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MODERN AUTHORS' SERIES

SILENCE

BY

LEONIDAS ANDREIYEFF

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Translated from the Russian

by

JOHN CURNOS

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SECOND EDITION

PHILADELPHIA

BROWN BROTHERS

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FOREWORD

When Maxim Gorky had finished writing that wonderful series of tramp stories which astonished by their force and originality the outside world no less than the native, when it became evident that his contact with the civilized world and his entry into the political arena had not served to add to his literary prestige, there appeared on the scene a young man, by the name of Leonidas Andreiyeff, with a small volume of tales, fittingly dedicated to the author of "Chelkash."

It was one of those peculiarly timed events, which occur occasionally in the domain of literature no less in that of history, when a man of genius appears in our midst—in the nick of time, as it were—to carry on some unfinished work, and to hammer the next link in the chain of prevailing circumstances. Since this initial

production Andreiyeff has been unusually prolific, having several volumes of short stories to his credit and a number of plays, the latter being a late development.

There are critics who are inclined to place Andreiyeff above Gorky. This is hardly fair to either man. Both are thorough moderns, both are rebels against the life that is, both have shown a decided leaning toward the Nietzschean view, the religion of individualism, have expounded through their art the place which the Ego occupies in our lives; both have attracted the young generation, have raised a storm of applause and protest from antagonistic factions, at the same time laying their impress upon their time by influencing armies of young writers. The rich, red blood, the crude blind force—are Gorky's; the refinement, the conscious artistry—are Andreiyeff's. Though linked in their literary sympathies, each man stands on his own footing.

Andreiyeff's earlier stories, one of which is presented here, are characterized particularly by their purely artistic quality, rather than by the iconoclastic spirit which marks his later work. "Silence" has no moral to teach, no idea to inculcate. It is simply a story—or bet-

ter, a melancholy poem, in which the reader is subjected to a series of heart pangs, and is forced to listen to a music, in which the dominant motif is a terrible, oppressive and crushing silence. We are compelled to strain our ear to catch the least noise which might break that silence—but it never comes.

J. C.

SILENCE

I.

One moonlit night in May, while the nightingales sang, Father Ignatius' wife entered his chamber. Her countenance expressed suffering, and the little lamp she held in her hand trembled. Approaching her husband, she touched his shoulder, and managed to say between her sobs:

“Father, let us go to Verochka.”

Without turning his head, Father Ignatius glanced severely at his wife over the rims of his spectacles, and looked long and intently, till she waved her unoccupied hand and dropped on a low divan.

“That one toward the other be so pitiless!” she pronounced slowly, with emphasis on the

final syllables, and her good plump face was distorted with a grimace of pain and exasperation, as if in this manner she wished to express what stern people they were—her husband and daughter.

Father Ignatius smiled and arose. Closing his book, he removed his spectacles, placed them in the case and meditated. His long, black beard, inwoven with silver threads, lay dignified on his breast, and it slowly heaved at every deep breath.

“ Well, let us go! ” said he.

Olga Stepanovna quickly arose and entreated in an appealing, timid voice:

“ Only don't revile her, father! You know the sort she is. ”

Vera's chamber was in the attic, and the narrow, wooden stair bent and creaked under the heavy tread of Father Ignatius. Tall and ponderous, he lowered his head to avoid striking the floor of the upper story, and frowned disdainfully when the white jacket of his wife brushed his face. Well he knew that nothing would come of their talk with Vera.

“ Why do you come? ” asked Vera, raising a bared arm to her eyes. The other arm lay on top of a white summer blanket hardly dis-

tinguishable from the fabric, so white, translucent and cold was its aspect.

“Verochka!” began her mother, but sobbing, she grew silent.

“Vera!” said her father, making an effort to soften his dry and hard voice. “Vera, tell us, what troubles you?”

Vera was silent.

“Vera, do not we, your mother and I, deserve your confidence? Do we not love you? And is there some one nearer to you than we? Tell us about your sorrow, and believe me you’ll feel better for it. And we too. Look at your aged mother, how much she suffers!”

“Verochka!”

“And I . . .” The dry voice trembled, truly something had broken in it. “And I . . . do you think I find it easy? As if I did not see that some sorrow is gnawing at you—and what is it? And I, your father, do not know what it is. Is it right that it should be so?”

Vera was silent. Father Ignatius very cautiously stroked his beard, as if afraid that his fingers would enmesh themselves involuntarily in it, and continued:

“Against my wish you went to St. Petersburg—did I pronounce a curse upon you, you

who disobeyed me? Or did I not give you money? Or, you'll say, I have not been kind? Well, why then are you silent? There, you've had your St. Petersburg!"

Father Ignatius became silent, and an image arose before him of something huge, of granite, and terrible, full of invisible dangers and strange and indifferent people. And there, alone and weak, was his Vera and there they had lost her. An awful hatred against that terrible and mysterious city grew in the soul of Father Ignatius, and an anger against his daughter who was silent, obstinately silent.

"St. Petersburg has nothing to do with it," said Vera, morosely, and closed her eyes. "And nothing is the matter with me. Better go to bed, it is late."

"Verochka," whimpered her mother. "Little daughter, do confess to me."

"Akh, mamma!" impatiently Vera interrupted her.

Father Ignatius sat down on a chair and laughed.

"Well, then it's nothing?" he inquired, ironically.

"Father," sharply put in Vera, raising herself from the pillow, "you know that I love you

and mother. Well, I do feel a little weary. But that will pass. Do go to sleep, and I also wish to sleep. And to-morrow, or some other time, we'll have a chat."

Father Ignatius impetuously arose so that the chair hit the wall, and took his wife's hand.

"Let us go."

"Verochka!"

"Let us go, I tell you!" shouted Father Ignatius. "If she has forgotten God, shall we . . ."

Almost forcibly he led Olga Stepanovna out of the room, and when they descended the stairs, his wife, decreasing her gait, said in a harsh whisper:

"It was you, priest, who have made her such. From you she learnt her ways. And you'll answer for it. Akh, unhappy creature that I am!"

And she wept, and, as her eyes filled with tears, her foot, missing a step, would descend with a sudden jolt, as if she were eager to fall into some existent abyss below.

From that day Father Ignatius ceased to speak with his daughter, but she seemed not to notice it. As before she lay in her room, or walked about, continually wiping her eyes with

the palms of her hands as if they contained some irritating foreign substance. And crushed between these two silent people, the jolly, fun-loving wife of the priest quailed and seemed lost, not knowing what to say or do.

Occasionally Vera took a stroll. A week following the interview she went out in the evening, as was her habit. She was not seen alive again, as on this evening she threw herself under the train, which cut her in two.

Father Ignatius himself directed the funeral. His wife was not present in church, as at the news of Vera's death she was prostrated by a stroke. She lost control of her feet, hands and tongue, and she lay motionless in the semi-darkened room when the church bells rang out. She heard the people, as they issued out of church and passed the house, intone the chants, and she made an effort to raise her hand, and to make a sign of the cross, but her hand refused to obey; she wished to say: "Farewell, Vera!" but the tongue lay in her mouth huge and heavy. And her attitude was so calm, that it gave one an impression of restfulness or sleep. Only her eyes remained open.

At the funeral, in church, were many people who knew Father Ignatius and many stran-

gers, and all bewailed Vera's terrible death, and tried to find in the movements and voice of Father Ignatius tokens of a deep sorrow. They did not love Father Ignatius because of his severity and proud manners, his scorn of sinners, for his unforgiving spirit, his envy and covetousness, his habit of utilizing every opportunity to extort money from his parishioners. They all wished to see him suffer, to see his spirit broken, to see him conscious in his two-fold guilt for the death of his daughter—as a cruel father and a bad priest—incapable of preserving his own flesh from sin. They cast searching glances at him, and he, feeling these glances directed toward his back, made efforts to hold erect its broad and strong expanse, and his thoughts were not concerning his dead daughter, but concerning his own dignity.

“A hardened priest!” said, with a shake of his head, Karzenoff, a carpenter, to whom Father Ignatius owed five roubles for frames.

And thus, hard and erect, Father Ignatius reached the burial ground, and in the same manner he returned. Only at the door of his wife's chamber did his spine relax a little, but this may have been due to the fact that the

height of the door was inadequate to admit his tall figure. The change from broad daylight made it difficult for him to distinguish the face of his wife, but, after scrutiny, he was astonished at its calmness and because the eyes showed no tears. And there was neither anger, nor sorrow in the eyes—they were dumb, and they kept silent with difficulty, reluctantly, as did the entire plump and helpless body, pressing against the feather bedding.

“ Well, how do you feel? ” inquired Father Ignatius.

The lips, however, were dumb; the eyes also were silent. Father Ignatius laid his hand on her forehead; it was cold and moist, and Olga Stepanovna did not show in any way that she had felt the hand's contact. When Father Ignatius removed his hand there gazed at him, immobile, two deep grey eyes, seeming almost entirely dark from the dilated pupils, and there was neither sadness in them, nor anger.

“ I am going into my own room, ” said Father Ignatius, who began to feel cold and terror.

He passed through the drawing-room, where everything appeared neat and in order, as usual, and where, attired in white covers, stood tall chairs, like corpses in their shrouds. Over

one window hung an empty wire cage, with the door open.

“Nastasya!” shouted Father Ignatius, and his voice seemed to him coarse, and he felt ill at ease because he raised his voice so high in these silent rooms, so soon after his daughter’s funeral. “Nastasya!” he called out in a lower tone of voice, “where is the canary?”

“She flew away, to be sure.”

“Why did you let it out?”

Nastasya began to weep, and wiping her face with the edges of her calico headkerchief, said through her tears:

“It was my young mistress’s soul. Was it right to hold it?”

And it seemed to Father Ignatius that the yellow, happy little canary, always singing with inclined head, was really the soul of Vera, and if it had not flown away it wouldn’t have been possible to say that Vera had died. He became even more incensed at the maid-servant, and shouted:

“Off with you!”

And when Nastasya did not find the door at once he added:

“Fool!”

II.

From the day of the funeral silence reigned in the little house. It was not stillness, for stillness is merely the absence of sounds; it was silence, because it seemed that they who were silent could say something but would not. So thought Father Ignatius each time he entered his wife's chamber and met that obstinate gaze, so heavy in its aspect that it seemed to transform the very air into lead, which bore down one's head and spine. So thought he, examining his daughter's music sheets, which bore imprints of her voice, as well as her books and her portrait, which she brought with her from St. Petersburg. Father Ignatius was accustomed to scrutinize the portrait in established order: First, he would gaze on the cheek upon which a strong light was thrown by the painter; in his fancy he would see upon it a slight wound, which he had noticed on Vera's cheek in death, and the source of which he could not understand. Each time he would meditate upon causes; he reasoned that if it was made by the train the entire head would have been crushed, whereas the head of Vera remained wholly untouched. It was possible that some-

one did it with his foot when the corpse was removed, or accidentally with a finger nail.

To contemplate at length upon the details of Vera's death taxed the strength of Father Ignatius, so that he would pass on to the eyes. These were dark, handsome, with long lashes, which cast deep shadows beneath, causing the whites to seem particularly luminous, both eyes appearing to be inclosed in black, mourning frames. A strange expression was given them by the unknown but talented artist; it seemed as if in the space between the eyes and the object upon which they gazed there lay a thin, transparent film. It resembled somewhat the effect obtained by an imperceptible layer of dust on the black top of a piano, softening the shine of polished wood. And no matter how Father Ignatius placed the portrait, the eyes insistently followed him, but there was no speech in them, only silence; and this silence was so clear that it seemed it could be heard. And gradually Father Ignatius began to think that he heard silence.

Every morning after breakfast Father Ignatius would enter the drawing-room, throw a rapid glance at the empty cage and the other familiar objects, and seating himself in the

armchair would close his eyes and listen to the silence of the house. There was something grotesque about this. The cage kept silence, stilly and tenderly, and in this silence were felt sorrow and tears, and distant dead laughter. The silence of his wife, softened by the walls, continued insistent, heavy as lead, and terrible, so terrible that on the hottest day Father Ignatius would be seized by cold shivers. Continuous and cold as the grave, and mysterious as death, was the silence of his daughter. The silence itself seemed to share this suffering and struggled, as it were, with the terrible desire to pass into speech; however, something strong and cumbersome, as a machine, held it motionless and stretched it out as a wire. And somewhere at the distant end, the wire would begin to agitate and resound subduedly, feebly and plaintively. With joy, yet with terror, Father Ignatius would seize upon this engendered sound, and resting with his arms upon the arms of the chair, would lean his head forward, awaiting the sound to reach him. But the sound would break and pass into silence.

“How stupid!” muttered Father Ignatius, angrily, arising from the chair, still erect and tall. Through the window he saw, suffused

with sunlight, the street, which was paved with round, even-sized stones, and directly across, the stone wall of a long, windowless shed. On the corner stood a cab-driver, resembling a clay statue, and it was difficult to understand why he stood there, when for hours there was not a single passer-by.

III.

Father Ignatius had occasion for considerable speech outside his house. There was talking to be done with the clergy, with the members of his flock, while officiating at ceremonies, sometimes with acquaintances at social evenings; yet, upon his return he would feel invariably that the entire day he had been silent. This was due to the fact that with none of those people he could talk upon that matter which concerned him most, and upon which he would contemplate each night: Why did Vera die?

Father Ignatius did not seem to understand that now this could not be known, and still thought it was possible to know. Each night—all his nights had become sleepless—he would picture that minute when he and his wife, in

dead midnight, stood near Vera's bed, and he entreated her: "Tell us!" And when in his recollection, he would reach these words, the rest appeared to him not as it was in reality. His closed eyes, preserving in their darkness a live and undimmed picture of that night, saw how Vera raised herself in her bed, smiled and tried to say something. And what was that she tried to say? That unuttered word of Vera's, which should have solved all, seemed so near, that if one only had bent his ear and suppressed the beats of his heart, one could have heard it, and at the same time it was so infinitely, so hopelessly distant. Father Ignatius would arise from his bed, stretch forth his joined hands and, wringing them, would exclaim:

"Vera!"

And he would be answered by silence.

One evening Father Ignatius entered the chamber of Olga Stepanovna, whom he had not come to see for a week, seated himself at her head, and turning away from that insistent, heavy gaze, said:

"Mother! I wish to talk to you about Vera. Do you hear?"

Her eyes were silent, and Father Ignatius

raising his voice, spoke sternly and powerfully, as he was accustomed to speak with penitents:

“ I am aware that you are under the impression that I have been the cause of Vera’s death. Reflect, however, did I love her less than you loved her? You reason absurdly. I have been stern; did that prevent her from doing as she wished. I have forfeited the dignity of a father, I humbly bent my neck, when she defied my malediction and departed—hence. And you—did you not entreat her to remain, until I command you to be silent. Did I beget cruelty in her? Did I not teach her about God, about humility, about love? ”

Father Ignatius quickly glanced into the eyes of his wife, and turned away.

“ What was there for me to do when she did not wish to reveal her sorrow? Did I not command her? Did I not entreat her? I suppose, in your opinion, I should have dropped on my knees before the maid, and cried like an old woman! How should I know what was going on in her head! Cruel, heartless daughter! ”

Father Ignatius hit his knees with his fist.

“ There was no love in her—that’s what! As far as I’m concerned, that’s settled, of

course—I'm a tyrant! Perhaps she loved you —you, who wept and humbled yourself?"

Father Ignatius gave a hollow laugh.

"There's love for you! And as a solace for you, what a death she chose! A cruel, ignominious death. She died in the dust, in the dirt—as a d-dog who is kicked in the jaw."

The voice of Father Ignatius sounded low and hoarse:

"I feel ashamed! Ashamed to go out in the street! Ashamed before the altar! Ashamed before God! Cruel, undeserving daughter! Accurst in thy grave!"

When Father Ignatius glanced at his wife she was unconscious, and revived only after several hours. When she regained consciousness her eyes were silent, and it was impossible to tell whether or not she remembered what Father Ignatius had said.

That very night—it was a moonlit, calm, warm and deathly-still night in May—Father Ignatius, proceeding on his tip-toes, so as not to be overheard by his wife and the sick-nurse, climbed up the stairs and entered Vera's room. The window in the attic had remained closed since the death of Vera, and the atmosphere was dry and warm, with a light odor of burning

that comes from heat generated during the day in the iron roof. The air of lifelessness and abandonment permeated the apartment, which for a long time had remained unvisited, and where the timber of the walls, the furniture and other objects gave forth a slight odor of continued putrescence. A bright streak of moonlight fell on the window-sill, and on the floor, and, reflected by the white, carefully washed boards, cast a dim light into the room's corners, while the white, clean bed, with two pillows, one large and one small, seemed phantom-like and aerial. Father Ignatius opened the window, causing to pour into the room a considerable current of fresh air, smelling of dust, of the nearby river and the blooming linden. An indistinct sound as of voices in chorus also entered occasionally; evidently young people rowed and sang.

Quietly treading with naked feet, resembling a white phantom, Father Ignatius made his way to the vacant bed, bent his knees and fell face down on the pillows, embracing them—on that spot where should have been Vera's face. Long he lay thus; the song grew louder, then died out; but he still lay there, while his

long, black hair spread over his shoulders and the bed.

The moon had changed its position, and the room grew darker, when Father Ignatius raised his head and murmured, putting into his voice the entire strength of his long-suppressed and unconscious love and hearkening to his own words, as if it were not he who was listening, but Vera.

“Vera, daughter mine! Do you understand what you are to me, daughter? Little daughter! My heart, my blood and my life. Your father—your old father—is already grey, and also feeble.”

The shoulders of Father Ignatius shook and the entire burdened figure became agitated. Suppressing his agitation, Father Ignatius murmured tenderly, as to an infant:

“Your old father entreats you. No, little Vera, he supplicates. He weeps. He never has wept before. Your sorrow, little child, your sufferings—they are also mine. Greater than mine.”

Father Ignatius shook his head.

“Greater, Verochka. What is death to an old man like me? But you—If you only knew how delicate and weak and timid you are! Do

you recall how you bruised your finger once and the blood trickled and you cried a little? My child! I know that you love me, love me intensely. Every morning you kiss my hand. Tell me, do tell me, what grief troubles your little head, and I—with these hands—shall smother your grief. They are still strong, Vera, these hands.”

The hair of Father Ignatius shook.

“Tell me!”

Father Ignatius fixed his eyes on the wall, and wrung his hands.

“Tell me!”

Stillness prevailed in the room, and from afar was heard the prolonged and broken whistle of a locomotive.

Father Ignatius, gazing out of his dilated eyes, as if there had arisen suddenly before him the frightful phantom of the mutilated corpse, slowly raised himself from his knees, and with a credulous motion reached for his head with his hand, with spread and tensely stiffened fingers. Making a step toward the door, Father Ignatius whispered brokenly:

“Tell me!”

And he was answered by silence.

IV.

The next day, after an early and lonely dinner, Father Ignatius went to the graveyard, the first time since his daughter's death. It was warm, deserted and still; it seemed more like an illumined night. Following habit, Father Ignatius, with effort, straightened his spine, looked severely about him and thought that he was the same as formerly; he was conscious neither of the new, terrible weakness in his legs, nor that his long beard had become entirely white as if a hard frost had hit it. The road to the graveyard led through a long, direct street, slightly on an upward incline, and at its termination loomed the arch of the graveyard gate, resembling a dark, perpetually open mouth, edged with glistening teeth.

Vera's grave was situated in the depth of the grounds, where the sandy little pathways terminated, and Father Ignatius, for a considerable time, was obliged to blunder along the narrow footpaths, which led in a broken line between green mounds, by all forgotten and abandoned. Here and there appeared, green with age, sloping tombstones, broken railings and large, heavy stones planted in the ground,

and seemingly crushing it with some cruel, ancient spite. Near one such stone was the grave of Vera. It was covered with fresh turf, turned yellow; around, however, all was in bloom. Ash embraced maple tree; and the widely spread hazel bush stretched out over the grave its bending branches with their downy, shaggy foliage. Sitting down on a neighboring grave and catching his breath, Father Ignatius looked around him, throwing a glance upon the cloudless, desert sky, where in complete immovability, hung the glowing sun disk—and here he only felt that deep, incomparable stillness which reigns in graveyards, when the wind is absent and the slumbering foliage has ceased its rustling. And anew the thought came to Father Ignatius that this was not a stillness but a silence. It extended to the very brick walls of the graveyard, crept over them and occupied the city. And it terminated only—in those grey, obstinate and reluctantly silent eyes.

Father Ignatius' shoulders shivered, and he lowered his eyes upon the grave of Vera. He gazed long upon the little tufts of grass uprooted together with the earth from some open, wind-swept field and not successful in adapting

themselves to a strange soil; he could not imagine that there, under this grass, only a few feet from him, lay Vera. And this nearness seemed incomprehensible and brought confusion into the soul and a strange agitation. She, of whom Father Ignatius was accustomed to think as of one passed away forever into the dark depths of eternity, was here, close by—and it was hard to understand that she, nevertheless, was no more and never again would be. And in the mind's fancy of Father Ignatius it seemed that if he could only utter some word, which was almost upon his lips, or if he could make some sort of movement, Vera would issue forth from her grave and arise to the same height and beauty that was once hers. And not alone would she arise, but all corpses, intensely sensitive in their solemnly-cold silence.

Father Ignatius removed his wide-brimmed black hat, smoothed down his disarranged hair and whispered:

“Vera!”

Father Ignatius felt ill at ease, fearing to be overheard by a stranger, and stepping on the grave he gazed around him. No one was present, and this time he repeated loudly:

“Vera!”

It was the voice of an aged man, sharp and demanding, and it was strange that a so powerfully expressed desire should remain without answer.

“Vera!”

Loudly and insistently the voice called, and when it relapsed into silence, it seemed for a moment that somewhere from underneath came an incoherent answer. And Father Ignatius, clearing his ear of his long hair, pressed it to the rough, prickly turf.

“Vera, tell me!”

With terror, Father Ignatius felt pouring into his ear something cold as of the grave, which froze his marrow; Vera seemed to be speaking—speaking, however, with the same unbroken silence. This feeling became more racking and terrible, and when Father Ignatius forced himself finally to tear away his head, his face was pale as that of a corpse, and he fancied that the entire atmosphere trembled and palpitated from a resounding silence, and that this terrible sea was being swept by a wild hurricane. The silence strangled him; with icy waves it rolled through his head and agitated the hair; it smote against his breast, which

groaned under the blows. Trembling from head to foot, casting around him sharp and sudden glances, Father Ignatius slowly raised himself and with a prolonged and torturous effort attempted to straighten his spine and to give proud dignity to his trembling body. He succeeded in this. With measured protractiveness, Father Ignatius shook the dirt from his knees, put on his hat, made the sign of the cross three times over the grave, and walked away with an even and firm gait, not recognizing, however, the familiar burial ground and losing his way.

“ Well, here I’ve gone astray ! ” smiled Father Ignatius, halting at the branching of the footpaths.

He stood there for a moment, and, unreflecting turned to the left, because it was impossible to stand and to wait. The silence drove him on. It arose from the green graves ; it was the breath issuing from the grey, melancholy crosses ; in thin, stifling currents it came from all pores of the earth, satiated with the dead. Father Ignatius increased his stride. Dizzy, he circled the same paths, jumped over graves, stumbled across railings, clutching with his hands the prickly, metallic garlands, and turn-

ing the soft material of his dress into tatters. His sole thought was to escape. He fled from one place to another, and finally broke into a dead run, seeming very tall and unusual in the flowing cassock, and his hair streaming in the wind. A corpse arisen from the grave could not have frightened a passer-by more than this wild figure of a man, running and leaping, and waving his arms, his face distorted and insane, and the open mouth breathing with a dull, hoarse sound. With one long leap, Father Ignatius landed on a little street, at one end of which appeared the small church attached to the graveyard. At the entrance, on a low bench, dozed an old man, seemingly a distant pilgrim, and near him, assailing each other, were two quarreling old beggar women, filling the air with their oaths.

When Father Ignatius reached his home, it was already dusk, and there was light in Olga Stepanovna's chamber. Not undressing and without removing his hat, dusty and tattered, Father Ignatius approached his wife and fell on his knees.

"Mother . . . Olga . . . have pity on me!" he wept. "I shall go mad."

He dashed his head against the edge of the

table and he wept with anguish, as one who was weeping for the first time. Then he raised his head, confident that a miracle would come to pass, that his wife would speak and would pity him.

“ My love! ”

With his entire big body he drew himself toward his wife—and met the gaze of those grey eyes. There was neither compassion in them, nor anger. It was possible his wife had forgiven him, but in her eyes there was neither pity, nor anger. They were dumb and silent.

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And silent was the entire dark, deserted house.

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