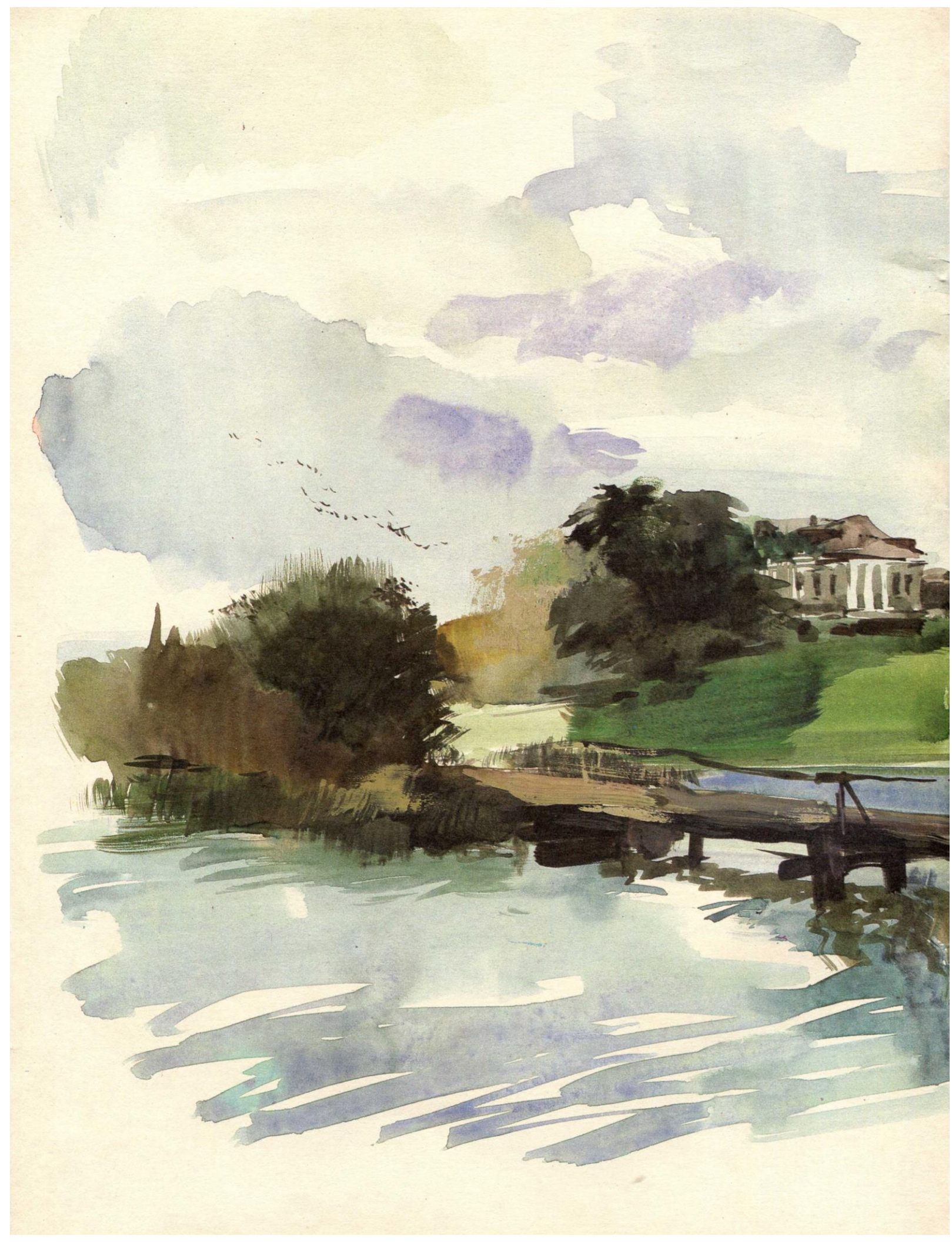


YELLOWBEAK

Alexei Tolstoy









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**Drawings by
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REQUEST TO READERS

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Yellowbeak was sitting on a tuft of grass in the sun in the corner between the porch and the wall of the house; with terror in his heart he watched the approaching Nikita.

Yellowbeak's head was resting on his back, his beak with the yellow stripe running right down he lay on his fat crop. All Yellowbeak's feathers were ruffled, his legs were drawn up under his belly. When Nikita bent over him he opened his beak to frighten the boy. Nikita held him between his two hands. It was a starling, still grey in colour, that had apparently tried to fly away from his nest but his unskilled wings would not support him and he had fallen to the ground and taken refuge in the corner on dandelion leaves pressed close to the earth.

Yellowbeak's heart beat in despair. "Before I can let out a gasp," he thought, "he'll eat me." He knew very well, of course, how to eat worms, flies and caterpillars.

The boy lifted him to his mouth. Yellowbeak's eyes were covered with a film, his heart jumped under his feathers. Nikita, however, only blew on his head and took him into the house: that meant that he was not hungry and would eat Yellowbeak later on.

When Alexandra Leontievna saw the starling she picked him up like Nikita did and blew on his head as he lay on her hand.

"He's so small, the poor little thing," she said. "Such a yellow beak!"

They placed the starling on the sill of a window that opened into the garden and was protected by gauze. The inside of the window was also lined with gauze halfway up. Yellowbeak immediately cringed in the corner striving to show that he would not give up his life cheaply.

Outside, beyond the white gauze, the leaves rustled, the despised sparrows—the thieves and scoundrels—squabbled in the bushes. On the other side, also from behind the gauze, Nikita was looking at him and his eyes were big, they moved, were incomprehensible and hypnotizing. "I'm lost, I'm lost," thought Yellowbeak.

Still Nikita did not eat him right up to the evening, all he did was drop flies and worms over the gauze. "Fattening me up," thought Yellowbeak and squinted at the red blindworm that was wriggling like a snake in front of his nose. "I won't eat it, it isn't a real worm, it's a trick."

The sun sank below the trees. The grey, sleepy light pulled at his eyes but still Yellowbeak clung tightly to the window-sill with his claws. There was no longer anything to be seen. The birds in the garden grew silent. There was a sweet, somnambulant odour of dampness and grass. His head sank deeper and deeper into his feathers. Ruffling his feathers in anger—in case of emergency—Yellowbeak lurched forward, then backward onto his tail and fell asleep.

The sparrows woke him up—they were creating a disturbance, fighting on the branches of a lilacbush. Wet leaves hung down in the greyish light. Sweetly and merrily, with a lot of





clucking, a starling sang in the distance. "I can't stand it, I'm so hungry that I feel sick," thought Yellowbeak and saw the worm that had crept halfway into a crack in the window-sill, jumped on it, pulled it out by its tail and swallowed it. "Not bad, a tasty worm," he thought.

The light changed to blue. The birds began to sing. A bright, warm ray of sunshine fell on Yellowbeak through the leaves of the trees. "Well, we're still alive," thought Yellowbeak, hopped along, snapped up a fly and swallowed it.

At that moment there came the loud sound of footsteps, Nikita came to the window and pushed his huge hand behind the gauze: he opened his fingers and scattered flies and worms on the window-sill. Yellowbeak cringed back into his corner in terror, spread his wings, looked at the hand but it hovered over his head for a second and then disappeared behind the gauze; again those strange, absorbing, opalescent eyes stared at Yellowbeak.

When Nikita had gone, Yellowbeak preened his feathers and began to think: "So he didn't eat me although he could have. So he doesn't eat birds. Then there's nothing to be afraid of."

Yellowbeak ate his fill, preened his feathers with his bill, hopped along the window-sill, looked out at the sparrows, saw an old one with tattered head feathers and began teasing him, turning his head back and forth and whistling: "Fuyoot, chillik-chillik, fuyoot." The sparrow grew angry, puffed up his chest and flew at Yellowbeak with open beak—and flew straight into the gauze. "Try and get me," thought Yellowbeak and strutted up and down the window-sill.

Then Nikita came back again, thrust his hand behind the gauze, but this time it was empty and he held it too near the bird. Yellowbeak jumped at it and pecked at a finger with all his strength, jumped back and made ready for battle. But Nikita only opened his mouth and roared, "Ha, ha, ha."

And so the day passed, there was nothing to fear, the food was good, but life was a little monotonous. Yellowbeak could scarcely wait for sundown and slept very well that night.

Next day, after he had had his breakfast, he began to look for a way to escape from behind the gauze. He hopped around the whole window but there was not a single crack anywhere. Then he jumped on to his dish and began to drink—he filled





his beak with water, threw back his head and swallowed—a little round ball rolled down his throat.

It was a long day. Nikita brought worms and cleaned the window-sill with a goose feather. Then the bald sparrow quarrelled with a jackdaw who struck him such a blow that he dropped through the leaves like a stone and looked up, all bristling.

For some reason or another a magpie flew right close to the window, trilled a few notes, darted about, wagged his tail and did nothing that had any sense to it.

A robin sang for a long time, sang sweetly about the hot sunlight, about honey in the clover—it made Yellowbeak so sad and there was such a gurgling in his throat, he too wanted

to sing, but where could he sing, not in the window, in a cage!..

He again made his tour of the window-sill and saw a fearful animal: it crept along on short soft legs, its belly dragging along the floor. Its head was round, its sparse whiskers stood out stiff, its eyes were green, their narrow pupils gleaming with satanic evil. Yellowbeak squatted down and did not budge.

Vasily Vasilievich the cat jumped softly, held on to the edge of the window-sill with his claws, looked through the gauze at Yellowbeak and opened his mouth... Oh Lord, in the mouth ... longer than Yellowbeak's beak ... were fangs!.. The cat struck out with his paw and tore the gauze... Yellowbeak's heart sank, his wings hung down... Just then, and just in time, Nikita appeared and seized the cat by the loose skin on the back of his neck and hurled him towards the door. Vasily Vasilievich yowled angrily and ran away, his tail down.





“There’s no animal stronger than Nikita,” thought Yellowbeak after this incident and when Nikita came again he let the boy stroke his head although he sat back on his tail in fear.

And so that day ended. The next morning a very happy Yellowbeak went on a tour of inspection around his premises and immediately saw the hole in the gauze that the cat had made. Yellowbeak put his head through the hole, looked round, climbed out, sprang into the stream of light air and, flapping his wings frantically, flew along just above the floor.

When he reached the door he flew up into the other room where he saw four people seated at a round table. They were eating, they took up huge pieces of food and placed them in their mouths. All four of them turned their heads and, motionless, watched Yellowbeak. He knew that he should stop short in the air and turn round, but he could not make that difficult turn in flight, flopped over on to one wing and landed on the table between the jam dish and the sugar bowl. Then he noticed Nikita sitting in front of him. Without thinking Yellowbeak hopped on to the jam dish, from there on to Ni-



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kita's shoulder and there he sat with his feathers ruffled and his eyes half-covered with film.

He remained seated on Nikita's shoulder for a while, then flew up under the ceiling, caught a fly, alighted on the rubber plant in the corner, cruised round the candelabra, began to feel hungry and flew back to his own window where fresh worms were waiting for him.

Towards evening Nikita brought a little wooden house with a porch, a door and two windows and put it on the windowsill. Yellowbeak liked it—the inside was dark, he hopped in, turned round a couple of times and then went to sleep.

That same night, Vasily Vasilievich, locked in a storeroom as punishment for his attempted crime, had mewed hoarsely and did not even want to catch mice—he just sat at the door and miaoued so piercingly that he even felt uncomfortable himself.

The house now contained a third member of the animal kingdom—in addition to the hedgehog and the cat—Yellowbeak. He was very independent, clever and resourceful. He liked to listen to people talking and when they sat down to table he would listen, cock his head on one side and warble in singsong tones, “Sasha!” and would bow. Alexandra Leontievna believed that he was bowing to her. Whenever she saw Yellowbeak she would say to him, “Greetings, greetings, little birdie, full of life and joy.” Yellowbeak would immediately hop on to the train of her dress and ride along with a very satisfied air.

And so he lived until autumn; he grew up, acquired big black wings and feathers, learned to speak Russian well and lived almost all day in the garden, always returning to his little house on the window-sill at dusk.

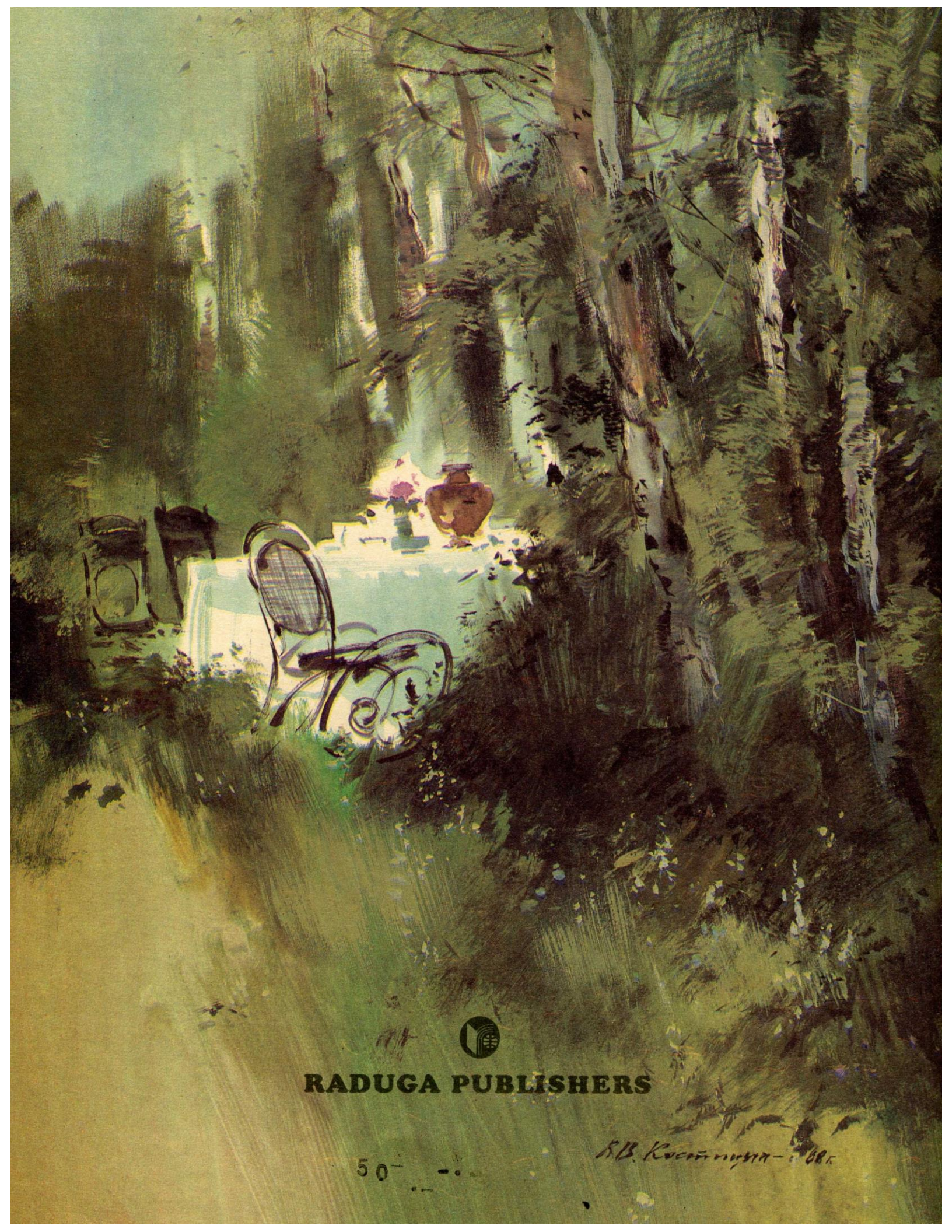
In August wild starlings enticed him into their flock, taught him to fly properly and when the leaves in the garden began to fall he flew off at break of day across the sea to Africa with the birds of passage.







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