

GEMS OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE
Volume I

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

by A. Apukhtin

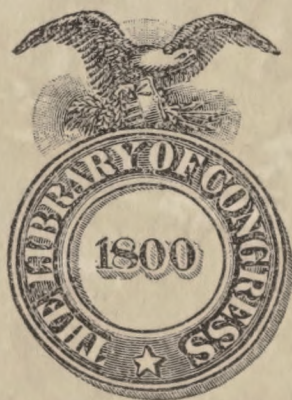
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GEMS OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

“A page digested is better than
a volume hurriedly read”.

Macaulay.

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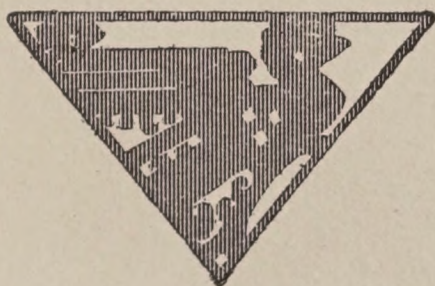
VOLUME I

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

BY A. APUKHTIN

Aleksei Nikolaevich

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A. APUKHTIN

Russian Poet
1849-1893

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

I

It was eight o'clock in the evening when the doctor placed his ear to my heart, put a small mirror to my lips, and, turning to my wife, said in a low and solemn voice:

"It's all over."

From these words I surmised that I was dead.

Strictly speaking, I had been dead for some time.

For more than a thousand hours I had lain motionless; I could not utter a word, but now and then continued to breathe. During the whole course of my illness I felt as if chained by a thousand fetters to a hollow wall, which caused me torture. Little by little the wall released me, my sufferings decreased, the fetters loosened and fell apart.

During the last two days I was held by a piece of tape, which now also was torn off, and I felt a sense of lightness, such as I had never before experienced.

Around me began an indescribable scene of confusion. My big study, to which I had been moved at the beginning of my illness, was suddenly filled with people, who began whispering, talking, and weeping, all at once. The old housekeeper, Yudishna, cried in an unusually loud voice. My wife fell upon my breast, sobbing convulsively; she had wept so much during my illness that I could not understand where all her tears came from. Above all the voices was heard the cracked, quavering voice of my old butler, Savelli. While I was still a child he was assigned to me as nurse, and had never since left me; but he was now so old that he no longer did any work to speak of. In the morning he would bring me my dressing-gown and slippers, and then, "for the sake of his health," he indulged for the rest of the day in sundry liquors and quarreled with the other domestics. My death seemed to irritate rather than to grieve him; yet, at the same time it gave him an unusual sense of importance. I overheard how he ordered someone to go for my brother, scolded

someone else, and bustled about, giving all sorts of orders.

My eyes were closed, but I saw and heard everything that was going on around me.

My brother came in—self-centred and overbearing, as always. My wife could not tolerate him, and yet she threw herself on his neck, and her tears redoubled.

“That’ll do, Zoe! That’s enough! After all, tears will not help you,” said my brother in a cold, passionless voice. “Pull yourself together for the sake of your children, and remember that he is better off.”

He freed himself with difficulty from her embrace, and placed her on a sofa.

“It will be necessary to make some arrangements at once. . . . Will you let me help you, Zoe?”

“Oh, André, do, for Heaven’s sake; I leave it all to you. . . . How could I do anything now?”

She began to weep afresh, and my brother sat down at the writing-desk and called the young servant Semyon.

“Take this announcement to the Novoe Vremya, and then send for an undertaker; and, by the way, ask him whether he knows of any good psalm-singer.”

“Your Highness,” answered Semyon,

bowing, "there's no need of sending for an undertaker: four of them have been hanging around outside since morning. We have chased them away again and again, and yet they're still there. Shall I call them up?"

"No, I'll go out to them myself." And thereupon my brother read aloud the announcement he had just written.

"Princess Zoe Borissovna Trubtchevsky announces with heartfelt emotion the death of her husband, Prince Dmitri Alexandrovitch Trubtchevsky, which took place on the 20th of February at 8 o'clock in the evening, after a long and painful illness. The funeral service will be held at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and 9 o'clock in the evening."

"Is there nothing else to say, Zoe?"

"No, certainly not. But why do you use that terrible word 'emotion'? *Je ne puis pas souffrir ce mot. Mettez: 'with profound grief'.*"

My brother made the correction.

"I'm sending it to the *Novoe Vremya*. Is that enough?"

"Yes, quite enough. But perhaps you might also send it to the *Journal de St. Pétersburg*."

"Very well. I'll write it in French."

"It doesn't matter; they'll translate it."



"It's all over."

My brother left. My wife came up to me, seated herself in the armchair, which stood at the bedside, and looked at me for a long time with a sort of imploring expression. In that silent look I read much more of love and sorrow than in her sobs and cries. She recalled to mind our past life, full of stress and storm. She now blamed herself for everything and pondered over the way she should have acted. So deep in thought was she that she did not notice my brother, who had returned with an undertaker and who had been standing for some time beside her, not wishing to disturb her. On seeing the undertaker, she uttered a sharp cry, and fainted. She was removed to her room.

"You may rest easy, your Highness," said the undertaker, taking my measure as unceremoniously as my tailor used to do. "We have everything ready: the shroud and funeral lights. We can remove the remains into the drawing-room within an hour. And don't worry about the coffin: it'll be such a comfortable one that even a live man might lie in it."

Once more my study began to fill with people. The governess brought in the children.

Sonya threw herself upon me and wept just as her mother had done, but little Kolya stood stock-still, stoutly refusing to approach me, and screamed with fright. Nastassya, my wife's favorite maid, who had married the servant Semyon last year and who was now approaching her confinement, glided into the room. She crossed herself with a clumsy motion of the arms, and tried hard to kneel down, but her condition prevented her from doing so. She sobbed apathetically.

"Listen, Nastassya," said Semyon to her softly, "don't bend down, or something might happen to you. You'd better go to your room: you've prayed, that's enough."

"And how could I help praying for him?" answered Nastassya in a droning voice and loud enough for all to hear. "He was not a man, he was an angel of Heaven! Just before the very end he thought of me, and told Sophya Franzovna to stay by me and not to leave me."

Nastassya spoke the truth. My wife had spent all the previous night at my bedside and wept almost unceasingly. This tired me out at last. Early in the morning, in order to give her thoughts another direction, but mainly to see whether I could speak clearly,

I asked her the first question that came to my mind: whether Nastassya's child was born yet. My wife rejoiced greatly that I could speak, and asked whether she should not send for our midwife, Sophya Franzovna. I replied: "Yes, do so." After that I seemed to have said nothing more, and Nastassya naïvely imagined that my last thoughts were about her.

The housekeeper, Yudishna, at last stopped crying, and began to look at something on my writing desk. Savelli set upon her furiously.

"Now, you there, Praskovya Yudishna, leave his Highness' desk alone," said he in an irritated whisper. "You've no business here."

"Well, what's the matter with you, Savelli Petrovitch?" hissed Yudishna, greatly offended. "Do you think I was going to steal something?"

"I know nothing about what you were going to do, but as long as the seals haven't been attached, I'll allow nobody to touch the desk. I haven't served his Highness these forty years for nothing."

"You needn't throw your forty years at me. I myself have lived in this house longer than that, and now it appears I may not

even pray for his Highness' soul."

"Pray as much as you like, but don't touch the desk."

Out of respect for me, these people quarreled in a whisper, yet I clearly heard every word they said. That astonished me greatly. Two years ago I read a French story giving a detailed account of the impressions of a man who had been buried alive. I tried to recall to mind that story, but could not remember the main point—how he managed to get out of the coffin.

In the dining-room the clock began to strike. I counted eleven. Vassyutka, a little girl whom we kept to go on errands, ran in with the news that the priest had come and that everything was ready in the drawing-room. A big basin of water was brought in; they undressed me and began to rub me with a wet sponge, but I did not feel it; it seemed to me as if they were washing someone else's body, someone else's legs.

"Now I know I am not in a trance," I said to myself, while they were wrapping me in clean linen. "But what can it be then?"

The doctor said it was all over, they are weeping for me, they are about to put me

into a coffin, and will bury me in a couple of days. The body, which has served me for so many years, is no longer mine; I am dead, beyond doubt, and yet I continue to see, hear, and understand. Perhaps, in the brain life continues longer, but is not the brain also a part of the body? This body was like a house in which I had lived for a long time and from which I decided to move. All the windows and doors are wide open, all the things have been removed, all the family have gone, and only the master remains behind at the entrance, casting a parting glance at the row of rooms, which before were swarming with life, and which now surprise him by their emptiness.

Here, in the darkness, which surrounded me, for the first time flashed before me a feeble spark of light, some sort of sensation or recollection. It seemed to me that all this was familiar to me, that I had already lived through it at some former time, but long, long ago.

II

Night came on. I was lying on the table in the big drawing-room, covered with a black pall. The furniture had been removed, the blinds were pulled down, the pictures were hung with crape. A covering of gold brocade was placed over my feet, in the tall silver candle-sticks candles burned brightly. Savelli, with his yellow, sharply protruding cheek-bones, his bald head, toothless mouth, and bunches of wrinkles round his half-closed eyes, stood motionless at my right; he, rather than I, resembled a skeleton. At my left stood a tall, pale man, in a long coat, who chanted the funeral psalms in a deep monotone, his voice re-echoing through the empty room.

Exactly two months previously in that same room music had resounded, merry

couples had whirled, and various people, young and old, had greeted each other gladly, or talked scandal of one another.

I always detested social functions, and, besides, since the middle of November I had not been feeling well, and therefore I protested with all my might against that ball. My wife, however, was determined to have it at all costs, because she had reason to expect that some very distinguished personages would be our guests. We quarreled about it, but she insisted. The ball was a brilliant success, but for me it was intolerable. That evening, for the first time, I felt utterly tired of life, and became conscious that I had not much longer to live.

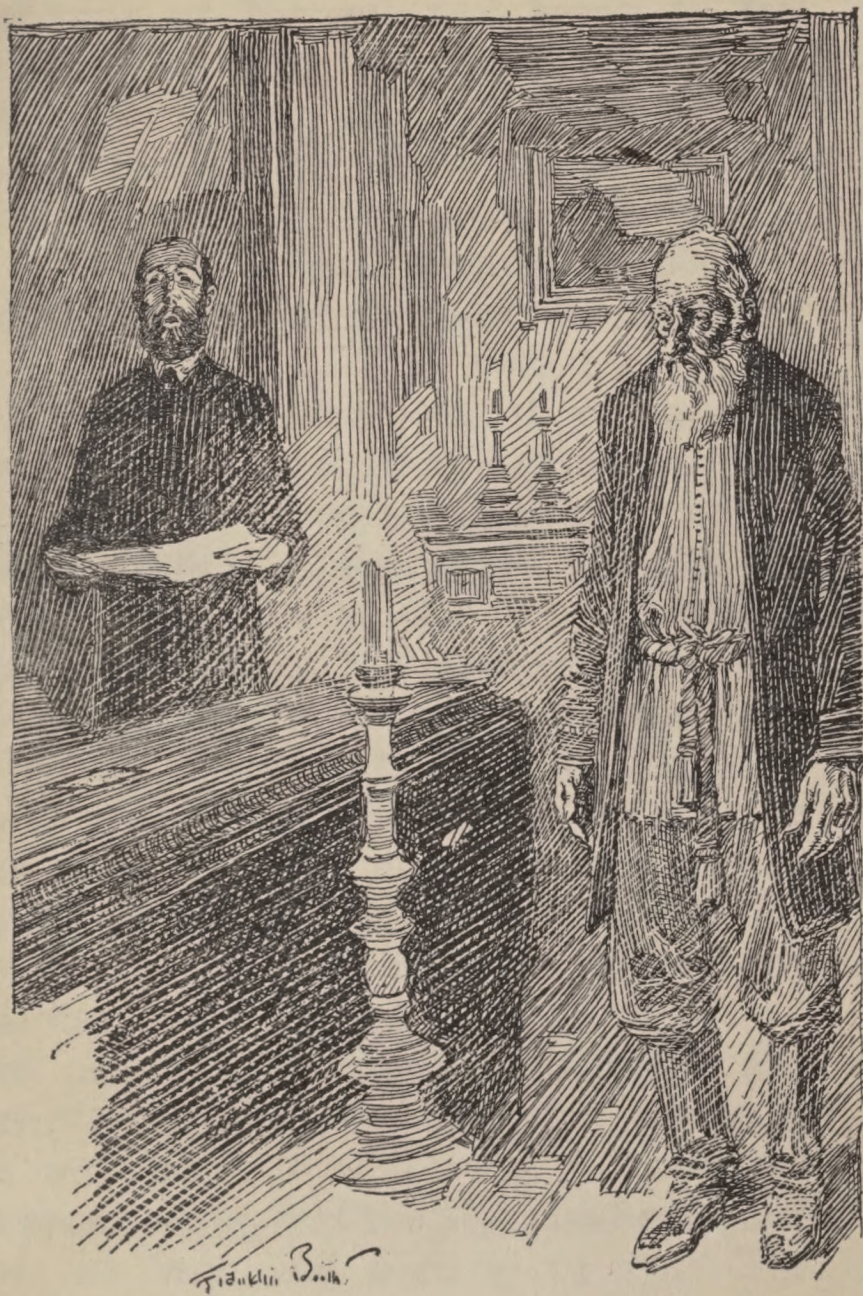
My whole life was a succession of social festivities, and herein lies the tragedy of my existence. I loved the country, books, hunting; I loved quiet life, and yet I passed all my life in society—first to please my parents, and afterwards to please my wife. I have always thought that man is born with clearly defined indications of his future character, and all the trouble is due to the fact that his environment raises obstacles to its natural development. And I began to recall to mind all the wrong I had done, which at different times had troubled my

conscience. It was evident to me that it was all caused by the sharp contrast between my character and the manner of life I led. . . .

My thoughts were interrupted by a slight noise at my right. Savelli, who had already been dozing for some time, suddenly swayed and nearly rolled to the floor. He crossed himself, went into the hall, and brought back a chair, on which he comfortably fell asleep in the far corner of the room. The psalm-singer continued to drone more leisurely, until his voice stopped completely, and he followed Savelli's example. A dead silence ensued. . . .

In the midst of this death-like stillness all my life was unfolded before me, as if preordained by fate—terrible in its relentless chain of logic. No longer did I see single facts, but a straight line, which began at my birth and finished this very night. It could go no farther—this was clear to me as day. But, as I said before, I was conscious of the approach of death two months ago.

I, to be sure, could not name the exact day or hour of my death, but I knew it approximately. I had enjoyed very good health all my life, and suddenly, from the



“Savelli, with his sharply protruding cheek-bones, stood motionless at my right.”

beginning of November, I began to feel indisposed without any cause. No illness had as yet announced itself, but I felt that I was "heading for death," as clearly as I used to feel that I was about to fall asleep. My wife and I usually made our plans at the beginning of winter as to how we should pass the summer. This time I could not decide anything, the idea of summer did not seem to fit in; it seemed to me somehow that there would be no summer at all.

My condition, meanwhile, did not improve. My illness, like a ceremonious guest, was waiting for some pretext. And, indeed, pretexts did begin to creep in from all sides. Towards the end of December I was to join in a bear-hunt. The weather was very cold, and my wife, without any reason, began to feel alarmed about my health; having probably some sort of presentiment, she begged me not to go. I was passionately fond of hunting, and therefore insisted on going; but almost at the very moment of leaving, I received a telegram saying that the bears had gone and that the hunt had been given up. The ceremonious guest did not come to me this time. A week later a lady, with whom I had a slight love affair, arranged a monster

picnic with troikas, gypsies and snow-slides. Catching cold would be unavoidable, but my wife suddenly fell seriously ill, and begged me to pass the evening at home. Perhaps she only pretended to be ill, for the very next day she was at the theatre. However that may be, the ceremonious guest again failed to appear.

Two days later came the death of my uncle. He was the oldest of the Princes of Trubtchevsky. My brother, who was very proud of his lineage, often said of him: "That's our Prince de Chambord." I loved my uncle sincerely; not to attend his funeral was unthinkable. I followed the coffin on foot. There was a furious snowstorm, and I was chilled through. The ceremonious guest did not hesitate to take advantage of this, and rejoicing at the pretext, burst in upon me that very evening. On the third day the doctors found that I was suffering from pneumonia with all sorts of complications, and declared that I could not live more than two days. But it was a long time till the twentieth of February, and before that day I was not destined to die. And now began that tedious death-agony, which had puzzled so many learned men. One day

I was better, the next day—worse than before; one day I suffered, the next day—my sufferings ceased entirely; until at last, to-day, I died according to all the rules of science, precisely on the day and the hour which fate had decreed at the moment of my birth. I had completed my part like a conscientious actor, neither adding nor omitting a single word of the play.

This more than commonplace comparison of life with the rôle of an actor began to acquire for me a deep meaning. If, I reasoned, I was playing this rôle of mine like a good actor, then, probably, I had also played other rôles and taken part in other plays. If I did not die after my apparent death, then, probably, I had never died and had lived as long as the world had existed. What seemed to me yesterday as a vague sensation, appeared to me now as a reality. But what rôles, what plays were these?

I tried to find in my past life some key to the mystery. I tried to recall to mind those strange dreams, full of unknown countries and people; I recalled various meetings that left a strange, almost mystic impression upon me. And suddenly the castle of Laroch-Moden came to my memory.

III

It was one of the most interesting and puzzling episodes of my life. Several years ago my wife and I, for the sake of her health, spent about six months in the south of France. There we made the acquaintance, among others, of the very charming family of Count Laroch-Moden, who one day invited us to his castle.

I remember my wife and I were unusually cheerful that day. We went in an open carriage; it was one of those warm October days which are so charming in that country. The stubble-fields, the bare vines, the many-colored leaves of the trees—all wore a festive appearance under the caressing rays of the warm sun. The fresh, invigorating air put us in the best of humor, and we chatted without ceasing. But no



“It was one of those warm October days which are so charming in that country.”

sooner had we entered the estate of Count Moden than my cheerfulness instantly disappeared.

The thought suddenly rushed upon me that the place was known, even familiar to me, that I had lived here at some former time. . . . This strange, uncanny feeling increased every moment. And finally, when we drove into the main avenue, which led to the castle gates, I told my wife about it.

“What nonsense!” she exclaimed. “Only yesterday you told me that even in your childhood, when you lived with your mother in Paris, you had never been here.”

I did not contradict her; I was too much disturbed. Imagination, like a courier galloping in advance, reported to me everything that I should see. Here is the main courtyard (*la cour d'honneur*), strewn with red sand; here is the main entrance, surmounted by the arms of the Counts of Laroch-Moden; here is the drawing-room with its double row of windows, here—the big reception-room, hung with family portraits. Even the peculiar, individual smell of that reception-room, a mixture of musk, mold and rosewood,

struck me as something too familiar. I became absorbed in thought. . . .

When Count Laroch-Moden proposed that we should take a turn in the park, memories, living, though indistinct, rushed upon me with such force that I hardly listened to my host, who expended all his store of amiability to get me to talk.

Finally, on noticing my random answers to his questions, he gave me a side glance, expressive of surprise and pity.

"Don't be surprised at my absent-mindedness, Count," said I, as I caught his glance. "I'm experiencing a very strange sensation. I am, without doubt, in your castle for the first time, and yet it seems to me that I have passed whole years here."

"There's nothing strange in that: all our old castles are so much alike."

"That's true, but I did live in this very castle. . . . Do you believe in the transmigration of the soul?"

"Well . . . my wife believes in it, I can't exactly say that I do. . . . However, anything is possible."

"Now, you say it is possible, but I become more and more convinced of it. . . ."

The Count answered me in jocular, good-natured vein, regretting that he had not

lived here a hundred years ago, for he would then have received me at his castle with the same pleasure as to-day.

"Perhaps you won't laugh at me," said I, making a supreme effort of memory, "if I tell you that we are now approaching a broad chestnut avenue."

"You're perfectly right, there it is, on the left."

"And beyond that avenue we'll see a lake."

"You're too polite, calling this bit of water a lake. We'll simply see a pond."

"Very well, I'll give in on that point, but at any rate it'll be a big pond."

"If that's the case, let us call it a little lake."

I did not walk, I ran along that chestnut avenue. At the end I saw in all its details the picture which had imprinted itself on my mind a few minutes before. Beautiful flowers of wonderful shape bordered a somewhat large pond; a boat was moored to the edge. On the opposite side were groups of stately weeping willows. . . . Great Heavens! Yes, in very truth, I lived here at one time, long, long ago, rowed in a boat like this, sat under those very willows, picked those red flowers.

. . . We continued to walk in silence.
“But, I beg you,” said I, looking to the left with astonishment, “there must be a second pond here, and then a third. . . .”

“No, my dear Prince, this time your memory or your imagination deceives you. There is no other pond here.”

“But there was one, surely! Look at these red flowers; they grow round this little meadow just as they do round the first pond. There must have been a second pond here, but evidently it has been filled up.”

“With every desire to agree with you, my dear Prince, I can’t do it. I’m nearly fifty, I was born in this castle, and I assure you that there was never another pond here.”

“But, maybe there is some old inhabitant here?”

“My steward, Joseph, is much older than I. . . . We’ll ask him when we get back.”

In the refined and courteous words of the Count I clearly saw a suspicion that he was talking to a maniac, whom it was safer not to contradict.

When we went to dress for dinner that evening, I reminded my host about Joseph. The Count sent for him immediately.



“But, I beg you, there must be a second pond here, and then a third. . . .”

A sprightly old man of seventy came in. To all my questions he gave a decided answer that there never was a second pond in the park.

“However, I have kept all the old maps, and if the Count will allow me to fetch them. . . .”

“Oh, yes, bring them along, and as quickly as you can. We must settle this question at once, or else our worthy guest will not be able to enjoy his dinner.”

Joseph brought the maps. The Count glanced at them carelessly, but suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise. In an old map, of unknown date, were clearly marked three ponds; in fact, all this portion of the park bore the name *L'étangs*.

“I present a wreath to the victor,” said the Count with a forced smile, turning pale.

But I was far from feeling victorious. I was completely upset by this discovery—it was as if some misfortune had happened which I had long dreaded.

As we were entering the dining-room, Count Moden asked me to say nothing about the incident to his wife, as she had weak nerves and was inclined to mysticism.

There were many guests at dinner, but my host and I were so silent, that our wives

jointly scolded us for our unsociability.

Since then my wife was very often at the castle of Laroch-Moden, but I could never make up my mind to go there. I became very friendly with the Count, and he often visited me; but he never insisted on my accepting his invitations, for he perfectly understood the situation.

Time gradually effaced the impression made upon me by that terrible episode in my life, and I gave no more thought to it. But now, lying in my coffin, I tried to recall to mind all the details and to judge them calmly. Now, as I knew for certain that I had lived in the world before I was Prince Dmitri Trubtchevsky, it was evident to me that I had at one time lived in the castle of Laroch-Moden. But in what capacity? Did I dwell there permanently or did I happen to be there accidentally? Was I master, guest, groom, or workman? I could find no answer to these questions, but of one thing I was sure: I was very unhappy there; otherwise I could not explain to myself the painful sense of grief, which seized me on entering the castle, and which torments me even now.

These recollections became more and more distinct; between separate images and

sounds I began to see a common link—but the snoring of Savelli and the psalm-singer disturbed me, and I could no longer concentrate my thoughts.

The brightly burning wax-candles were getting low, and through the blinds of the big windows a bright frosty day had long cast its light upon me.

IV

Savelli jumped up from his seat, crossed himself, rubbed his eyes, and, seeing the psalm-singer still asleep, awoke him. He did not lose the opportunity of heaping bitter reproaches on him. Then he went off, washed himself, changed his clothes, took a good nip of brandy, and returned in a furious temper.

The household awoke. In various quarters all was noise and bustle. The governess again brought the children. This time Sonya was quieter; Kolya was very much pleased with the brocade and began to play with the tassels, with no sign of fear. Then came the midwife Sophya Franzovna; she made some remarks to Savelli, displaying an expert knowledge of the undertaking business scarcely to be expected from

a person of her profession. After her came my bondsmen, coachmen, cooks, grooms, to take leave of me, and even people whom I had never seen before: old women, porters and servants from the neighboring houses. All these prayed very devoutly; the old women wept bitterly. I noticed that among the callers who came to pay their last respects, those of the lower class kissed me on the lips, and with a certain degree of pleasure, whereas people of my own class—even those who were nearest to me—turned from me with aversion. This would have hurt me keenly, had I been able to look upon it with my former earthly senses. Nastassya, dressed in a loose light-blue dressing-gown, with pink flowers, again entered the room and approached my coffin. Her dress did not please Savelli, and he spoke to her sharply about it.

“But what can I do, Savelli Petrovitch?” said Nastassya. “I tried on the dark ones, but none of them fit me.”

“Well, if they don’t fit, you’d better stay in bed. Another woman in your place would be ashamed even to approach his Highness’ coffin.”

“But why do you abuse her, Savelli Petrovitch?” broke in Semyon. “She’s my

lawful wife, and I don't see any sin in that."

"I know them, these lawful hussies!" growled Savelli, and went into his corner.

Nastassya became horribly confused, and wanted to make some crushing reply, but could not find the words; her lips trembled with rage, and tears stood in her eyes.

"Thou shalt tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the dragon shalt Thou trample under foot. . . ." chanted the psalm-singer.

Nastassya crept up close to Savelli and whispered to him:

"That's you, the adder."

"Whom are you calling an adder? You. . . ."

Savelli did not finish the phrase, for a loud ring was heard outside, and Vass-yutka ran in with the news that Countess Maria Mikhailovna had arrived. All immediately left the drawing-room.

Marya Mikhailovna, my wife's aunt, was a very distinguished lady. She approached me very leisurely and uttered a few solemn words of prayer. She was about to kiss me, but changed her mind and for several minutes shook her grey head, covered in black like a nun's, over

me; whereupon, supported courteously by her companion, she went to my wife's room. In a quarter of an hour she returned with my wife, who was in a white dressing-gown, with her hair down, and her eyes so swollen with crying that she could hardly open them.

"*Voyons, Zoé, mon enfant,*" said the Countess in a soothing tone, "*soyez ferme.* Remember how much I have been through; bear up!"

"*Oui, ma tante, je serai ferme,*" answered my wife and walked towards me with a firm step. But my appearance had, probably, changed so much during the night, that she started back, screamed, and fell into the arms of the women near her. She was led away.

No doubt, my wife was very much grieved by my death. But there is an admixture of artificiality in every public exhibition of grief, which few can escape. Even the most sincerely grief-stricken man cannot forget that other people are looking at him.

Towards two o'clock the guests began to assemble. The first to arrive was a tall, middle-aged general, with grey curled moustache, and a number of orders on his breast.

He approached me and was also about to kiss me, but changed his mind and crossed himself repeatedly without touching his forehead and breast, shaking his fingers in the air. Thereupon he turned to Savelli.

“So, then, Savelli, my dear fellow, we’ve lost our Prince.”

“Yes, your Excellency, I’ve served the Prince for forty years, and if I could ever have imagined. . . .”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, the Princess won’t forget you.”

And, patting Savelli on the shoulder, the general turned to greet a short, pasty-looking senator, who, without coming up to me, plumped himself down on the same chair on which Savelli slept during the night. His cough nearly choked him.

“So, then, Ivan Efimitch,” said the general, “we’ve lost another of our members.”

“There’s nothing to be done for it: no man knows the day nor the hour. . . .”

“Ah, it’s all very well to talk—but yet it’s awful to leave the club in the evening with no certainty that you’ll be there again next day. And it’s still worse that you can never tell when that rascal, death, will steal upon you. Why, here Prince Dmitri Alexandrovitch goes to the funeral of Vas-

sili Ivanovitch and catches cold, while you and I are also there, and we both escape.”

The senator was again seized with a fit of coughing, after which he usually became more ill-humored.

“Yes, he had a strange fate, this Prince Vassili Ivanovitch! All his life was full of dirty actions; it serves him right. Even at his own funeral, when one would think he could do no more harm, he managed to bring about the death of his own nephew.”

“Stop, that’s enough, Ivan Efimitch, you’ll get pinched in the next world for your tongue. . . . At least, you can’t say anything bad about our dear Dmitri Alexandrovitch, and you must admit that he was an excellent man. . . .”

“Why exaggerate, general? If we say that he was an amiable and sociable fellow, that’ll be quite enough. And, believe me, for a Trubtchevsky even that is saying a good deal, as the Princes of Trubtchevsky are not usually distinguished for their amiability. Let us take, not to go any farther, his brother Andrey. . . .”

“Well, as for him I won’t argue with you: Andrey is not congenial to me. I wonder why he gives himself such airs?”

“He has nothing to boast about, but that’s

not my point. If such a man as Prince Andrey Alexandrovitch is tolerated in society, that only shows how easy-going we are. Really, we should refuse to shake hands with such a man. Here's what I heard about him from a most reliable source of information. . . ."

At that moment my brother appeared, and both speakers hurried towards him, with an expression of deepest sympathy.

Shortly afterwards my old friend Misha Zvyaguin came in timidly. He was a very good fellow and always head over ears in debt. In the beginning of October he came to me, explained the fix he was in, and asked me for the loan of five thousand roubles for a couple of months, which would help him out of the mess. After a little hesitation I wrote him a check; he offered me a promissory note, but I told him this was unnecessary. Of course, he did not return the money two months later, and he began to keep out of my way. During my illness he sent several times to inquire after my health, but never came himself. Now, as he stepped up to my coffin, I read in his eyes all sorts of feelings: regret, shame, fear and even, somewhere in the depths of his eyes, a sort of joy-

ous relief at the thought that he had one creditor less. However, he immediately felt ashamed of this thought and began to pray fervently. There was a struggle going on in his heart: he ought to declare his debt on the spot, but, on the other hand, of what use, if he could not pay it? He would do when the time came, but now . . . does anybody know of it? Is it entered in any book? But no, he really must declare it at once. . . .

Misha Zvyaguin came up to my brother with a resolute air and began to question him about my illness. My brother answered his questions carelessly, looking the other way: my death gave him an excuse for being inattentive and overbearing.

"You see, Prince," began Zvyaguin, stammering, "I was owing your late brother. . . ."

My brother pricked up his ears and looked at him inquiringly.

"I wanted to say, I was greatly indebted to the late Dmitri Alexandrovitch. Our life-long friendship. . . ."

My brother again turned away, and poor Misha Zvyaguin went back to his former place. His flushed face quivered, his eyes wandered incessantly about the room. Here, for the first time since my death, I was

sorry that I could not speak. I so wanted to say to him: "Oh, keep those five thousand, my children have enough already."

The drawing-room was soon filled. The ladies entered in pairs and stood along the wall. Hardly anybody approached me; they seemed ashamed of me. The ladies who were more intimate with us asked my brother whether they might see my wife; my brother, with a solemn bow, pointed to the door of the reception-room. The ladies stopped at the door, reflecting for a moment, and then, with bowed head, dived into the reception-room like bathers, who, after a little hesitation, plunge boldly, head foremost, into the cold water.

By two o'clock all the *élite* of St. Petersburg were assembled. Had I been a vain man, the sight of the room would have given me great pleasure. Among the visitors there were even some whose arrival was announced to my brother in a whisper; these he went to meet at the head of the staircase.

I was always agreeably affected by the funeral service, although there was much in it that I did not understand. The words "eternal life" always rather puzzled me; they seemed to me a bitter irony. But now

all these words acquired a deep meaning for me. I myself was living this eternal life, and was in the very place where "illness, grief, or sighing were unknown."

On the contrary, the earthly sighs, which reached my hearing, seemed to me strange and unmeaning. When the choir began to sing "The Weeping for the Dead," as if in answer to the songs convulsive sobs were heard in different parts of the room. My wife fainted and was carried out.

The funeral service was finished. The deacon began in a deep voice: "In blessed death. . . ." But at that moment something strange occurred. All at once it became dark, as if night had suddenly descended on the earth. I could no longer distinguish faces, but saw only black figures. The deacon's voice became fainter and gradually faded somewhere into the distance. At last it died out altogether, the lights went out, everything disappeared. I completely lost the sense of sight and hearing. . . .

V

I found myself in some dark, unknown place. I use the word "place," however, from mere force of habit: the idea of space no longer existed for me. Nor was there such a thing as time: I could not tell how long this condition lasted. I saw nothing, heard nothing, but only thought, thought deeply, persistently.

The profound riddle which had troubled me all my life was solved. There is no death, there is eternal life. I was always convinced of this, but could never clearly formulate my belief. It was based on the fact that life must otherwise be a crying absurdity. Man thinks, feels, is conscious of his surroundings, enjoys himself, suffers—and finally disappears. His body is dissolved and serves to form new elements—

this is clear to all of us. But that which was conscious of itself and all the world about us, where does that go? If matter is indestructible, why should consciousness disappear forever? And if it does disappear, where does it come from, and what aim has such an ephemeral manifestation? This seemed to me an absurdity, and I could not admit it.

Now I saw, by my own experience, that consciousness does not die, that I never ceased, and probably never shall cease, to live. But at the same time new "cursed questions" bothered me. If I never have died and if I shall be reincarnated on earth, then of what use are these successive existences? By what law do they act, and to what last resort will they lead me? Possibly, I might be able to grasp this law and understand it, if I remember all or, at least, some of the past existences. But why is man deprived of that remembrance? Why is he condemned to live in such perpetual ignorance, that even the conception of life comes to him only in the guise of a riddle? And if some unknown law demands darkness and oblivion, why do lucid intervals occur in that darkness, as, for instance, had been the case with me, when

I came to the castle of Laroch-Moden?

I clung with all my might to this recollection, as the drowning man snatches at a straw. It seemed to me that if I could recall my whole life in that castle down to its minutest details, this would throw light on all the rest. No outward impression disturbed me, I tried not to think nor reflect, so that my memory could act freely. . . .

And, lo! From the depth of my soul, as the mist from the river-bed, indistinct, pale images began to shape themselves. I saw figures flitting before me, heard strange, hardly comprehensible words. . . . In each remembrance there were gaps which I could not fill: the faces of the figures were shrouded in mist, the words had no relation to each other, all was disconnected and incomplete. Here is the family vault of the Counts Laroch-Moden. On the white marble slab I clearly read the black letters: "*Ci—git très haute et recommandable dame. . . .*" Then follows the name, but I cannot decipher it. Next to it is the sarcophagus with the marble urn, on which I read: "*Ci—git le coeur du marquis. . . .*" Suddenly a shrill, impatient voice resounds in my ears, calling somebody: "Zo . . .



"From the depth of my soul, as the mist from the river-bed, indistinct, pale images began to shape themselves."

Zo . . .” I strain my memory, and to my great joy I hear the name: “Zorobabel! Zorobabel!” This name, so familiar to me, suddenly brings up before me a whole series of pictures. I am in the courtyard of the castle, in a great crowd of people. “*A la chambre du roi! A la chambre du roi!*” cries the same sharp, impatient voice in a commanding tone. In every old French castle there is a King’s Room, the room which the King would occupy should he ever visit the castle. And now I see that room of the castle of Laroch-Moden in all its details. The ceiling is painted with rose-colored cupids, with garlands in their hands, the walls are covered with gobelin tapestry, depicting hunting scenes. I distinctly see the stag with his big antlers, standing over a brook in a despairing attitude, as the three hunters bring him to bay. In the far end of the room—an alcove, surmounted by a golden crown; white lilies are embroidered on the blue quilted canopy. On the opposite side is the life-size portrait of the King. I see his breast in coat of mail, his long, thin legs encased in leggings, but I cannot distinguish his face. If I were able to do so, I should have, perhaps, known at what time I lived

in that castle. But this was just what I could not see: some tightly closed valve in my memory would not open. "Zorobabel, Zorobabel!" cries the commanding voice. I make a tense effort, and suddenly an entirely new valve opens in my capricious memory. The castle of Laroch-Mouden disappears, and a new, unexpected picture unfolds before me.

VI

I saw a big Russian village. Wooden huts, thatched with straw, were scattered on both sides of a broad roadway, overhung by a hill. It was a raw autumn day, and evening seemed to be drawing on. A drizzling, chilly rain was falling from the leaden clouds; the wind roared and whistled along the roadway, lifting the straw from the torn roofs and whirling it in the air. Below ran a little brook with dark foaming waters. I crossed to the other side of the brook, the rough-hewn bridge without any handrail quivering under my feet. Two roads led from the bridge: to the left the village stretched away to the hill, and to the right, as if bending over the ravine, stood an old wooden church with a green dome.

I turned to the right. Behind the church were seen heaps of crosses blackened by time, and between the tombs the wet, almost bare, branches of young birch trees swayed in the wind; yellow-brown leaves covered the earth like a carpet. Beyond was a black, entirely bare, stretch of land. And yet, in spite of that desolate picture, something sweet and familiar from a long-past life stirred within me. But why all this darkness and solitude around me? Why is not a single living face visible? Why do all the huts stand wide open? When did I live in this village? Was it during the Tartar invasion, or later? And had some stranger destroyed this nest, or had native robbers driven the inhabitants into the forests and the steppes?

I returned to the bridge and, turning to the left, went up the hill. And there I found the same solitude, the same marks of desolation. At last, near an old broken-down well, I saw a living creature. It was a starved looking dog, very old and evidently dying from hunger. His skin was mangy, and his bones were sticking out through his sides. On seeing me, he made an intense effort to get up, but could not move, and, falling into the mud, he began to yelp pitifully.



“I crossed to the other side of the brook, the rough-hewn bridge without any handrail quivering under my feet.”

I tried with all my might to imagine this village, so dear to my heart, in some other surroundings; to picture it in the flush of dawn, or with the sun setting in splendor behind the hill, the corn waving in the fields, or the brook frozen, and all the hill sparkling like silver in the frosty moon-night. But, however much I tried to recall all this, I could not remember anything like it. It seemed that all the year round this drizzling rain was falling from the leaden sky, the wind blowing into the open huts and finding vent through the unused chimneys.

But, lo! Amid the death-like silence I hear the ringing of bells. The sound is so cracked and mournful that it does not seem like a bell, but resembles rather a voice coming out from some long-suffering metallic breast. I go in the direction whence the sound is coming, and enter the church. It is full of people praying, of simple, rustic folk. The service is somewhat unusual, as is also the mood of the worshipers. Groans are heard at intervals in different parts of the church; tears flow down the furrowed, sunburnt cheeks. I make my way through the crowd, along the worn, rough-hewn floor, to the right, where candles are burn-

ing in front of the Miraculous Icon of the Holy Virgin. The Icon is black, without a chasuble; a small golden wreath surmounts the head of the Mother of God; her look is half severe, half pitying. In front of the Icon are hung hands, feet, and eyes, made of silver and ivory—votive offerings of the sick. From the pulpit comes floating the feeble, indistinct voice of the priest, reading a prayer which was new to me:

“Thou punishest us for our sins, but Thy wrath is more than we can bear.

“O Lord, stay Thy avenging hand and have mercy on us!

“A cruel enemy oppresses us, but we are without leaders, homes, or bread.

“We suffer for our sins, but why should our innocent children suffer?

“We are patient, O Lord, we submit to Thy will, but yet we are human, and have not enough strength to endure it.

“We cannot fight, we await no help from outside, and now we come to Thee for the last time and pray: save us, O Lord!

“O God, do not let us rebel against Thee! Do not bring us to despair! Thou gavest us life; do not take it from us before the time!”

There was a stir among the worshipers.

The crowd made way, and the priest hastened to the Miraculous Icon. He was a little old man, with grey tangled beard. His old faded chasuble did not fit him and trailed on the floor.

“O Heavenly Mother!” he cried in a loud agitated voice. “Thou art nearer to human suffering, for Thou knowest what it means.

“Thou sawest Thy beloved and innocent Son nailed to the Cross. Thou sawest His tormentors, mocking Him in His last mortal hour.

“What grief could be compared to that?

“Tell Him, to Thy Son, Thy Son. . . .”

The priest could not continue: his voice trembled, and he fell to the ground weeping. The whole assemblage of worshipers fell on their knees. Groans from a thousand throats filled every part of the church, floating upwards like a column of incense rising into the air. My heart overflowed with pity and brotherly feeling for the sorrows of the people. I threw myself on my knees, and everything became a blank. . . .

When I came to myself again, the church was empty. All the lights in the candlesticks were out; only the little lamp before the dark face of the Holy Virgin was burn-

ing. In the dim light the expression of her face had changed. There was no pity in it. Her eyes looked down severely and without sympathy.

I went out of the church with the vague hope of meeting somebody. Alas! Around me the same silence, the same desolation. The same dull, leaden sky, the same drizzling rain pattering on the yellow-brown leaves, and the same wind—that terrible, unbearable wind, lashing the leafless branches of the birch trees, and rending my soul with its monotonous moan. . . .

VII

The boundaries of my memory spread wider and wider. Visions flitted before me of things long forgotten and, possibly, never seen by me: of countries, wild forests, gigantic battles, in which wild animals engaged with men. But all was indistinct, and nothing could shape itself into definite form. In one of these pictures a little girl in a blue dress flashed past me. I had long known her; at the time of my last existence she appeared to me now and then in my sleep, which always seemed to me a bad omen. She was about ten years of age, thin, pale and unattractive looking; but her eyes were wonderful: black, deep-set, with a serious expression, quite unlike a child's. At times such suffering and terror were seen in those eyes that they caused me to

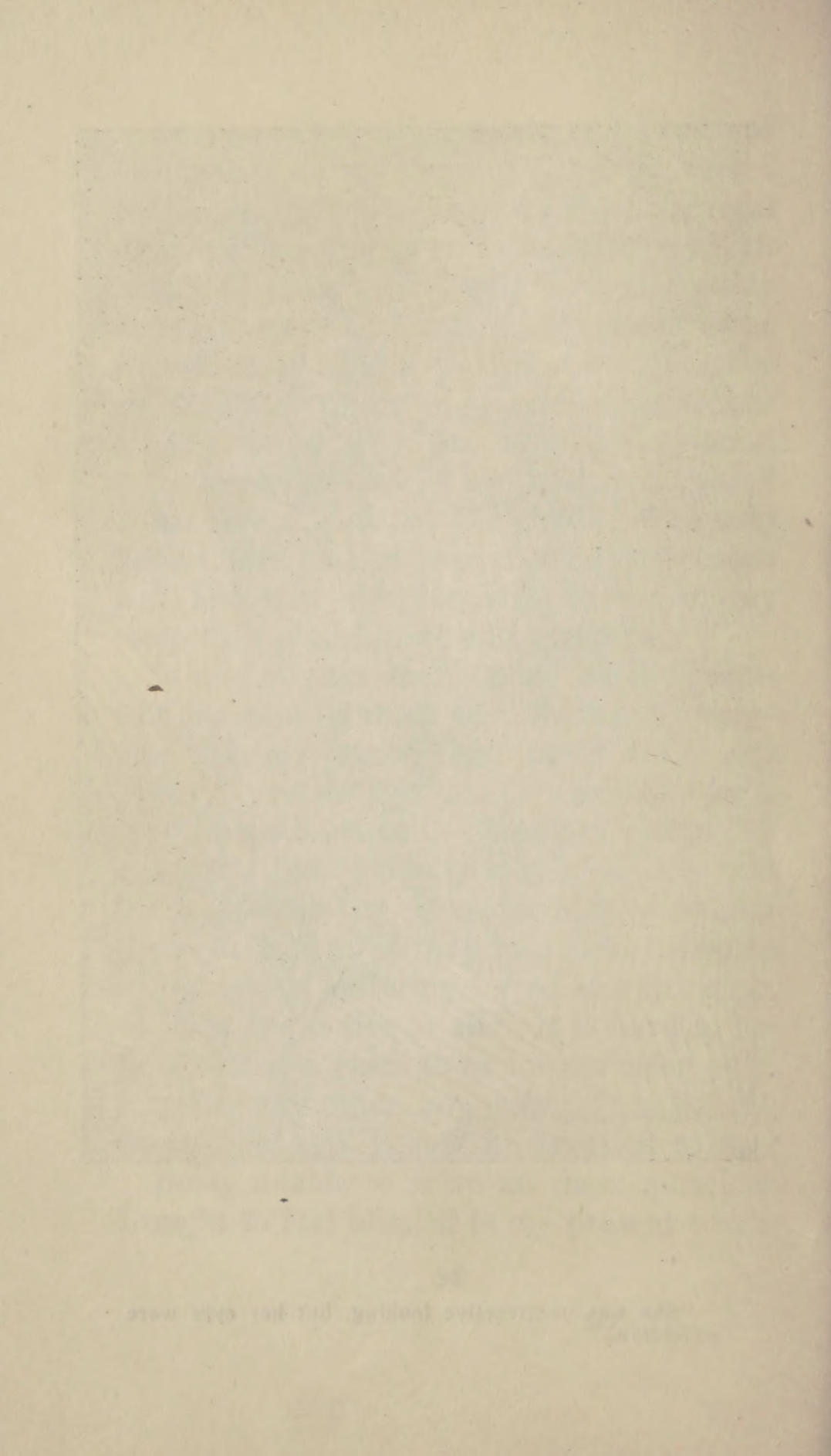
wake up with beating heart and drops of cold sweat on my forehead. After that I could not go to sleep again, and for several days was in a highly nervous state of mind. Now I was convinced that this girl really did exist and that I had known her at some former time. But who was she? Was she my daughter, or sister, or an entire stranger to me? And why was such superhuman suffering expressed in her frightened eyes? What tyrant tortured this child? And who knows but that it was I who tormented her, and that she appeared to me in my sleep as a punishment and a reproach?

It was strange that among all my recollections none of them were joyous or cheerful; that my inner sight could read only pages of sorrow and misfortune. Certainly there must have been cheerful days in my existence, but evidently they were few and far between, for I could not remember them; it was as if they had been drowned in the sea of suffering. And this being so, of what use is life at all? It is hard to believe that it is given to us for suffering only. Has life any other, any definite aim? Yes, surely; but will it ever be revealed to me?

Being unable to solve all these questions I ought to feel blissful in my present condi-



"She was unattractive looking, but her eyes were wonderful."



tion of absolute rest. But out of all that chaos of indistinct recollections and incoherent thoughts a strange feeling began to steal over me: I felt drawn again into that vale of grief and sorrow from which I had just emerged. I tried to stifle this feeling, but it grew, waxed strong, was deaf to all objections, and finally became a passionate, unrestrained thirst for life.

VIII

Oh, just to live! I do not ask for the continuance of my former existence; it is all the same to me who I may be: prince or peasant, rich or poor. People say money does not bring happiness, and yet they call happiness everything in life which can be bought for money. But, in truth, real happiness exists only within us, and not in outward possessions. Where does that happiness begin and where does it end? All is relative and depends on the point of view. The beggar who stretches out his hand for a penny and receives a rouble from an unknown benefactor experiences more pleasure, perhaps, than a banker who unexpectedly wins two hundred thousand. I had always thought this, but could not be convinced owing to prejudices which I acquired

during childhood and which I accepted as absolute truths. Now those illusions were dispelled, and I saw everything much more clearly. For instance, I was passionately fond of art, and thought that the sense of beauty was only attainable by people of culture, by the rich; and without that sense all life seemed to be aimless. But what, then, is art? The conception of art is as elastic as that of good and evil. Every age, every country, judges good and evil differently; what is considered virtue in one country is looked upon in another country as a crime. The question of art, apart from the difference of time and place, is complicated by the infinite variety of individual tastes. In France, which considers itself the most cultured country in the world, Shakespeare up to the present century was neither understood nor recognized; and it is easy to cite many such examples. It seems to me that there is no poor creature, or even savage, who is not occasionally stirred by the sense of beauty, although his artistic conception may be different. The peasants sitting on the grass on a warm spring evening around an amateur guitar player enjoy it, possibly, not a whit less than the conservatoire professors listening in a

stuffy room to one of Bach's fugues.

Oh, just to live! Just to see a human face, to hear the sound of a human voice, to mingle once more with my fellow men . . . with all kinds of men: good and bad. And, then, are there any absolutely bad people in the world? If we remember in what terrible conditions of helplessness and ignorance man is condemned to live and struggle, it is rather surprising that there are absolutely good people in the world. Man is ignorant of what is most important for him to know. He does not know why he was born, why he is living, why he should die. He forgets all his former existences and cannot even make a guess about his future ones. He does not see the reason for those successive existences, and he completes the ritual of life, incomprehensible to him, in the midst of darkness and suffering. And how he struggles to escape from this darkness! How desperately he tries to understand, how laboriously he works in order to build up and improve his hearth and home, how strenuously he exercises his poor limited reason! All his efforts are in vain, all his inventions, even the most remarkable, are powerless to solve any of those vital questions. In all his

work he finds a limit which he cannot overstep. He knows, for instance, that besides the earth there exist other worlds, other planets; by the aid of mathematics he knows how these planets move, when they approach the earth, and when they move away; but what goes on in those planets and whether they have beings like ourselves—he can only make a guess, but will never know definitely. And yet, he hopes and searches.

Oh, how I wish I could come back to these unfortunate, pitiful, patient little creatures! To live in common with them, to take part in their every-day petty interests, to which they attach such enormous importance! Some of them I would love, with some I would quarrel, others I would hate—but I crave for this love, this hate, this strife!

Oh, just to live! I want to see the sun as it sets behind the hill, the blue sky studded with bright stars, the white ripples dancing on the glassy surface of the sea, and huge breakers dashing against one another to the accompaniment of the sudden storm. I want to fling myself into a canoe to brave that tempest. I want to gallop across the snow-covered steppe in the reck-

less troika, to challenge the infuriated bear, dagger in hand, to live through all the thrills and all the trifles of life! I want to see how the lightning rends the sky, to watch the green beetle as it creeps from one branch to another; I want to smell the new-mown hay, to hear the song of the nightingale in the lilac bushes, the croaking of the frogs in the pond, the sound of the village church bells, and the rattling of the carts on the pavement. I want to hear the solemn chords of the heroic symphony and the exultant songs of the gypsies!

Oh, only just to live! Only just to be able to take the breath of life once more and to utter a human word. Just to cry out! . . .

IX

And suddenly I cried out with all my might. A great joy seized me as I uttered that cry, but the sound of my voice startled me. It was not my usual voice; it was a weak, feeble cry. I opened my eyes: the dazzling light of a bright frosty morning nearly blinded me. I found myself in Nastassya's room. Sophya Franzovna was holding me in her arms. Nastassya was lying in bed, supported on all sides by pillows, and breathing heavily.

"Listen, Vassyutka," said Sophya Franzovna, "slip through into the drawing-room and call Semyon for a moment."

"But how can I get there, ma'am?" replied Vassyutka. "They're just going to carry the Prince out, and there's such a big crowd."

“Well, you must get through somehow! Just call him for a moment; after all, he is the father.”

Vassytutka disappeared, and after a moment returned with Semyon. He was in a black dress-coat with white crepe-band and was holding a large towel in his hands.

“Well, what’s new?” he asked, running in.

“All’s well, I congratulate you,” said Sophya Franzovna in a solemn tone of voice.

“Thank Heaven,” said Semyon, and ran back again, without even looking at me.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” he asked from the corridor.

“A boy, a boy!”

“Thank Heaven!” replied Semyon, and disappeared.

Yudishna was finishing her toilet at a dressing-table, on which there stood an old crooked mirror in a brass frame. She tied up her head with a black woollen shawl and was about to go and witness the removal of the coffin, but suddenly she turned round and cast a look of disgust at Nastassya.

“You’ve hit the right time to bring a child into the world, just when they’re carrying out the Prince! Oh, be d——d!” She spat with withering scorn, and, piously crossing

herself, swept majestically into the hall. Nastassya made no reply, but simply smiled after her with a blissful kind of expression.

I was bathed in a tub, put into swaddling clothes, and laid in my cot. I fell asleep at once, like a stranger tired out after a long, fatiguing journey. During that deep sleep I forgot everything that had happened to me up to that moment.

After several hours I awoke—a helpless, feeble, unreasoning little creature, destined to constant suffering.

I was entering a new life.

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