggestive of raw physical strength, that marked Arseni Lagounov or Kuznetsov himself. But Iosif Yakovlev inspired trust. He said little but what he said, each word measured in silence before he uttered it aloud, was always sound. So despite the fact that Kuznetsov would never bring him, or ever send him, on any of the society's missions, he would always include him in the discussions beforehand. As he would tonight.

"You are picking apart my scheme, Iosif, are you?" he asked.

Iosif shook his head. "The fundamental assumption in your plan is indeed an assumption, Kuznetsov, but it is a safe one. The minister always leaves his office at that time and follows that route to the inn his office procures. Sleet does not deter him, nor flurries, nor blizzards. And it is clear from this that he has no fear of the society either."

Kuznetsov nodded. "That is indeed a comfort that you think so. But yet you remain."

Iosif smiled. "You have asked me to be here. However, there are variables. The state of Mihaylov tonight, which I can judge for myself when I see him, the state of Lagounov, whom I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting –"

"You will when it is safe to do so," Kuznetsov assured him. "But Lagounov is known to the captain who resides in the local police station. He can roam wherever he pleases

on his side of town but he cannot venture anywhere near here.” Kuznetsov smiled. “Not yet.”

Iosif declined to comment, demonstrating yet another reason why Kuznetsov would not consider him for missions. He did not give him any sign he had the stomach for that side of the work. That was fine. Kuznetsov understood that not everyone in the society did and those who did not had other talents, other gifts that they could contribute to the greater cause, just as Iosif had.

“And what other variables concern you, my friend?” he asked the quiet man.

“Just the possibility that Mihaylov may be delayed,” Iosif said, “perhaps detained without cause. The police have done this before, yes? When the strain of their constant vigilance begins to tell and they crave a momentary reprieve, they sometimes put your activities on hold without any legal justification.”

“How do you know about that?” Kuznetsov asked. “The last incident was before your time.”

“The brothers talk amongst themselves,” Iosif said. “I listen.”

Kuznetsov stared at the dull grey sky, that lifeless wintry sky that compounded the feelings of loss and grief. As he stepped out of the hansom, he batted at his eyes, and then glided across the ice strewn street and knocked on the door of the little inn there.

Arseni Lagounov opened it and Kuznetsov saw the same grief in his eyes that he felt inside, but not the astonishment. Kuznetsov waved a newspaper in front of him.

“What is this?”

Lagounov bowed his head, let Kuznetsov inside and closed the door.

“The devil himself,” he said.

He walked to the kitchen table and sat down. Kuznetsov joined him.

“I saw him,” Lagounov said. “Last night. I knew that Mihaylov would not have failed to show unless something had happened to him so I walked a block to find him.” He sighed. “I know I can’t go into that part of town but I couldn’t stop myself. And that’s when I saw him.”

“Mihaylov?” Kuznetsov asked, transfixed by the wide eyed expression of horror on his companion’s face.

“The devil,” Lagounov replied, “as I said. He wasn’t big but he was strong. This little Mephistopheles strangling the life out of Mihaylov with just one slight hand around his throat. Watching him. Watching Mihaylov die under his gaze as if it were nothing. And God only knows what the terrible creature had done to our friend beforehand. I don’t.”

“What did you do?”

“I tried to rush him,” Lagounov told him companion, “but the man came at me too. I couldn’t know for certain but it looked as though he were armed and...” Here, the big man broke off and hung his head in his hands. “I couldn’t face him, Kuznetsov. I couldn’t.”

“You ran?”

Lagounov nodded. “At first. Then I thought that I had lost him and I came back here but I think he followed me. However, whoever he was, he couldn’t know I was connected with Mihaylov.”

“He knew that you saw him murder him,” Kuznetsov said.

Lagounov sighed. "That's true. But if he were a common ruffian, then there'd be no reason for him to worry about me now. Ordinary criminals know the police have no interest in the reports of civilians. Especially since half the crimes reported are those the police perpetrate themselves."

"But what if this man wasn't a common ruffian?" Kuznetsov asked. "What if he was with the police himself or some secret branch of the state?"

"He still wouldn't be interested in me," Lagounov told him. "It's as I said, he would not have known I was connected with Mihaylov."

"Unless he knew Mihaylov was planning to meet someone," Kuznetsov murmured. Then he hung his head in his hands too. "I think, my friend, that we are in trouble."

The official smiled over the desk at Iosif. "We followed Kuznetsov to that man's house."

Iosif's expression betrayed no emotion. "He was Lagounov then?"

"Yes. You found the last link in the society. The state thanks you." The official then leaned forward. "I wonder though. Why didn't you simply follow Mihaylov to the rendezvous? It would have been less... messy."

Iosif shrugged. "He saw me. He recognized me."

At this, the official raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I doubt very much that he recognized you, Yakovlev. I am not even sure that *I* recognize you at times."

"I am what I am," Iosif said.

"All things to all people," the official replied. "That's why you're the best there is."

At this, Iosif inclined his head. "It is kind of you to say so." Then he removed his round rimmed glasses and placed them on the table in front of him. "Now, before I go, I have a small request."

The official held out his hands in an expansive gesture. "Name it."

"Mihaylov had a wife. Elena. She had no knowledge of the society. I would like –"

"Of course," the official said. "A weekly stipend can be arranged."