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The Duel

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Содержание

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I

THE 6th Company's afternoon drill was nearly over, and the junior officers looked with increasing frequency at their watches, and with growing impatience. The rank and file of the new regiment were being instructed in garrison duty. Along the whole of the extensive parade-ground the soldiers stood in scattered groups: by the poplars that bordered the causeway, by the gymnastic apparatus, by the door of the company's school, and in the neighbourhood of the butts. All these places were to represent during the drill the most important buildings in the garrison – the commander's residence, the headquarters, the powder magazine, the administration department, etc. Sentries were posted and relieved; patrols marched here and there, shouting at and saluting each other in military fashion; harsh non-commissioned officers visited and examined the sentries on duty, trying, sometimes by a trick, sometimes by pretended threats, to fool the soldiers into infringing the rules, e.g. to quit their posts, give up their rifles, to take charge of contraband articles, etc. The older men, who had had previous experience of such practical jokes, were very seldom taken in, but answered rudely, "The Tsar alone gives orders here," etc., etc. The young recruits, on the other hand, often enough fell into the snare set for them.

"Khliabnikov!" a stout little "non-com." cried angrily in a voice which betrayed a passion for ruling. "What did I tell you just now, simpleton? Did I put you under arrest? What are you sticking there for, then? Why don't you answer?"

In the third platoon a tragi-comic scene took place. Moukhamedjinov, a young soldier, Tartar by birth, was not yet versed in the Russian language. He got more and more confused under the commander's irritating and insidious questions. At last he lost his head entirely, brought his rifle to the charge, and threatened all the bystanders with the bayonet.

"Stop, you madman!" roared Sergeant Bobuilev. "Can't you recognize your own commander, your own captain?"

"Another step and you are a dead man!" shouted the Tartar, in a furious rage. His eyes were bloodshot, and he nervously repelled with his bayonet all who approached him. Round about him, but at a respectful distance, a crowd of soldiers flocked together, accepting with joy and gratitude this interesting little interlude in the wearisome drill.

Sliva, the captain of the company, approached to see what was going on. While he was on the opposite side of the parade-ground, where, with bent back and dragging steps, he tottered slowly backwards and forwards, a few young officers assembled in a small group to smoke and chatter. They were three, all told: Lieutenant Viätkin, a bald, moustached man of thirty-three, a jovial fellow, chatterbox, singer, and particularly fond of his glass; Sub-Lieutenant Romashov, who had hardly served two years in the regiment; and, lastly, Sub-Ensign Lbov, a lively, well-shaped young man, with an expression of shrewd geniality in his pale eyes and an eternal smile on his thick, innocent lips. He passed for a peripatetic storehouse of anecdotes, specially crammed with old and worn-out officers' stories.

"This is an out-and-out scandal," said Viätkin, as he looked at his dainty little watch, the case of which he angrily closed with a little click. "What the devil does he mean by keeping the company all this time?"

"You should ask him that question, Pavel Pavlich," replied Lbov, with a sly look.

"Oh, go to the devil! Go and ask him yourself. But the point which I want to emphasize is that the whole business is utterly futile; there is always this fuss before the review, and every time they

overdo it. The soldiers are so worried and badgered, that at the review they stand like blockheads. Do you know that story about the two captains who made a pretty heavy bet as to which of them had in his company the best trencher-man? When one of the 'champions' had consumed seven pounds of bread he was obliged to acknowledge himself beaten. His Captain, furious with indignation, sent for his sergeant-major, and said: 'What made you send me a creature like that? After his seventh pound he had to give up, and I've lost my wager!' The poor sergeant-major stared at his superior. 'I don't know what could have happened to him, your Excellency. This very morning I rehearsed with him, and then he ate *eight* pounds without any ado.' It's the same case here, gentlemen. We rehearse without mercy and common-sense up to the very last, and thus, when the tug-of-war comes, the soldier drops down from sheer weariness."

"Last night," began Lbov, who could hardly get his words out for laughing – "last night, when the drill was over, I went to my quarters. It was past eight, and quite dark then. As I was approaching the barracks of the 11th Company I heard some ear-piercing music from there. I go there and am told that the men are being taught our horn signals. All the recruits were obliged to sing in chorus. It was a hideous concert, and I asked Lieutenant Andrusevich how any one could put up with such a row so late at night. He answered laughingly, 'Why shouldn't we now and then, like the dogs, howl at the moon?'"

"Now I can't stand this any longer," interrupted Viätkin, with a yawn. "But who's that riding down there? It looks like Biek."

"Yes, it's Biek-Agamalov," replied sharp-sighted Lbov. "Look how beautifully he rides."

"Yes, he does," chimed in Romashov. "To my thinking, he rides better than any other of our cavalrymen. But just look at his horse dancing. Biek is showing off."

An officer, wearing an Adjutant's uniform and white gloves, was riding quietly along the causeway. He was sitting on a high, slim-built horse with a gold-coloured and short-clipped tail, after the English fashion. The spirited animal pirouetted under his rider, and impatiently shook its branch-bit by the violent tossings of its long and nobly formed neck.

"Pavel Pavlich, is it a fact that Biek is a Circassian by birth?" asked Romashov.

"Yes, I think so," answered Viätkin. "Armenians pretend sometimes that they are Circassians or Lezghins,[1] but nobody can be deceived with regard to Biek. Only look how he carries himself on horseback."

"Wait, I'll call him," said Lbov.

Lbov put his hands to his mouth, and tried to form out of them a sort of speaking-tube, and shouted in a suppressed voice, so as not to be heard by the Commander —

"Lieutenant Biek-Agamalov!"

The officer on horseback pulled the reins, stopped for a second, and swung in the saddle towards the right. Then he also turned his horse to the right, bent slightly forward, and, with a springy and energetic movement, jumped the ditch, and rode in a short gallop up to the officers.

He was a man somewhat below the medium height, lean, muscular, and very powerful. His countenance, with its receding forehead, delicate, aquiline nose, and strong, resolute lines about the mouth, was manly and handsome, and had not yet got the pale and sickly hue that is so characteristic of the Oriental when he is getting on in years.

"Good-day, Biek," was Viätkin's greeting. "Who was the girl for whom you were exercising your arts of seduction down there, you lady-killer?"

Biek-Agamalov shook hands with the officers, whilst with an easy and graceful movement he bent slightly forward in the saddle. He smiled, and his gleaming white and even row of teeth cast a sort of lustre over the lower part of his face, with its black and splendidly cultivated moustache.

[1] The Lezghins are among the medley of mountain tribes living in Daghestan and part of the Terek province. These mountaineers of the Eastern Caucasus are nearly all Sun'i Mohammedans.

"Two or three little Jewess girls were there, but what is that to do with me? I took no notice of them."

"Ah! we know well enough how you play the game with ladies," said Viätkin jestingly.

"I say!" interrupted Lbov, with a laugh; "have you heard what General Dokturov[2] remarked about the Adjutants in the infantry? It ought to interest you, Biek. He said they were the most dare-devil riders in the whole world."

"No lies, now, ensign," replied Biek, as he gave his horse the reins and assumed an expression as if he intended to ride down the joker.

"It's true, by God it is! 'They ride,' said he, 'the most wretched "crocks" in the world – spavined "roarers" – and yet, only give the order, and off they fly at the maddest speed over stocks and stones, hedges and ditches – reins loose, stirrups dropped, cap flying, ah! – veritable cantaurs.'"

"What news, Biek?" asked Viätkin.

"What news? None. Ah! stay. A little while ago the Commander of the regiment ran across Lieutenant-Colonel Liekh at mess. Liekh, as drunk as a lord, was wobbling against the wall with his hands behind him, and hardly able to stammer out a syllable. Shulgovich rushed at him like an infuriated bull, and bellowed in such a way that it might be heard over the whole market-place: 'Please remove your hands from the small of your back when you stand in the presence of your commanding officer.' And all the servants witnessed this edifying scene."

"Ah! that is detestable," chimed in Viätkin, laughing. "Yesterday, when he favoured the 4th Company with a visit, he shouted: 'Who dares to thrust the regulations in my face? I am your regulations. Not a word more. Here I'm your Tsar and your God.'"

Lbov was again laughing at his own thoughts.

"Gentlemen, have you heard what happened to the Adjutant of the 4th Regiment?"

"Keep your eternal stories to yourself, Lbov," exclaimed Viätkin, interrupting him in a severe tone. "To-day you're worse than usual."

"I have some more news to tell," Biek-Agamalov went on to say, as he again facetiously threatened Lbov with his horse, which, snorting and shaking its head, beslavered all around it with foam. "The Commander has taken it into his head that the officers of all the companies are to practise sabre-cutting at a dummy. He has aroused a fearful animosity against himself in the 9th Company. Epifanov was arrested for having neglected to sharpen his sabre. But what are you frightened of, Lbov? He isn't dangerous, and you must teach yourself to make friends with these noble animals. It may, you know, some day fall to your lot to be Adjutant; but then, I suppose, you will sit your horse as securely as a roast sparrow on a dish."

"*Retro, Satanas!*" cried Lbov, who had some difficulty in protecting himself against the horse's froth-covered muzzle. "You've heard, I suppose, what happened to an Adjutant of the 4th Regiment who bought himself a circus-horse? At the review itself, right before the eyes of the inspecting General, the well-trained beast began to exhibit its proficiency in the 'Spanish walk.' You know, I suppose, what that is? At every step the horse's legs are swung high in the air from one side to the other. At last, both horse and rider alighted in the thick of the company. Shrieks, oaths, universal confusion, and a General, half-dead with rage, who at last, by a supreme effort, managed to hiss out: 'Lieutenant and Adjutant, for this exhibition of your skill in riding you have twenty-one days' arrest. March!'"

"What rot!" interrupted Viätkin in an indignant tone. "I say, Biek, the news of the sabre-cutting was by no means a surprise to us. It means that we do not get any free time at all. Turn round and see what an abortion some one brought here yesterday."

He concluded his sentence by a significant gesture towards the middle of the parade-ground, where a monstrously ugly figure of raw clay, lacking both arms and legs, had been erected.

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[2] One of Russia's bravest and greatest generals in the war with Napoleon, 1812.

"Ha! look there – already. Well, have you tried it?" asked Biek, his interest excited. "Have you had a go at it yet, Romashov?"

"Not yet."

"Don't you think I've something better to do than occupy myself with rubbish of that sort?" exclaimed Viätkin angrily. "When am I to find time for that? From nine in the morning to six at night I have to be here, there, and everywhere, and hardly manage to get a bite or sup. Besides, thank God! I've still my wits about me."

"What silly talk! An officer ought to be able to handle his sabre."

"Why? if I may ask. You surely know that in warfare, with the firearms now in use, one never gets within a range of a hundred paces of the enemy. What the devil's the use of a sabre to me? I'm not a cavalryman. When it comes to the point, I shall seize hold of a rifle and – bang! So the matter's simple enough. People may say what they please; the bullet is, after all, the safest."

"Possibly so; but, even in time of peace, there are still many occasions when the sabre may come in useful – for instance, if one is attacked in street riots, tumults, etc."

"And you think I should condescend to exchange cuts with the tag-rag of the streets? No, thank you, my good friend. In such a case I prefer to give the command, 'Aim, fire' – and all's said and done."

Biek-Agamalov's face darkened.

"You are talking nonsense, Pavel Pavlich. Now answer me this: Suppose, when you are taking a walk, or are at a theatre or restaurant, some coxcomb insults you or a civilian boxes your ears. What will you do then?"

Viätkin shrugged his shoulders and protruded his under lip contemptuously.

"In the first place, that kind of man only attacks those who show that they are afraid of him, and, in the second, I have my – revolver."

"But suppose the revolver were left at home?" remarked Lbov.

"Then, naturally, I should have to go home and fetch it. What stupid questions! You seem to have clean forgotten the incident of a certain cornet who was insulted at a music-hall by two civilians. He drove home for his revolver, returned to the music-hall, and cheerfully shot down the pair who had insulted him – simple enough."

Biek-Agamalov made an indignant gesture. "We know – we have heard all that, but in telling the story you forget that the cornet in question was convicted of deliberate murder. Truly a very pretty business. If I had found myself in a similar situation, I should have – "

He did not finish his sentence, but the little, well-formed hand in which he held the reins was clenched so hard that it trembled. Lbov was seized with one of his usual paroxysms of laughter.

"Ah! you're at it again," Viätkin remarked severely.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but I really couldn't – ha, ha, ha! I happened to think of a tragi-comic scene that was enacted in the 17th Regiment. Sub-Ensign Krause on one occasion had a row with some one in an aristocratic club. The steward, to prevent further mischief, seized him so violently by the shoulder-knot that the latter was torn off, whereupon Krause drew his revolver and put a bullet through the steward's skull. A little lawyer who incautiously mixed himself up in the game shared the same fate. The rest of the party rushed out of the room like so many frightened hens. But Krause quietly proceeded to the camp, and was then challenged by the sentry. 'Who goes there?' shouted the sentry. 'Sub-Ensign Krause, who is coming to die by the colours of his regiment'; whereupon he walked straight up to the colours, laid himself down on the ground, and fired a bullet through his left arm. The court afterwards acquitted him."

"That was a fine fellow," exclaimed Biek-Agamalov.

Then began the young officers' usual favourite conversation on duels, fights, and other sanguinary scenes, whereupon it was stated with great satisfaction that such transgressions of law and municipal order always went unpunished. Then, for instance, a story was told about how a drunken, beardless cornet had drawn his sword at random on a small crowd of Jews who were returning from

keeping the Passover; how a sub-lieutenant in the infantry had, at a dancing-hall, stabbed to death an undergraduate who happened to elbow him at the buffet, how an officer at St. Petersburg or Moscow shot down like a dog a civilian who dared to make the impertinent observation that decent people were not in the habit of accosting ladies with whom they are not acquainted.

Romashov, who, up to now, had been a silent listener to these piquant stories, now joined in the conversation; but he did so with every sign of reluctance and embarrassment. He cleared his throat, slowly adjusted his eyeglass, though that was not absolutely necessary then, and finally, in an uncertain voice, spoke as follows —

"Gentlemen, allow me to submit to you this question: In a dispute of that sort it might happen, you know, that the civilian chanced to be a respectable man, even perhaps a person of noble birth. Might it not, in that case, be more correct to demand of him an explanation or satisfaction? We should both belong to the cultured class, so to speak."

"You're talking nonsense, Romashov," interrupted Viätkin. "If you want satisfaction from such scum you'll most certainly get the following answer, which is little gratifying: 'Ah, well, my good sir, I do not give satisfaction. That is contrary to my principles. I loathe duels and bloodshed – and besides, you can have recourse, you know, to the Justice of the Peace, in the event of your feeling yourself wronged.' And then, for the whole of your life, you must carry the delightful recollection of an unavenged box on the ears from a civilian."

Biek-Agamalov smiled in approbation, and with more than his usual generosity showed his whole row of gleaming white teeth. "Hark you, Viätkin, you ought really to take some interest in this sabre-cutting. With us at our home in the Caucasus we practise it from childhood – on bundles of wattles, on water-spouts, the bodies of sheep."

"And men's bodies," remarked Lbov.

"And on men's bodies," repeated Agamalov with unruffled calm. "And such strokes, too! In a twinkling they cleave a fellow from his shoulder to the hip."

"Biek, can you perform a test of strength like that?"

Biek-Agamalov sighed regretfully.

"No, alas! A sheep, or a calf; I can say I could cleave to the neck by a single stroke, but to cut a full-grown man down to the waist is beyond my power. To my father it would be a trifle."

"Come, gentlemen, and let us try our strength and sabres on that scarecrow," said Lbov, in a determined tone and with flashing eyes. "Biek, my dear boy, come with us."

The officers went up to the clay figure that had been erected a little way off. Viätkin was the first to attack it. After endeavouring to impart to his innocent, prosaic face an expression of wild-beast ferocity, he struck the clay man with all his might and with an unnecessarily big flourish of his sabre. At the same time he uttered the characteristic sound "Khryass!" which a butcher makes when he is cutting up beef. The weapon entered about a quarter of an inch into the clay, and Viätkin had some trouble to extricate his brave sabre.

"Wretchedly done," exclaimed Agamalov, shaking his head. "Now, Romashov, it's your turn."

Romashov drew his sabre from its sheath, and adjusted his eyeglass with a hesitating movement. He was of medium height, lean, and fairly strong in proportion to his build, but through constitutional timidity and lack of interest not much accustomed to handling the weapon. Even as a pupil at the Military Academy he was a bad swordsman, and after a year and a half's service in the regiment he had almost completely forgotten the art.

He raised his sabre high above his head, but stretched out, simultaneously and instinctively, his left arm and hand.

"Mind your hand!" shouted Agamalov.

But it was too late then. The point of the sabre only made a slight scratch on the clay, and Romashov, to his astonishment, who had mis-reckoned on a strong resistance to the steel entering the

clay, lost his balance and stumbled forward, whereupon the blade of the sabre caught his outstretched hand and tore off a portion of skin at the lower part of his little finger, so that the blood oozed.

"There! See what you've done!" cried Biek angrily as he dismounted from his charger. "How can any one handle a sabre so badly? You very nearly cut off your hand, you know. Well, that wound is a mere trifle, but you'd better bind it up with your handkerchief. Ensign, hold my horse. And now, gentlemen, bear this in mind. The force or effect of a stroke is not generated either in the shoulder or the elbow, but *here*, in the wrist." He made, as quick as lightning, a few rotary movements of his right hand, whereupon the point of his sabre described a scintillating circle above his head. "Now look, I put my left hand behind my back. When the stroke itself is to be delivered it must not be done by a violent and clumsily directed blow, but by a vigorous cut, in which the arm and sabre are jerked slightly backwards. Do you understand? Moreover, it is absolutely necessary that the plane of the sabre exactly coincides with the direction of the stroke. Look, here goes!"

Biek took two steps backwards from the manikin, to which he seemed, as it were, to fasten himself tightly by a sharp, penetrating glance. Suddenly the sabre flashed in the air, and a fearful stroke, delivered with a rapidity that the eye could not follow, struck like lightning the clay figure, the upper part of which rolled, softly but heavily, down to the ground. The cut made by the sabre was as smooth and even as if it had been polished.

"The deuce, that was something like a cut!" cried the enthusiastic Lbov in wild delight. "Biek, my dear fellow, of your charity do that over again."

"Yes, do, Biek," chimed in Viätkin.

But Agamalov, who was evidently afraid of destroying the effect he had produced, smiled as he replaced the sabre in its scabbard. He breathed heavily, and at that moment, by his bloodthirsty, wildly staring eyes, his hawk's nose, and set mouth, he put one in mind of a proud, cruel, malignant bird of prey.

"That was really nothing remarkable," he exclaimed in a tone of assumed contempt. "At home in the Caucasus my old father, although he is over sixty-six, could cut off a horse's head in a trice. You see, my children, everything can be acquired by practice and perseverance. At my home we practise on bundles of fagots tightly twisted together, or we try to cut through a water-spout without the least splash being noticeable. Well, Lbov, it's your turn now."

At that very moment, however, Bobuilev, the "non-com.," rushed up to Viätkin, with terror depicted on every feature.

"Your Honour! The Commander of the regiment is here."

"Attention!" cried Captain Sliva's sharp voice from the other side of the parade-ground. The officers hastily made their way to their respective detachments.

A large open carriage slowly approached the avenue and stopped at the parade-ground. Out of it stepped the Commander with great trouble and agony amidst a loud moaning and groaning from the side of the poor carriage. The Commander was followed by his Adjutant, Staff-Captain Federovski, a tall, slim officer of smart appearance.

"Good day, 7th Company," was his greeting in a careless, indistinct voice. An ear-splitting chorus of soldiers, dispersed over the whole extent of the ground, replied instantly: "God preserve your Excellency!"

The officers touched their caps.

"Proceed with the drill," ordered the Commander, as he went up to the nearest platoon.

Colonel Shulgovich was evidently not in a good humour. He wandered about the platoons, growling and swearing, all the while repeatedly trying to worry the life out of the unhappy recruits by catch-questions from the "Military Regulations." Time after time he was heard to reel out the most awful strings of insults and threats, and in this he displayed an inventive power and mastery that could hardly be surpassed. The soldiers stood before him, transfixed with terror, stiff, motionless, scarcely daring to breathe, and, as it were, hypnotized by the incessant, steadfast glances, as hard

as marble, from those senile, colourless, severe eyes. Colonel Shulgovich, although much troubled with fatness and advanced in years, nevertheless still contrived to carry his huge, imposing figure. His broad, fleshy face, with its bloated cheeks and deeply receding forehead, was surrounded below by a thick, silvery, pointed beard, whereby the great head came very closely to resemble an awe-inspiring rhomboid. The eyebrows were grey, bushy, and threatening. He always spoke in a subdued tone, but his powerful voice – to which alone he owed his comparatively rapid promotion – was heard all the same as far as the most distant point of the parade-ground, nay! even out on the highroad.

"Who are you?" asked the Colonel, suddenly halting in front of a young soldier named Sharafutdinov, who was on sentry duty near the gymnastic apparatus.

"Recruit in the 6th Company, Sharafutdinov, your Excellency," the Tartar answered in a strained and hoarse voice.

"Fool! I mean, of course, what post are you supposed to occupy?"

The soldier, who was frightened by his Commander's angry tone, was silent: he could only produce one or two nervous twitchings of the eyebrows.

"Well?" Shulgovich raised his voice.

"I – am – standing – on guard," the Tartar at last spluttered out, chancing it. "I cannot – understand, your Excellency," he went on to say, but he relapsed into silence again, and stood motionless.

The Colonel's face assumed a dark brick colour, a shade with a touch of blue about it, and his bushy eyebrows began to pucker in an alarming way. Beside himself with fury, he turned round and said in a sharp tone —

"Who is the youngest officer here?"

Romashov stepped forward and touched his cap.

"I am, Colonel."

"Ha – Sub-lieutenant Romashov, you evidently train your men well. Stand at attention and stretch your legs," bawled Shulgovich suddenly, his eyes rolling. "Don't you know how to stand in the presence of your commanding officer? Captain Sliva, I beg to inform you that your subaltern officer has been lacking in the respect due to his chief. And you, you miserable cur," he now turned towards the unhappy Sharafutdinov, "tell me the name of your Commander."

"I don't know," replied Sharafutdinov quickly, but in a firm tone in which, nevertheless, a melancholy resignation might be detected.

"Oh, *I* ask you the name of your Colonel. Do you know who I am? I – I – I!" and Shulgovich drummed with the flat of his hand several times on his broad chest.

"I don't know."

The Colonel delivered himself of a string of about twenty words of cynical abuse. "Captain Sliva, I order you at once to exhibit this son of a sea-cook, so that all may see him, with rifle and heavy accoutrements, and let him stand there till he rots. And as for you, Sub-lieutenant, I know well enough that loose women and flirtation interest you more than the service does. In waltzing and reading Paul de Kock you're said to be an authority, but as to performing your duties, instructing your men – that, of course, is beneath your dignity. Just look at this creature" (he gave Sharafutdinov a sound slap on the mouth) – "is this a Russian soldier? No, he's a brute beast, who does not even recognize his own commanding officer. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Romashov stared speechlessly at his chief's red and rage-distorted countenance. He felt his heart threatening to burst with shame and indignation. Suddenly, almost unconsciously, he burst out in a hollow voice —

"Colonel, this fellow is a Tartar and does not understand a word of our language, and besides…"

But he did not finish his sentence. Shulgovich's features had that very instant undergone a ghastly change. His whole countenance was as white as a corpse's, his withered cheeks were transfused with sharp, nervous puckers, and his eyes assumed a terrible expression.

"Wh-at!" roared he in a voice so unnatural and awe-inspiring that a little crowd of Jew boys, who, some distance from the causeway, were sitting on the fence on which they had swarmed, were scattered like sparrows – "you answer back? Silence! A raw young ensign permits himself to – Lieutenant Federovski, enter in my day-book that I have ordered Sub-lieutenant Romashov four days' arrest in his room for breach of discipline. And Captain Sliva is to be severely rebuked for neglecting to instil into his junior officers 'a true military spirit.'"

The Adjutant saluted respectfully without any sign of fear. Captain Sliva stood the whole time bending slightly forward, with his hand to his cap, and quivering with emotion, though without altering a feature of his wooden face.

"I cannot help being surprised at you, Captain Sliva," again grunted Shulgovich, who had now to some extent regained his self-control. "How is it possible that you, who are one of the best officers in the regiment, and, moreover, old in the service, can let your youngsters run so wild? They want breaking in. It is no use to treat them like young ladies and being afraid of hurting them."

With these words he turned his back on the Captain, and, followed by the Adjutant, proceeded to the carriage awaiting him. Whilst he was getting into the carriage, and till the latter had turned round behind the corner of the regimental school, a dull, painful silence reigned in the parade-ground.

"Ah! you dear old ducky," exclaimed Captain Sliva in a dry tone and with deep contempt, when the officers had, some minutes later, separated. "Now, gentlemen, I suppose I, too, ought to say a couple of loving words to you. Learn to stand at attention and hold your jaw even if the sky falls – etc. To-day I've had a wigging for you before the whole of my company. Who saddled me with you? Who asked for your services? Not I, at any rate. You are, for me and my company, about as necessary as a fifth leg is to a dog. Go to the deuce, and return to your feeding-bottle."

He finished his bitter lecture with a weary, contemptuous movement of his hand, and dragged himself slowly away in the direction of his dark, dirty, cheerless bachelor quarters. Romashov cast a long glance at him, and gazing at the tall, thin figure, already bent with age, as well as by the affront just endured, he felt a deep pity for this lonely, embittered man whom nobody loved, who had only two interests in the whole world – correct "dressing" of the 6th Company when marching at a review, and the dear little schnapps bottle which was his trusty and sole companion till bedtime.

And whereas Romashov also had the absurd, silly habit, which is often peculiar to young people, viz. in his introspection to think of himself as a third party, and then weave his noble personality into a sentimental and stilted phrase from novelettes, our soft-hearted lieutenant now expressed his opinion of himself in the following touching manner —

"And over his kindly, expressive eyes fell the shadow of grief."

II

THE soldiers marched home to their quarters in platoon order. The square was deserted. Romashov stood hesitating for a moment at the causeway. It was not the first time during the year and a half he had been in the service he had experienced that painful feeling of loneliness, of being lost among strangers either hostile or indifferent, or that distressful hesitation as to where one shall spend the evening. To go home or spend the evening at the officers' mess was equally distasteful to him. At the latter place, at that time of day, there was hardly a soul, at most a couple of ensigns who, whilst they drank ale and smoked to excess and indulged in as many oaths and unseemly words as possible, played pyramids in the wretched little narrow billiard-room; in addition to all this, the horrible smell of food pervading all the rooms.

"I shall go down to the railway-station," said Romashov at last. "That will be something to do."

In the poor little town, the population of which mainly consisted of Jews, the only decent restaurant was that at the railway-station. There were certainly two clubs – one for officers, the other for the civilian "big-wigs" of the community. They were both, however, in a sorry plight, and on these grounds the railway restaurant had become the only place where the inhabitants assembled to shake off the dust of everyday life, and to get a drink or a game at cards. Even the ladies of the place accompanied their male protectors there, chiefly, however, to witness the arrival of the trains and scrutinize the passengers, which always offered a little change in the dreary monotony of provincial life.

Romashov liked to go down to the railway-station of an evening at the time when the express arrived, which made its last stop before reaching the Prussian frontier. With a curious feeling of excitement and tension, he awaited the moment when the train flashed round a sharp curve of the line, the locomotive's fiery, threatening eye grew rapidly in size and intensity, and, at the next second, thundered past him a whole row of palatial carriages. "Like a monstrously huge giant that suddenly checks himself in the middle of a furious leap," he thought, the train came to an abrupt stop before the platform. From the dazzling, illuminated carriages, that resembled a fairy palace, stepped beautiful and elegant ladies in wonderful hats, gentlemen dressed according to the latest Paris fashion, who, in perfect French or German, greeted one another with compliments or pointed witticisms. None of the passengers took the slightest notice of Romashov, who saw in them a striking little sample of that envied and unattainable world where life is a single, uninterrupted, triumphal feast.

After an interval of eight minutes a bell would ring, the engine would whistle, and the *train de luxe* would flit away into the darkness. The station would be soon deserted after this, and the lights lowered in the buffet and on the platform, where Romashov would remain gazing with melancholy eyes, after the lurid gleam of the red lamp of the rear coach, until it disappeared in the gloom like an extinguished spark.

"I shall go to the station for a while," Romashov repeated to himself once more, but when he cast a glance at his big, clumsy goloshes, bespattered with clay and filth, he experienced a keen sense of shame. All the other officers in the regiment wore the same kind of goloshes. Then he noticed the worn buttonholes of his shabby cloak, its many stains, and the fearfully torn lower border that almost degenerated into a sort of fringe at the knees, and he sighed. One day in the previous week he had, as usual, been promenading the platform, looking with curiosity at the express train that had just arrived, when he noticed a tall, extraordinarily handsome lady standing at the open door of a first-class carriage. She was bare-headed, and Romashov managed to distinguish a little, straight, piquant nose, two charming, pouting lips, and a splendid, gleaming black head of hair which, parted in the middle of her forehead, stole down to her coquettish little ears. Behind her, and looking over her shoulder, stood a gigantic young man in a light suit, with a scornful look, and moustaches after the style affected by Kaiser Wilhelm. In fact, he bore a certain resemblance to Wilhelm. The lady

looked at Romashov, it seemed to him with an expression of interest, and he said to himself: "The fair unknown's eyes rested with pleasure on the young warrior's tall, well-formed figure." But when, after walking on a few steps, he turned round to catch the lady's eyes again, he saw that both she and her companion were looking after him and laughing. In that moment he saw himself from outside, as it were – his awful goloshes, his cloak, pale face, stiff, angular figure – and experienced a feeling of shame and indignation at the thought of the bombastic, romantic phrase he had just applied to himself. Ah! even at this moment, when he was walking along the road in the gloomy spring evening, he flushed at that torturing recollection.

"No, I shall not go to the station," he whispered to himself with bitter hopelessness. "I'll take a little stroll and then go straight home."

It was in the beginning of April. The dusk was deepening into night. The poplars that bordered the road, the small white houses with their red-tiled roofs, the few wanderers one met in the street at this hour – all grew darker, lost colour and perspective. All objects were changed into black shadow, the lines of which, however, still showed distinctly against the dark sky. Far away westwards, outside the town, the sunset still gleamed fiery red. Vast dark-blue clouds melted slowly down into a glowing crater of streaming, flaming gold, and then assumed a blood-red hue with rays of violet and amber. But above the volcano, like a dome of varying green, turquoise and beryl, arose the boundless sky of a luminous spring night.

Romashov looked steadily at this enchanting picture whilst he slowly and laboriously dragged himself and his goloshes along the causeway. As he always did, even from childhood, he even now indulged in fancies of a mysterious, marvellous world that waited for and beckoned to him in the far distance, beyond the sunset. Just there – there behind the clouds and the horizon – is hidden a wonderfully beautiful city lighted up by the beams of a sun invisible from here, and protected against our eyes by heavy, inexorable, threatening clouds. There the human eye is blinded by streets paved with gold; there, to a dazzling height, the dome-capped towers rise above the purple-hued roofs, where the palace windows shimmer in the sun like innumerable gems, where countless flags and banners resplendent with colour sway in the breeze. And in this fairy city throng bands of rejoicing people, whose whole life is nothing but an endless, intoxicating feast, a chord of harmony and bliss vibrating for ever and ever. In paradisaical parks and gardens, amidst fountains and flowers, stroll godlike men and women fair as the day, who have never yet known an unfulfilled desire, who have never yet experienced sorrow and struggle and shame.

Romashov suddenly called to mind the painful scene in the parade-ground, the Commander's coarse invectives and that outrageous insult in the presence of his comrades and subordinates. Ah! what affected him most bitterly of all was that a person had railed at him before the soldiers in the same rough and ruthless way as he himself, alas! had only too often done to his subordinates. This he felt almost as a degradation, nay, even as a debasement of his dignity as a human being.

Then awoke within him, exactly as was the case in his early youth – alas! in many respects he still much resembled a big child – feelings at once revengeful, fantastic, and intoxicating. "Stuff and nonsense!" he shouted out to himself. "All my life is before me." And, as it were, in keeping with his thoughts, he took firmer strides, and breathed more deeply. "To-morrow to spite them all I shall rise with the sun, stick to my books, and force an entrance into the Military Academy. Hard work? I can work hard if I like. I must take myself in hand, that is all. I'll read and cram like fury, early and late, and then, some fine day, to every one's astonishment, I shall pass a brilliant examination. And then, of course, every one will say: 'This was nothing unexpected, we might have foretold that long ago. Such an energetic, talented young man!'"

And our Romashov already saw himself in his mind's eye with a snug Staff appointment and unlimited possibilities in the future. His name stood engraved on the golden tablet of the Military Academy. The professors had predicted a brilliant career for him, tried to retain him as a lecturer at the Academy, etc. etc. – but in vain. All his tastes were for the practical side, for troop service. He

had also first to perform his duties as company officer, and as a matter of course – yes, *as a matter of course*– in his old regiment. He would, therefore, have to make another appearance here – in this disgusting little out-of-the-way hole – as a Staff officer uncommonly learned and all-accomplished, in every respect unsurpassable, well-bred and elegant, inexorably severe to himself, but benevolently condescending towards others, a pattern for all, envied by all, etc. etc. He had seen at the manœuvres in the previous year a similar prodigy, who stood millions of miles above the rest of mankind, and who, therefore, kept himself far apart from his comrades at the officers' mess. Cards, dice, heavy drinking and noisy buffoonery were not in his line; he had higher views. Besides, he had only honoured with a short visit that miserable place, which for him was only a stage, a step-ladder on the road to honour – and decorations.

And Romashov pursued his fancies. The grand manœuvres have begun, and the battalion is busy. Colonel Shulgovich, who never managed to make out the strategical or tactical situation, gets more and more muddled in his orders, commands and countermands, marches his men aimlessly here and there, and has already got two orderlies at him, bringing severe reprimands from the Commander of the corps. "Look here, Captain," says Shulgovich, turning to his former sub-lieutenant, "help me out of this. We are old and good friends, you know – well, we did have a little difference on one occasion. Now tell me what I ought to do." His face is red with anxiety and vexation; but Romashov sits straight in the saddle, salutes stiffly, and in a respectful but freezing tone replies: "Pardon, Colonel. *Your* duty is to advance your regiment in accordance with the Commander's order; *mine* is only to receive your instructions and to carry them out to the best of my ability." In the same moment a third orderly from the Commander approaches at a furious gallop.

Romashov, the brilliant Staff officer, rises higher and higher towards the pinnacles of power and glory. A dangerous strike has taken place at a steel manufactory. Romashov's company is charged with the difficult and hazardous task of restoring peace and order amongst the rioters. Night and gloom, incendiarism, a flaming sea of fire, an innumerable, hooting, bloodthirsty mob, a shower of stones. A stately young officer steps in front of the company, his name is Romashov. "Brothers," cries he, in a strong but melodious voice, "for the third and last time I beseech you to disperse, otherwise – I shall fire." Wild shouts, derisive laughter, whistling. A stone hits Romashov on the shoulder, but his frank, handsome countenance maintains its unalterable calm. Slowly he turns towards his soldiers, whose eyes scintillate with rage at the insolent outrage that some one had dared to commit on their idolized Captain. A few brief, energetic words of command are heard, "Line and aim – fire!" A crashing report of rifles, immediately followed by a roar of rage and despair from the crowd. A few score dead and wounded lie where they have fallen; the rest flee in disorder or beg for mercy and are taken prisoners. The riot is quelled, and Romashov awaits a gracious token of the Tsar's gratitude and favour, together with a special reward for the heroism he displayed.

Then comes the longed-for war. Nay, even before the war he is sent by the War Office to Germany as a spy on the enemy's military power near the frontier. Perfectly familiar with the German language, he enters upon his hazardous career. How delightful is such an adventure to a brave and patriotic man! Absolutely alone, with a German passport in his pocket and a street organ on his back, he wanders from town to town, from village to village, grinds out tunes, collects coppers, plays the part of a simple lout, and meanwhile obtains, in all secrecy, plans and sketches of fortresses, stores, barracks, camps, etc., etc. Foes and perils lie in wait for him every minute. His own Government has left him helpless and unprotected. He is virtually an outlaw. If he succeeds in his purpose, honours and rewards of all kinds await him. Should he be unmasked, he will be condemned straight off to be shot or hanged. He sees himself standing in the dark and gloomy trench, confronted by his executioners. Out of compassion they fasten a white cloth before his eyes; but he tears it away and throws it to the ground with the proud words, "Do you not think an officer can face death?" An old Colonel replies, in a quivering voice: "Listen, my young friend. I have a son of the same age as you. I will spare you. Tell us your name – tell us, at any rate, your nationality, and the death sentence will be commuted to

imprisonment." "I thank you, Colonel; but it is useless. Do your duty." Then he turns to the soldiers, and says to them in a firm voice in German: "Comrades, there is only one favour I would crave: spare my face, aim at my heart." The officer in command, deeply moved, raises his white pocket-handkerchief – a crashing report – and Romashov's story is ended.

This picture made such a lively impression on his imagination that Romashov, who was already very excited and striding along the road, suddenly stopped short, trembling all over. His heart beat violently, and he clenched his hands convulsively. He gained, however, command over himself immediately, and smiling compassionately at himself, he continued on his way in the darkness.

But it was not long before he began to conjure up fresh pictures in his imagination. The cruel war with Prussia and Austria, long expected and prepared for, had come. An enormous battlefield, corpses everywhere, havoc, annihilation, blood, and death. It was the chief battle, on the issue of which the whole war depended. The decisive moment had arrived. The last reserves had been brought up, and one was waiting anxiously for the Russian flanking column to arrive in time to attack the enemy in the rear. At any cost the enemy's frantic attack must be met without flinching. The most important and threatened position on the field was occupied by the Kerenski regiment, which was being decimated by the concentrated fire of the enemy. The soldiers fight like lions without yielding an inch, although the whole line is being mowed down by a murderous fire of shells. Every one feels that he is passing through an historical moment. A few more seconds of heroic endurance and victory will be snatched out of the enemy's hands. But Colonel Shulgovich wavers. He is a brave man – that must be admitted – but the perils of a fight like this are too much for his nerves. He turns pale and trembles. The next moment he signals to the bugler to sound the retreat, and the latter has already put the bugle to his lips, when, that very moment, Colonel Romashov, chief of the Staff, comes dashing from behind the hill on his foaming Arab steed. "Colonel, we dare not retreat. The fate of Russia will be decided here." Shulgovich begins blustering. "Colonel Romashov, it is I who am in command and must answer to God and the Tsar. The regiment must retire – blow the bugle." But Romashov snatches the bugle from the bugler's hand and hurls it to the ground. "Forward, my children!" he shouts; "the eyes of your Emperor and your fellow-countrymen are fixed on you." "Hurrah!" With a deafening shout of joy the soldiers, led by Romashov, rush at the foe. Everything disappears in a chasm of fire and smoke. The enemy wavers, and soon his lines are broken; but behind him gleam the Russian bayonets. "The victory is ours! Hurrah, comrades" —

Romashov, who no longer walked but ran, gesticulating wildly, at last stopped and gradually became himself again. It seemed to him as if some one with fingers cold as ice had suddenly passed them over his back, arms, and legs, his hair bristled, and his strong excitement had brought tears to his eyes. He had no notion how he suddenly found himself near his quarters, and, as he recovered from his mad fancies, he gazed with astonishment at the street door he knew so well, at the neglected fruit-garden within which stood the little whitewashed wing where he lodged.

"How does all this nonsense get into my head?" said he, with a sense of shame and a shrug of his shoulders in self-contempt.

III

WHEN Romashov reached his room he threw himself, just as he was, with cap and sabre, on his bed, and for a long time he lay there motionless, staring up at the ceiling. His head burned, his back ached; and he suffered from a vacuum within him as profound as if his mind was incapable of harbouring a feeling, a memory, or a thought. He felt neither irritation nor sadness, but he was sensible of a suffocating weight on his heart, of darkness and indifference.

The shades of a balmy April night fell. He heard his servant quietly occupied with some metal object in the hall.

"Curiously enough," said he to himself, "I have read somewhere or other that one cannot live a single second without thinking. But here I lie and think about absolutely nothing. Isn't that so? Perhaps it is just this: I am thinking that *I am thinking about nothing*. It even seems as if a tiny wheel in my brain is in motion. And see here a new reflection, an objective introspection – I am also thinking of – "

He lay so long and tortured himself with such forced mental images that returned in an eternal circle that it finally became physically repulsive to him. It was just as if a great loathsome spider, from which he could not extricate himself, was softly groping about *under his brain*. At last he raised his head from the pillows and called out —

"Hainán."

At that very moment was heard a tremendous crash of something falling and rolling on the floor. It was probably the funnel belonging to the samovar which had dropped. The door was opened hastily and shut again with a loud bang. The servant burst into the room, making as much noise in opening and shutting the door as if we were running away from some one.

"It is I, your Honour," shrieked Hainán in a fear-stricken voice.

"Has there been any message from Lieutenant Nikoläiev?"

"No, your Excellency," replied Hainán in the same shrieking tone.

Between the officer and his servant there existed a certain simple, sincere, affectionately familiar relationship. When the question only required the usual stereotyped, official answer, e.g. "Yes, your Excellency," "No, your Excellency," etc., then Hainán shrieked the words in the same wooden, soulless, and unnatural way as soldiers always do in the case of their officers, and which, from their first days in the recruit school, becomes ineradicably ingrained in them as long as they live.

Hainán was by birth a Circassian, and by religion an idolater. This latter circumstance gave great satisfaction to Romashov, because among the young officers of the regiment the silly and boyish custom prevailed of training their respective servants to be something unique, or of teaching them certain semi-idiotic answers and phrases.

For instance, when his friends paid him a visit, Viätkin used to say to his orderly, a Moldavian, "Busioskul, have we any champagne in the cellar?" And Busioskul would answer with imperturbable gravity, "No, your Excellency. Last night you were pleased to drink up the last dozen." Another officer, Sub-lieutenant Epifanov, amused himself by putting to his servant learned and difficult questions which he himself could hardly answer. "Listen, my friend, what are your views on the restoration of the monarchy in France at the present day?" The servant answers, "Your Honour, it will, I think, succeed." Lieutenant Bobetinski had written down a whole catechism for his flunkey, and the latter trained genius replied frankly and unhesitatingly to the most absurd questions, e.g. "Why is this important for the third?" Answer – "For the third this is not important." "What is Holy Church's opinion about it?" Answer – "Holy Church has no opinion about it." The same servant would declaim, with the quaintest, semi-tragical gestures, Pinen's rôle in "Boris-Gudunov." It was also usual and much appreciated to make him express himself in French: "Bong shure, musseur. Bon nuite, moussier. Vulley vous du tay, musseur?" etc. etc., in that style. All these follies naturally arose from

the dullness of that little garrison town, and the narrowness of a life from which all interests were excluded except those belonging to the service.

Romashov often talked to Hainán about his gods – about whom the Circassian had only dim and meagre ideas; but it amused him greatly to make Hainán tell the story of how he took the oath of allegiance to the Tsar and Russia – a story well worth hearing now and then. At that time the oath of allegiance was, for the Orthodox, administered by a priest of the Greek Church; for Catholics, by the *ksends*[3]; for Protestants, when a Lutheran pastor was not available, by Staff-Captain Ditz; and for Mohammedans, by Lieutenant Biek-Agamalov. For Hainán and two of his fellow-countrymen a particular and highly original form had been authorized. The three soldiers were ordered to march in turn up to the Adjutant of the regiment, and from the point of the sabre held towards them they were required to bite off, with deep reverence, a piece of bread that had been dipped in salt. Under no circumstances was the bread to be touched by their hands. The symbolism of this curious ceremony was as follows: When the Circassian had eaten his lord's – the Tsar's – bread and salt in this peculiar way he was ruthlessly condemned to die by the sword if he ever failed in loyalty and obedience. Hainán was evidently very proud of having thus taken his oath of allegiance to the Tsar, and he never got tired of relating the circumstance; but as every time he told his story he adorned it with fresh inventions and absurdities, it became at last a veritable Münchausen affair, which was always received with Homeric laughter by Romashov and his guests.

Hainán now thought that his master would start his usual questions about gods and Adjutants, and stood ready to begin with a cunning smile on his face, when Romashov said —

"That will do; you can go."

"Shall I not lay out your Honour's new uniform?" asked the ever-attentive Hainán.

Romashov was silent and pondered. First he would say "Yes," then "No," and again "Yes." At last, after a long, deep sigh, uttered in the descending scale, he replied in a tone of resignation —

"No, Hainán, never mind about that – get the samovar ready and then run off to the mess for my supper."

"I will stay away to-day," whispered he to himself. "It doesn't do to bore people to death by calling on them like that every day. And, besides, it is plain I am not a man people long for."

His resolution to stay at home that evening seemed fixed enough, and yet an inner voice told him that even to-day, as on most other days during the past three months, he would go to the Nikoläievs'. Every time he bade these friends of his good-bye at midnight, he had, with shame and indignation at his own weakness and lack of character, sworn to himself on his honour that he would not pay another call there for two or three weeks. Nay, he had even made up his mind to give up altogether these uncalled-for visits. And all the while he was on his way home, whilst he was undressing, ah! even up to the moment he fell asleep, he believed it would be an easy matter for him to keep his resolution. The night went by, the morning dawned, and the day dragged on slowly and unwillingly, evening came, and once more an irresistible force drew him to this handsome and elegant abode, with its warm, well-lighted, comfortable rooms, where peace, harmony, cheerful and confidential conversation, and, above all, the delightful enchantment of feminine beauty awaited him.

Romashov sat on the edge of his bed. It was already dark, but he could, nevertheless, easily discern the various objects in his room. Oh, how he loathed day by day his mean, gloomy dwelling, with its trumpery, tasteless furniture! His lamp, with its ugly shade that resembled a night-cap, on the inconvenient, rickety writing-table, looked haughtily down on the nerve-torturing alarm-clock and the dirty, vulgar inkstand that had the shape of a badly modelled pug-dog. Over his head something intended to represent a wall decoration – a piece of felt on which had been embroidered a terrible tiger and a still more terrible Arab riding on horseback, armed with a spear. In one corner a tumbledown bookstand, in the other the fantastic silhouette of a hideous violoncello case. Over the only window

[3] Roman Catholic priests are so called in Lithuania and Poland.

the room could boast a curtain of plaited straw rolled up into a tube. Behind the door a clothes-stand concealed by a sheet that had been white in prehistoric times. Every unmarried subaltern officer had the same articles about him, with the exception of the violoncello which Romashov had borrowed from the band attached to the regiment – in which it was completely unnecessary – with the intention of developing on it his musical talent. But as soon as he had tried in vain to teach himself the C major scale, he tired of the thing altogether, and the 'cello had now stood for more than a year, dusty and forgotten, in its dark corner.

More than a year ago Romashov, who had just left the military college, had taken both pride and joy in furnishing his modest lodgings. To have a room of his own, his own things, to choose and buy household furniture according to his own liking, to arrange everything according to his own consummate taste – all that highly flattered the *amour propre* of that young man of two-and-twenty. It seemed only yesterday that he sat on the school form, or marched in rank and file with his comrades off to the general mess-room to eat, at the word of command, his frugal breakfast. To-day he was his own master. And how many hopes and plans sprang into his brain in the course of those never-to-be-forgotten days when he furnished and "adorned" his new home! What a severe programme he composed for his future! The first two years were to be devoted chiefly to a thorough study of classical literature, French and German, and also music. After that, a serious preparation for entering the Staff College was to follow. It was necessary to study sociology and society life, and to be abreast of modern science and literature. Romashov therefore felt himself bound at least to subscribe to a newspaper and to take in a popular monthly magazine. The bookstand was adorned with Wundt's *Psychology*, Lewes's *Physiology*, and Smiles's *Self-Help*, etc., etc.

But for nine long months have the books lain undisturbed on their shelves, forgotten by Hainán, whose business it is to dust them. Heaps of newspapers, not even stripped of their wrappers, lie cast in a pile beneath the writing-table, and the æsthetic magazine to which we just referred has ceased to reach Romashov on account of repeated "irregularities" with regard to the half-yearly payment. Sub-Lieutenant Romashov drinks a good deal of vodka at mess; he has a tedious and loathsome liaison with a married woman belonging to the regiment, whose consumptive and jealous husband he deceives in strict accordance with all the rules of art; he plays *schtoss*,[4] and more and more frequently comes into unpleasant collisions both in the service and also in the circles of his friends and acquaintances.

"Pardon me, your Honour," shouted his servant, entering the room noisily. Then he added in a friendly, simple, good-natured tone: "I forgot to mention that a letter has come from Mrs. Peterson. The orderly who brought it is waiting for an answer."

Romashov frowned, took the letter, tore open a long, slender, rose-coloured envelope, in a corner of which fluttered a dove with a letter in its beak.

"Light the lamp, Hainán," said he to his servant.

> MY DEAR DARLING IRRESISTIBLE LITTLE GEORGI (read Romashov in the sloping, crooked lines he knew so well), – For a whole week you have not been to see me, and yesterday I was so miserable without you that I lay and wept the whole night. Remember that if you fool me or deceive me I shall not survive it. One single drop of poison and I shall be freed from my tortures for ever; but, as for you, conscience shall gnaw you for ever and ever. You must – must come to me to-night at half-past seven. *He* is not at home, he is somewhere – on tactical duty or whatever it is called. Do come! I kiss you a thousand thousand times.
> *Yours always,*
> *Raisa.*
>
> P.S. —

[4] *Schtoss* is a sort of Russian hazard.

Have you forgotten the river fast rushing,
Under the willow-boughs wending its way,
Kisses you gave me, dear, burning and crushing,
When in your strong arms I tremblingly lay?

P.SS. – You must absolutely attend the soirée next Saturday at the officers' mess. I will give you the third quadrille. You understand.

A long way down on the fourth page lay written —

I have kissed here.

This delightful epistle wafted the familiar perfume of Persian lilac, and drops of that essence had, here and there, left yellow stains behind them on the letter, in which the characters had run apart in different directions. This stale scent, combined with the tasteless, absurdly sentimental tone throughout this letter from a little, immoral, red-haired woman, excited in Romashov an intolerable feeling of disgust. With a sort of grim delight he first tore the letter into two parts, laid them carefully together, tore them up again, laid the bits of paper once more together, and tore them again into little bits till his fingers got numb, and then, with clenched teeth and a broad, cynical grin, threw the fragments under his writing-table. At the same time, according to his old habit, he had time to think of himself in the third person —

"And he burst out into a bitter, contemptuous laugh."

A moment later he realized that he would have to go that evening to the Nikoläievs'. "But this is the last time." After he had tried to deceive himself by these words, he felt for once happy and calm.

"Hainán, my clothes."

He made his toilet hastily and impatiently, put on his elegant new tunic, and sprinkled a few drops of eau-de-Cologne on a clean handkerchief; but when he was dressed, and ready to go, he was stopped suddenly by Hainán.

"Your Honour," said the Circassian, in an unusually meek and supplicating tone, as he began to execute a most curious sort of dance before his master. Whilst he was performing a kind of "march on the spot" he lifted his knees right up, one after the other, rocking his shoulders, nodding his head, and making a series of convulsive movements in the air with his arms and fingers. Hainán was in the habit of giving vent to his excited feelings by curious gestures of that sort.

"What do you want now?"

"Your Honour," stammered Hainán, "I want to ask you something; please give me the white gentleman."

"The white gentleman? What white gentleman?"

"The one you ordered me to throw away – the one standing in that corner."

Hainán pointed with his fingers to the stove-corner, where a bust of Pushkin was standing on the floor. This bust, which Romashov had obtained from a wandering pedlar, really did not represent the famous poet, but merely reproduced the forbidding features of an old Jew broker. Badly modelled, so covered with dust and fly dirt as to be unrecognizable, the stone image aroused Romashov's aversion to such an extent that he had at last made up his mind to order Hainán to throw it into the yard.

"What do you want with it?" asked Romashov, laughing. "But take it by all means, take it, I am only too pleased. I don't want it, only I should like to know what you are going to do with it."

Hainán smiled and changed from one foot to the other.

"Well, take him, then; I wish you joy of it. By the way, do you know who it is?"

Hainán smiled in an embarrassed way, and infused still more energy into his caperings.

"No – don't know." Hainán rubbed his lips with his coat sleeve.

"So you don't know. Well, listen. This is Pushkin – Alexander Sergievich Pushkin. Did you understand me? Now repeat – 'Alexander Sergievich – '"

"Besiäev," repeated Hainán in a determined tone.

"Besiäev? Well, call him Besiäev if you like. Now I am off. Should any message come from Mr. and Mrs. Peterson, say I'm not at home, and you don't know where I have gone. Do you understand? But if any one wants me in the way of business connected with the regiment, run down at once for me at Lieutenant Nikoläiev's. You may fetch my supper from the mess and eat it yourself. Good-bye, old fellow."

Romashov gave his servant a friendly smack on his shoulder, which was answered by a broad, happy, familiar smile.

IV

WHEN Romashov reached the yard it was quite dark. He stumbled like a blind man into the street, his huge goloshes sank deep into the thick, stiff mud, and every step he took was accompanied by a smacking noise. Now and again one golosh stuck so fast in the mud of the road that it remained there, and he had all the difficulty in the world, whilst balancing himself wildly on his other foot, to recover his treasure.

The little town seemed to him to be absolutely dead. Not a sound was heard, even the dogs were silent. Here and there a gleam of light streamed from the small, low-pitched, white house, against which the window-sills sharply depicted their shapes in the yellowish-brown mire. From the wet and sticky palings along which Romashov slowly worked his way, from the raw, moist bark of the poplars, from the dirty road itself, there arose a strong, refreshing scent of spring, which aroused a certain unconscious sense of joy and comfort. Nay, even with the tormenting gale which swept violently through the streets seemed mingled a youthful, reawakened desire of life, and the gusts of wind chased one another like boisterous and sportive children in a “merry-go-round.”

When Romashov reached the house where the Nikoläievs dwelt, he stopped, despondent and perplexed. The close, cinnamon-coloured curtains were let down, but behind them one could, nevertheless, distinguish the clear, even glow of a lamp. On one side the curtain curved inwards and formed a long, small chink against the window-sill. Romashov pressed his face cautiously against the window, and hardly dared to breathe for fear of betraying his presence.

He could distinguish Alexandra Petrovna’s head and shoulders. She was sitting in a stooping attitude on that green rep divan that he knew so well. From her bowed head and slight movements he concluded that she was occupied with some needlework. Suddenly she straightened herself up, raised her head, and drew a long breath. Her lips moved.

“What is she saying?” thought Romashov. “And look! now she’s smiling. How strange to see through a window a person talking, and not to be able to catch a word of what she says.”

The smile, however, suddenly disappeared from Alexandra Petrovna’s face; her forehead puckered, and her lips moved rapidly and vehemently. Directly afterwards she smiled again, but wickedly and maliciously, and with her head made a slow gesture of disapproval.

“Perhaps they are talking about me,” thought Romashov, not without a certain disagreeable anxiety; but he knew how something pure, chaste, agreeably soothing and benevolent beamed on him from this young woman who, at that moment, made the same impression on him as a charming canvas, the lovely picture of which reminded him of happy, innocent days of long ago. “Shurochka,” whispered Romashov tenderly.

At that moment Alexandra Petrovna lifted her face from her work and cast a rapid, searching, despondent glance at the window. Romashov thought she was looking him straight in the face. It felt as if a cold hand had seized his heart, and in his fright he hid himself behind a projection of the wall. Again he was irresolute and ill at ease, and he was just about to return home, when, by a violent effort of the will, he overcame his pusillanimity and walked through a little back-door into the kitchen.

The Nikoläievs’ servant relieved him of his muddy goloshes, and wiped down his boots with a kitchen rag. When Romashov pulled out his pocket-handkerchief to remove the mist from his eyeglass he heard Alexandra Petrovna’s musical voice from the drawing-room.

“Stepan, have they brought the orders of the day yet?”

“She said that with an object,” thought Romashov to himself. “She knows well enough that I’m in the habit of coming about this time.”

“No, it is I, Alexandra Petrovna,” he answered aloud, but in an uncertain voice, through the open drawing-room door.

"Oh, it's you, Romashov. Well, come in, come in. What are you doing at the side entrance? Volodya, Romashov is here."

Romashov stepped in, made an awkward bow, and began, so as to hide his embarrassment, to wipe his hands with his handkerchief.

"I am afraid I bore you, Alexandra Petrovna."

He tried to say this in an easy and jocose tone, but the words came out awkwardly, and as it seemed to him, with a forced ring about them.

"What nonsense you talk!" exclaimed Alexandra Petrovna. "Sit down, please, and let us have some tea."

Looking him straight in the face with her clear, piercing eyes, she squeezed as usual his cold fingers with her little soft, warm hand.

Nikoläiev sat with his back to them at the table that was almost hidden by piles of books, drawings, and maps. Before the year was out he had to make another attempt to get admitted to the Staff College, and for many months he had been preparing with unremitting industry for this stiff examination in which he had already twice failed. Staring hard at the open book before him, he stretched his arm over his shoulder to Romashov without turning round, and said, in a calm, husky voice —

"How do you do, Yuri[5] Alexievich? Is there any news? Shurochka, give him some tea. Excuse me, but I am, as you see, hard at work."

"What a fool I am!" cried poor Romashov to himself. "What business had I here?" Then he added out loud: "Bad news. There are ugly reports circulating at mess with regard to Lieutenant-Colonel Liech. He is said to have been as tight as a drum. The resentment in the regiment is widespread, and a very searching inquiry is demanded. Epifanov has been arrested."

"Oh!" remarked Nikoläiev in an absent tone. "But excuse my interruption. You don't say so!"

"I, too, have been rewarded with four days. But that is stale news."

Romashov thought at that moment that his voice sounded peculiar and unnatural, as if he were being throttled. "What a wretched creature I am in their eyes!" thought he, but in the next moment consoled himself by the help of that forced special pleading to which weak and timid persons usually have recourse in similar predicaments. "Such you always are; something goes wrong; you feel confused, embarrassed, and at once you fondly imagine that others notice it, though only you yourself can be clearly conscious of it," etc., etc.

He sat down on a chair near Shurochka, whose quick crochet needle was in full swing again. She never sat idle, and all the table-covers, lamp-shades, and lace curtains were the product of her busy fingers. Romashov cautiously took up the long crochet threads hanging from the ball, and said —

"What do you call this sort of work?"

"Guipure. This is the tenth time you have asked me that."

Shurochka glanced quickly at him, and then let her eyes fall on her work; but before long she looked up again and laughed.

"Now then, now then, Yuri Alexievich, don't sit there pouting. 'Straighten your back!' and 'Head up!' Isn't that how you give your commands?"

But Romashov only sighed and looked out of the corner of his eye at Nikoläiev's brawny neck, the whiteness of which was thrown into strong relief by the grey collar of his old coat.

"By Jove! Vladimir Yefimovich is a lucky dog. Next summer he's going to St. Petersburg, and will rise to the heights of the Academy."

"Oh, that remains to be seen," remarked Shurochka, somewhat tartly, looking in her husband's direction. "He has twice been plucked at his examination, and with rather poor credit to himself has had to return to his regiment. This will be his last chance."

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[5] Yuri = George.

Nikoläiev turned round suddenly; his handsome, soldierly, moustached face flushed deeply, and his big dark eyes glittered with rage.

"Don't talk rubbish, Shurochka. When I say I shall pass my examination, I shall pass it, and that's enough about it." He struck the side of his outstretched hand violently on the table. "You are always croaking. I said I should – "

"Yes, '*I said I should*,'" his wife repeated after him, whilst she struck her knee with her little brown hand. "But it would be far better if you could answer the following question: 'What are the requisites for a good line of battle?' Perhaps you don't know" (she turned with a roguish glance towards Romashov) "that I am considerably better up in tactics than he. Well, Volodya – Staff-General that is to be – answer the question now."

"Look here, Shurochka, stop it," growled Nikoläiev in a bad temper. But suddenly he turned round again on his chair towards his wife, and in his wide-open, handsome, but rather stupid eyes might be read an amusing helplessness, nay, even a certain terror.

"Wait a bit, my little woman, and I will try to remember. 'Good fighting order'? A good fighting order *must* be arranged so that one does not expose oneself too much to the enemy's fire; that one can easily issue orders, that – that – wait a minute."

"That waiting will be costly work for you in the future, I think," said Shurochka, interrupting him, in a serious tone. Then, with head down and her body rocking, she began, like a regular schoolgirl, to rattle off the following lesson without stumbling over a single word —

"'The requisites of "good fighting order" are simplicity, mobility, flexibility, and the ability to accommodate itself to the ground. It ought to be easy to be inspected and led. It must, as far as possible, be out of reach of the enemy's fire, easy to pass from one formation to another, and able to be quickly changed from fighting to marching order.' Done!"

She opened her eyes, took a deep breath, and, as she turned her lively, smiling countenance to Romashov, said —

"Was that all right?"

"What a memory!" exclaimed Nikoläiev enviously, as he once more plunged into his books.

"We study together like two comrades," explained Shurochka. "I could pass this examination at any time. The main thing" – she made an energetic motion in the air with her crochet needle – "the main thing is to work systematically or according to a fixed plan. Our system is entirely my own invention, and I say so with pride. Every day we go through a certain amount of mathematics and the science of war – I may remark, by the way, that artillery is not my *forte*; the formulæ of projectiles are to me specially distasteful – besides a bit out of the Drill and Army Regulations Book. Moreover, every other day we study languages, and on the days we do not study the latter we study history and geography."

"And Russian too?" asked Romashov politely.

"Russian, do you say? Yes, that does not give us much trouble; we have already mastered Groth's *Orthography*, and so far as the essays are concerned, year after year they are after the eternal stereotyped pattern: *Para pacem, para bellum*; characteristics of Onyägin and his epoch, etc., etc."

Suddenly she became silent, and snatched by a quick movement the distracting crochet needle from Romashov's fingers. She evidently wanted to monopolize the whole of his attention to what she now intended to say. After this she began to speak with passionate earnestness of what was at present the goal of all her thoughts and aims.

"Romochka, please, try to understand me. I cannot – cannot stand this any longer. To remain here is to deteriorate. To become a 'lady of the regiment,' to attend your rowdy *soirées*, to talk scandal and intrigue, to get into tempers every day, and wear out one's nerves over the housekeeping, money and carriage bills, to serve in turn, according to precedency, on ladies' committees and benevolent associations, to play whist, to – no, enough of this. You say that our home is comfortable and charming. But just examine this *bourgeois* happiness. These eternal embroideries and laces; these

dreadful clothes which I have altered and modernized God knows how often; this vulgar, 'loud'-coloured sofa rug composed of rags from every spot on earth – all this has been hateful and intolerable to me. Don't you understand, my dear Romochka, that it is society – real society – that I want, with brilliant drawing-rooms, witty conversation, music, flirtation, homage. As you are well aware, our good Volodya is not one to set the Thames on fire, but he is a brave, honourable, and industrious fellow. If he can only gain admission to the Staff College I swear to procure him a brilliant career. I am a good linguist; I can hold my own in any society whatever; I possess – I don't know how to express it – a certain flexibility of mind or spirit that helps me to hold my own, to adapt myself everywhere. Finally, Romochka, look at me, gaze at me carefully. Am I, as a human being, so uninteresting? Am I, as a woman, so devoid of all charms that I deserve to be doomed to stay and be soured in this hateful place, in this awful hole which has no place on the map?"

She suddenly covered her face with her handkerchief, and burst into tears of self-pity and wounded pride.

Nikoläiev sprang from his chair and hastened, troubled and distracted, to his wife; but Shurochka had already succeeded in regaining her self-control and took her handkerchief away from her face. There were no tears in her eyes now, but the glint of wrath and passion had not yet died out of them.

"It is all right, Volodya. Dear, it is nothing." She pushed him nervously away. Immediately afterwards she turned with a little laugh to Romashov, and whilst she was again snatching the thread from him, she said to him coquettishly: "Answer me candidly, you clumsy thing, am I pretty or not? Remember, though, it is the height of impoliteness not to pay a woman the compliment she wants."

"Shurochka, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" exclaimed Nikoläiev reprovingly, from his seat at the writing-table.

Romashov smiled with a martyr's air of resignation. Suddenly he replied, in a melancholy and quavering voice —

"You are very beautiful."

Shurochka looked at him roguishly from her half-closed eyes, and a turbulent curl got loose and fell over her forehead.

"Romochka, how funny you are!" she twittered in a rather thin, girlish voice. The sub-lieutenant blushed and thought according to his wont —

"And his heart was cruelly lacerated."

Nobody said a word. Shurochka went on diligently crocheting. Vladimir Yefimovich, who was bravely struggling with a German translation, now and then mumbled out some German words. One heard the flame softly sputtering and fizzing in the lamp, which displayed a great yellow silk shade in the form of a tent. Romochka had again managed to possess himself of the crochet-cotton, which, almost without thinking about it, he softly and caressingly drew through the young woman's fingers, and it afforded him a delightful pleasure to feel how Shurochka unconsciously resisted his mischievous little pulls. It seemed to him as if mysterious, magnetic currents, now and again, rushed backwards and forwards through the delicate white threads.

Whilst he was steadily gazing at her bent head, he whispered to himself, without moving his lips, as if he were carrying on a tender and impassioned conversation —

"How boldly you said to me, 'Am I pretty?' Ah, you are most beautiful! Here I sit looking at you. What happiness! Now listen. I am going to tell you how you look – how lovely you are. But listen carefully. Thy face is as dark as the night, yet pale. It is a face full of passion. Thy lips are red and warm and good to kiss, and thine eyes surrounded by a light yellowish shadow. When thy glance is directed straight before thee, the white of thine eyes acquires a bluish shade, and amidst it all there beams on me a great dark blue mysteriously gleaming pupil. A brunette thou art not; but thou recallest something of the gipsy. But thy hair is silky and soft, and braided at the back in a knot so neat and simple that one finds a difficulty in refraining from stroking it. You little ethereal creature,

I could lift you like a little child in my arms; but you are supple and strong, your bosom is as firm as a young girl's, and in all thy being there is something quick, passionate, compelling. A good way down on your left ear sits a charming little birthmark that is like the hardly distinguishable scar after a ring has been removed. What charm – "

"Have you read in the newspapers about the duel between two officers?" asked Shurochka suddenly.

Romashov started as he awoke from his dreams, but he found it hard to remove his gaze from her.

"No, I've not read about it, but I have heard talk of it. What about it?"

"As usual, of course, you read nothing. Truly, Yuri Alexeitch, you are deteriorating. In my opinion the proceedings were ridiculous. I quite understand that duels between officers are as necessary as they are proper."

Shurochka pressed her crochet to her bosom with a gesture of conviction.

"But why all this unnecessary and stupid cruelty? Just listen. A lieutenant had insulted another officer. The insult was gross, and the Court of Honour considered a duel necessary. Now, there would have been nothing to say about it, unless the conditions themselves of the duel had been so fixed that the latter resembled an ordinary execution: fifteen paces distance, and the fight to last till one of the duellists was *hors de combat*. This is only on a par with ordinary slaughter, is it not? But hear what followed. On the duelling-ground stood all the officers of the regiment, many of them with ladies; nay, they had even put a photographer behind the bushes! How disgusting! The unfortunate sub-lieutenant or ensign – as Volodya usually says – a man of your youthful age, moreover the party insulted, and not the one who offered the insult – received, after the third shot, a fearful wound in the stomach, and died some hours afterwards in great torture. By his deathbed stood his aged mother and sister, who kept house for him. Now tell me why a duel should be turned into such a disgusting spectacle. Of course the immediate consequence" (Shurochka almost shrieked these words) "was that all those sentimental opponents of duelling – eugh, how I despise these 'liberal' weaklings and poltroons! – at once began making a noise and fuss about 'barbarism,' 'fratricide,' how 'duels are a disgrace to our times,' and more nonsense of that sort."

"Good God! I could never believe that you were so bloodthirsty, Alexandra Petrovna," exclaimed Romashov, interrupting her.

"I am by no means bloodthirsty," replied Shurochka, sharply. "On the contrary, I am very tender-hearted. If a beetle crawls on to my neck I remove it with the greatest caution so as not to inflict any hurt on it – but try and understand me, Romashov. This is my simple process of reasoning: 'Why have we officers?' Answer: 'For the sake of war.' 'What are the most necessary qualities of an officer in time of war?' Answer: 'Courage and a contempt of death.' 'How are these qualities best acquired in time of peace?' Answer: 'By means of duels.' How can that be proved? Duels are not required to be obligatory in the French Army, for a sense of honour is innate in the French officer; he knows what respect is due to himself and to others. Neither is duelling obligatory in the German Army, with its highly developed and inflexible discipline. But with us – us, as long as among our officers are to be found notorious card-sharpers such as, for instance, Artschakovski; or hopeless sots, as our own Nasanski, when, in the officers' mess or on duty, violent scenes are of almost daily occurrence – then, such being the case, duels are both necessary and salutary. An officer must be a pattern of correctness; he is bound to weigh every word he utters. And, moreover, this delicate squeamishness, the fear of a shot! Your vocation is to risk your life – which is precisely the point."

All at once she brought her long speech to a close, and with redoubled energy resumed her work.

"Shurochka, what is 'rival' in German?" asked Nikoläiev, lifting his head from the book.

"Rival?" Shurochka stuck her crochet-needle in her soft locks. "Read out the whole sentence."

"It runs – wait – directly – directly – ah! it runs: 'Our rival abroad.'"

"*Unser ausländischer Nebenbuhler*" translated Shurochka straight off.

"*Unser*," repeated Romashov in a whisper as he gazed dreamily at the flame of the lamp. "When she is moved," thought he, "her words come like a torrent of hail falling on a silver tray. *Unser*– what a funny word! *Unser – unser – unser.*"

"What are you mumbling to yourself about, Romashov?" asked Alexandra Petrovna severely. "Don't dare to sit and build castles in the air whilst I am present."

He smiled at her with a somewhat embarrassed air.

"I was not building castles in the air, but repeating to myself '*Unser – unser.*' Isn't it a funny word?"

"What rubbish you are talking! *Unser.* Why is it funny?"

"You see" (he made a slight pause as if he really intended to think about what he meant to say), "if one repeats the same word for long, and at the same time concentrates on it all his faculty of thought, the word itself suddenly loses all its meaning and becomes – how can I put it?"

"I know, I know!" she interrupted delightedly. "But it is not easy to do it now. When I was a child, now – how we used to love doing it!"

"Yes – yes – it belongs to childhood – yes."

"How well I remember it! I remember the word 'perhaps' particularly struck me. I could sit for a long time with eyes shut, rocking my body to and fro, whilst I was repeatedly saying over and over again, 'Perhaps, perhaps.' And suddenly I quite forgot what the word itself meant. I tried to remember, but it was no use. I saw only a little round, reddish blotch with two tiny tails. Are you attending?" Romashov looked tenderly at her.

"How wonderful that we should think the same thoughts!" he exclaimed in a dreamy tone. "But let us return to our *unser*. Does not this word suggest the idea of something long, thin, lanky, and having a sting – a long, twisting insect, poisonous and repulsive?"

"*Unser*, did you say?" Shurochka lifted up her head, blinked her eyes, and stared obstinately at the darkest corner of the room. She was evidently striving to improve on Romashov's fanciful ideas.

"No, wait. *Unser* is something green and sharp. Well, we'll suppose it is an insect – a grasshopper, for instance – but big, disgusting, and poisonous. But how stupid we are, Romochka!"

"There's another thing I do sometimes, only it was much easier when I was a child," resumed Romashov in a mysterious tone. "I used to take a word and pronounce it slowly, extremely slowly. Every letter was drawn out and emphasized interminably. All of a sudden I was seized by a strangely inexpressible feeling: all – everything near me sank into an abyss, and I alone remained, marvelling that I lived, thought, and spoke."

"I, too, have had a similar sensation," interrupted Shurochka gaily, "yet not exactly the same. Sometimes I made violent efforts to hold my breath all the time I was thinking. 'I am not breathing, and I won't breathe again till, till' – then all at once I felt as if time was running past me. No, time no longer existed; it was as if – oh, I can't explain!"

Romashov gazed into her enthusiastic eyes, and repeated in a low tone, thrilling with happiness —

"No, you can't explain it. It is strange – inexplicable."

Nikoläiev got up from the table where he had been working. His back ached, and his legs had gone dead from long sitting in the same uncomfortable position. The arteries of his strong, muscular body throbbed when, with arms raised high, he stretched himself to his full length.

"Look here, my learned psychologists, or whatever I should call you, it is supper-time."

A cold collation had been laid in the comfortable little dining-room, where, suspended from the ceiling, a china lamp with frosted glass shed its clear light. Nikoläiev never touched spirits, but a little decanter of schnapps had been put on the table for Romashov. Shurochka, contorting her pretty face by a contemptuous grimace, said, in the careless tone she so often adopted —

"Of course, you can't do without that poison?"

Romashov smiled guiltily, and in his confusion the schnapps went the wrong way, and set him coughing.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" scolded his young hostess. "You can't even drink it without choking over it. I can forgive it in your adored Nasanski, who is a notorious drunkard, but for you, a handsome, promising young man, not to be able to sit down to table without vodka, it is really melancholy. But that is Nasanski's doing too!"

Her husband, who was glancing through the regimental orders that had just come in, suddenly called out —

"Just listen! 'Lieutenant Nasanski has received a month's leave from the regiment to attend to his private affairs.' Tut, tut! What does that mean? He has been tippling again? You, Yuri Alexievich, are said, you know, to visit him. Is it a fact that he has begun to drink heavily?"

Romashov looked embarrassed and lowered his gaze.

"No, I have not observed it, but he certainly does drink a little now and again, you know."

"Your Nasanski is offensive to me," remarked Shurochka in a low voice, trembling with suppressed bitterness. "If it were in my power I would have a creature like that shot as if he were a mad dog. Such officers are a disgrace to their regiment."

Almost directly after supper was over, Nikoläiev, who in eating had displayed no less energy than he had just done at his writing-table, began to gape, and at last said quite plainly —

"Do you know, I think I'll just take a little nap. Or if one were to go straight off to the Land of Nod, as they used to express it in our good old novels – "

"A good idea, Vladimir Yefimovich," said Romashov, interrupting him in, as he thought, a careless, dreamy tone, but as he rose from table he thought sadly, "They don't stand on ceremony with me here. Why on earth do I come?"

It seemed to him that it afforded Nikoläiev a particular pleasure to turn him out of the house; but just as he was purposely saying good-bye to his host first, he was already dreaming of the delightful moment when, in taking leave of Shurochka, he would feel at the same time the strong yet caressing pressure of a beloved one's hand. When this longed-for moment at length arrived he found himself in such a state of happiness that he did not hear Shurochka say to him —

"Don't quite forget us. You know you are always welcome. Besides, it is far more healthy for you to spend your evenings with us than to sit drinking with that dreadful Nasanski. Also, don't forget we stand on no ceremony with you."

He heard her last words as it were in a dream, but he did not realize their meaning till he reached the street.

"Yes, that is true indeed; they don't stand on ceremony with me," whispered he to himself with the painful bitterness in which young and conceited persons of his age are so prone to indulge.

V

ROMASHOV was still standing on the doorstep. The night was rather warm, but very dark. He began to grope his way cautiously with his hand on the palings whilst waiting until his eyes got accustomed to the darkness. Suddenly the kitchendoor of Nikoläiev's dwelling was thrown open, and a broad stream of misty yellow light escaped. Heavy steps sounded in the muddy street, the next moment Romashov heard Stepan's, the Nikoläievs' servant's, angry voice —

"He comes here every blessed day, and the deuce knows what he comes for."

Another soldier, whose voice Romashov did not recognize, answered indifferently with a lazy, long-drawn yawn —

"What business can it be of yours, my dear fellow? Good-night, Stepan."

"Good-night to you, Baúlin; look in when you like."

Romashov's hands suddenly clung to the palings. An unendurable feeling of shame made him blush, in spite of the darkness. All his body broke out into a perspiration, and, in his back and the soles of his feet, he felt the sting of a thousand red-hot, pointed nails. "This chapter's closed; even the soldiers laugh at me," thought he with indescribable pain. Directly afterwards it flashed on his mind that that very evening, in many expressions used, in the tones of the replies, in glances exchanged between man and wife, he had seen a number of trifles that he had hitherto not noticed, but which he now thought testified only to contempt of him, and ridicule, impatience and indignation at the persistent visits of that insufferable guest.

"What a disgrace and scandal this is to me!" he whispered without stirring from the spot. "Things have reached such a pitch that it is as much as the Nikoläievs can do to endure my company."

The lights in their drawing-room were now extinguished. "They are in their bedroom now," thought Romashov, and at once he began fancying that Nikoläiev and Shurochka were then talking about him whilst making their toilet for the night with the indifference and absence of bashfulness at each other's presence that is characteristic of married couples. The wife is sitting in her petticoat in front of the mirror, combing her hair. Vladimir Yefimovitch is sitting in his night-shirt at the edge of the bed, and saying in a sleepy but angry tone, whilst flushed with the exertion of taking off his boots: "Hark you, Shurochka, that infernal bore, your dear Romashov, will be the death of me with his insufferable visits. And I really can't understand how you can tolerate him." Then to this frank and candid speech Shurochka replies, without turning round, and with her mouth full of hairpins: "Be good enough to remember, sir, he is not *my* Romochka, but *yours*."

Another five minutes elapsed before Romashov, still tortured by these bitter and painful thoughts, made up his mind to continue his journey. Along the whole extent of the palings belonging to the Nikoläievs' house he walked with stealthy steps, cautiously and gently dragging his feet from the mire, as if he feared he might be discovered and arrested as a common vagrant. To go straight home was not to his liking at all. Nay, he dared not even think of his gloomy, low-pitched, cramped room with its single window and repulsive furniture. "By Jove! why shouldn't I look up Nasanski, just to annoy *her*?" thought he all of a sudden, whereupon he experienced the delightful satisfaction of revenge.

"She reproached me for my friendship with Nasanski. Well, I shall just for that very reason pay him a visit."

He raised eyes to heaven, and said to himself passionately, as he pressed his hands against his heart —

"I swear – I swear that to-day I have visited them for the last time. I will no longer endure this mortification."

And immediately afterwards he added mentally, as was his ingrained habit —

"His expressive black eyes glistened with resolution and contempt."

But Romashov's eyes, unfortunately, were neither "black" nor "expressive," but of a very common colour, slightly varying between yellow and green.

Nasanski tenanted a room in a comrade's – Lieutenant Siégerscht's – house. This Siégerscht was most certainly the oldest lieutenant in the whole Russian Army. Notwithstanding his unimpeachable conduct as an officer and the fact of his having served in the war with Turkey, through some unaccountable disposition of fate, his military career seemed closed, and every hope of further advancement was apparently lost. He was a widower, with four little children and forty-eight roubles a month, on which sum, strangely enough, he managed to get along. It was his practice to hire large flats which he afterwards, in turn, let out to his brother officers. He took in boarders, fattened and sold fowls and turkeys, and no one understood better than he how to purchase wood and other necessaries cheap and at the right time. He bathed his children himself in a common trough, prescribed for them from his little medicine-chest when they were ill, and, with his sewing-machine, made them tiny shirts, under-vests, and drawers. Like many other officers, Siégerscht had, in his bachelor days, interested himself in woman's work, and acquired a readiness with his needle that proved very useful in hard times. Malicious tongues went so far as to assert that he secretly and stealthily sold his handiwork.

Notwithstanding all his economy and closeness, his life was full of troubles. Epidemic diseases ravaged his fowl-house, his numerous rooms stood unlet for long periods; his boarders grumbled at their bad food and refused to pay. The consequence of this was that, three or four times a year, Siégerscht – tall, thin, and unshaven, with cheerless countenance and a forehead dripping with cold sweat – might be seen on his way to the town to borrow some small sum. And all recognized the low, regimental cap that resembled a pancake, always with its peak askew, as well as the antiquated cloak, modelled on those worn in the time of the Emperor Nicholas, which waved in the breeze like a couple of huge wings.

A light was burning in Siégerscht's flat, and as Romashov approached the window, he saw him sitting by a round table under a hanging-lamp. The bald head, with its gentle, worn features, was bent low over a little piece of red cloth which was probably destined to form an integral part of a Little Russian *roubashka*.[6] Romashov went up and tapped at the window. Siégerscht started up, laid aside his work, rose from the table, and went up to the window.

"It is I, Adam Ivanich – open the window a moment."

Siégerscht opened a little pane and looked out.

"Well, it's you, Sub-Lieutenant Romashov. What's up?"

"Is Nasanski at home?"

"Of course he's at home – where else should he be? Ah! your friend Nasanski cheats me nicely, I can tell you. For two months I have kept him in food, but, as for his paying for it, as yet I've only had grand promises. When he moved here, I asked him most particularly that, to avoid unpleasantness and misunderstandings, he should – "

"Yes, yes, we know all about that," interrupted Romashov; "but tell me now how he is. Will he see me?"

"Yes, certainly, that he will; he does nothing but walk up and down his room." Siégerscht stopped and listened for a second. "You yourself can hear him tramping about. You see, I said to him, 'To prevent unpleasantness and misunderstandings, it will be best for – '"

"Excuse me, Adam Ivanich; but we'll talk of that another time. I'm in a bit of a hurry," said Romashov, interrupting him for the second time, and meanwhile continuing his way round the corner. A light was burning in one of Nasanski's windows; the other was wide open. Nasanski himself was walking, in his shirt sleeves and without a collar, backwards and forwards with rapid steps. Romashov crept nearer the wall and called him by name.

[6] *Roubashka* (blouse).

"Who's there?" asked Nasanski in a careless tone, leaning out of the window. "Oh, it's you, Georgie Alexievich. Come in through the window. It's a long and dark way round through that door. Hold out your hand and I'll help you."

Nasanski's dwelling was if possible more wretched that Romashov's. Along the wall by the window stood a low, narrow, uncomfortable bed, the bulging, broken bottom of which was covered by a coarse cotton coverlet; on the other wall one saw a plain unpainted table with two common chairs without backs. High up in one corner of the room was a little cupboard fixed to the wall. A brown leather trunk, plastered all over with address labels and railway numbers, lay in state. There was not a single thing in the room except these articles and the lamp.

"Good-evening, my friend," said Nasanski, with a hearty hand-shake and a warm glance from his beautiful, deep blue eyes. "Please sit down on this bed. As you've already heard, I have handed in my sick-report."

"Yes, I heard it just now from Nikoläiev."

Again Romashov called to mind Stepan's insulting remark, the painful memory of which was reflected in his face.

"Oh, you come from the Nikoläievs," cried Nasanski and with visible interest. "Do you often visit them?"

The unusual tone of the question made Romashov uneasy and suspicious, and he instinctively uttered a falsehood. He answered carelessly —

"No, certainly not often. I just happened to look them up."

Nasanski, who had been walking up and down the room during the conversation, now stopped before the little cupboard, the door of which he opened. On one of its shelves stood a bottle of vodka, and beside it lay an apple cut up into thin, even slices. Standing with his back to his guest, Nasanski poured out for himself a glass, and quickly drained it. Romashov noticed how Nasanski's back, under its thin linen shirt, quivered convulsively.

"Would you like anything?" asked Nasanski, with a gesture towards the cupboard. "My larder is, as you see, poor enough; but if you are hungry one can always try and procure an omelette. Anyhow, that's more than our father Adam had to offer."

"Thanks, not now. Perhaps later on."

Nasanski stuck his hands in his pockets, and walked about the room. After pacing up and down twice he began talking as though resuming an interrupted conversation.

"Yes, I am always walking up and down and thinking. But I am quite happy. To-morrow, of course, they will say as usual in the regiment, 'He's a drunkard.' And that is true in a sense, but it is not the whole truth. All the same, at this moment, I'm happy; I feel neither pain nor ailments. It is different, alas! in ordinary circumstances. My mind and will-power are paralysed; I shall again become a cowardly and despicably mean creature, vain, shabby, hypocritical – a curse to myself and every one else. I loathe my profession, but, nevertheless, I remain in it. And why? Ah! the devil himself could not explain that. Because I had it knocked into me in my childhood, and have lived since in a set where it is held that the most important thing in life is to serve the State, to be free from anxiety as to one's clothes and daily bread. And philosophy, people say, is mere rubbish, good enough for one who has nothing else to do or who has come into a goodly heritage from his dear mamma.

"Thus I, too, occupy myself with things in which I don't take the slightest interest, or issue orders that seem to me both harsh and unmeaning. My daily life is as monotonous and cheerless as an old deal board, as rough and hard as a soldier's regulation cap. I dare scarcely think of, far less talk of, love, beauty, my place in the scheme of creation, of freedom and happiness, of poetry and God. They would only laugh ha! ha! ha! at me, and say: 'Oh, damn it! That, you know, is philosophy. It is not only ridiculous but even dangerous for an officer to show he holds any high views,' and at best the officer escapes with being dubbed a harmless, hopeless ass."

"And yet it is this that alone gives life any value," sighed Romashov.

"And now the happy hour is drawing nigh about which they tattle so heartlessly and with so much contempt," Nasanski went on to say without listening to Romashov's words. He walked incessantly backwards and forwards, and interpolated his speech, every now and then, with striking gestures, which were not, however, addressed to Romashov, but were always directed to the two corners of the room which he visited in turn. "Now comes my turn of freedom, Romashov – freedom for soul, thought, and will. Then I shall certainly live a peculiar, but nevertheless rich, inner life. All that I have seen, heard, and read will then gain a deeper meaning, will appear in a clear and more distinct light, and receive a deep, infinite significance. My memory will then be like a museum of rare curiosities. I shall be a very Rothschild. I take the first object within my reach, gaze at it long, closely, and with rapture. Persons, events, characters, books, women, love – nay, first and last, women and love – all this is interwoven in my imagination. Now and then I think of the heroes and geniuses of history, of the countless martyrs of religion and science. I don't believe in God, Romashov, but sometimes I think of the saints and martyrs and call to mind the Holy Scriptures and canticles."

Romashov got up quietly from his seat at the edge of the bed and walked away to the open window, and then he sat down with his back resting against the sill. From that spot, from the lighted room, the night seemed to him still darker and more fraught with mystery. Tepid breezes whispered just beneath the window, amongst the dark foliage of the shrubs. And in this mild air, charged with the sharp, aromatic perfume of spring, under those gleaming stars, in this dead silence of the universe, one might fancy he felt the hot breath of reviving, generating, voluptuous Nature.

Nasanski continued all along his eternal wandering, and indulged in building castles in the air, without looking at Romashov, as if he were talking to the walls.

"In these moments my thoughts – seething, motley, original – chase one another. My senses acquire an unnatural acuteness; my imagination becomes an overwhelming flood. Persons and things, living or dead, which are evoked by me stand before me in high relief and also in an extraordinarily intense light, as if I saw them in a *camera obscura*. I know, I know now, that all that is merely a super-excitation of the senses, an emanation of the soul flaming up like lightning, but in the next instant flickering out, being produced by the physiological influence of alcohol on the nervous system. In the beginning I thought such psychic phenomena implied an elevation of my inner, spiritual Ego, and that even I might have moments of inspiration. But no; there was nothing permanent or of any value in this, nothing creative or fructifying. Altogether it was only a morbid, physiological process, a river wave that at every ebb that occurs sucks away with it and destroys the beach. Yes, this, alas! is a fact. But it is also equally indisputable that these wild imaginings procured me moments of ineffable happiness. And besides, let the devil keep for his share your much-vaunted high morality, your hypocrisy, and your insufferable rules of health. I don't want to become one of your pillar-saints nor do I wish to live a hundred years so as to figure as a physiological miracle in the advertisement columns of the newspapers. I am happy, and that suffices."

Nasanski again went up to the little cupboard, poured out and swallowed a "nip," after which he shut the cupboard door with much ceremony and an expression on his face as if he had fulfilled a religious duty. Romashov walked listlessly up from the window to the cupboard, the life-giving contents of which he sampled with a gloomy and *blasé* air. This done, he returned to his seat on the window-bench.

"What were you thinking about just before I came, Vasili Nilich?" asked Romashov, as he made himself as comfortable as possible.

Nasanski, however, did not hear his question. "How sweet it is to dream of women!" he exclaimed with a grand and eloquent gesture. "But away with all unclean thoughts! And why? Ah! because no one has any right, even in imagination, to make a human being a culprit in what is low, sinful, and impure. How often I think of chaste, tender, loving women, of their bright tears and gracious smiles; of young, devoted, self-sacrificing mothers, of all those who have faced death for love; of proud, bewitching maidens with souls as pure as snow, knowing all, yet afraid of nothing.

But such women do not exist – yet I am wrong, Romashov; such women do exist although neither you nor I have seen them. This may possibly be vouchsafed you; but to me – never!"

He was now standing right in front of Romashov and staring him straight in the face, but by the far-off expression in his eyes, by the enigmatical smile that played on his lips, any one could observe that he did not even see to whom he was talking. Never had Nasanski's countenance – even in his better and sober moments – seemed to Romashov so attractive and interesting as at this instant. His golden hair fell in luxuriant curls around his pure and lofty brow; his blond, closely clipped beard was curled in light waves, and his strong, handsome head on his bare, classically shaped neck reminded one of the sages and heroes of Greece, whose busts Romashov had seen in engravings and at museums. Nasanski's bright, clever blue eyes glistened with moisture, and his well-formed features were rendered still more engaging by the fresh colour of his complexion, although a keen eye could not, I daresay, avoid noticing a certain flabbiness – the infallible mark of every person addicted to drink.

"Love – what an abyss of mystery is contained in the word, and what bliss lies hidden in its tortures!" Nasanski went on to say in an enraptured voice. In his violent excitement he caught hold of his hair with both hands, and took two hasty strides towards the other end of the room, but suddenly stopped, and turned round sharply to Romashov with a merry laugh. The latter observed him with great interest, but likewise not without a certain uneasiness.

"Just this moment I remember an amusing story" (Nasanski now dropped into his usual good-tempered tone), "but, ugh! how my wits go wool-gathering – now here, now there. Once upon a time I sat waiting for the train at Ryasan, and wait I did – I suppose half a day, for it was right in the middle of the spring floods, and the train had met with real obstacles. Well, you must know, I built myself a little nest in the waiting-room. Behind the counter stood a girl of eighteen – not pretty, being pockmarked, but brisk and pleasant. She had black eyes and a charming smile. In fact, she was a very nice girl. We were three, all told, at the station: she, I, and a little telegraphist with white eyebrows and eyelashes. Ah! excuse me, there was another person there – the girl's father, a fat, red-faced, grey-haired brute, who put me in mind of a rough old mastiff. But this attractive figure kept itself, as a rule, behind the scenes. Only rarely and for a few minutes did he put in an appearance behind the counter, to yawn, scratch himself under his waistcoat, and immediately afterwards disappear for a longish time. He spent his life in bed, and his eyes were glued together by eternally sleeping. The little telegraphist paid frequent and regular visits to the waiting-room, laid his elbows on the counter, but was, for the most part, as mute as the grave. She, too, was silent and looked dreamily out of the window at the floods. All of a sudden our youngster began humming —

"'Love – love.
What is love?
Something celestial
That drives us wild.'

"After this, again silence. A pause of five minutes, she begins, in her turn —

"'Love – love.
What is love?' etc.

"Both the sentimental words as well as the melody were taken from some musty old operetta that had perhaps been performed in the town, and had become a pleasant recollection to both the young people. Then again the same wistful song and significant silence. At last she steals softly a couple of paces to the window, all the while keeping one hand on the counter. Our Celadon quietly lays hold of the delicate fingers, one by one, and with visible trepidation gazes at them in profound

devotion. And again the *motif* of that hackneyed operetta is heard from his lips. It was spring with all its yearning. Then all this cloying 'love' only awoke in me nausea and disgust, but, since then, I have often thought with deep emotion of the vast amount of happiness this innocent love-making could bestow, and how it was most certainly the only ray of light in the dreary lives of these two human beings – lives, very likely, even more empty and barren than my own. But, I beg your pardon, Romashov; why should I bore you with my silly, long-winded stories?"

Nasanski again betook himself to the little cupboard, but he did not fetch out the schnapps bottle, but stood motionless with his back turned to Romashov. He scratched his forehead, pressed his right hand lightly to his temple, and maintained this position for a considerable while, evidently a prey to conflicting thoughts.

"You were speaking of women, love, abysses, mystery, and joy," remarked Romashov, by way of reminder.

"Yes, love," cried Nasanski in a jubilant voice. He now took out the bottle, poured some of its contents out, and drained the glass quickly, as he turned round with a fierce glance, and wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve. "Love! who do you suppose understands the infinite meaning of this holy word? And yet – from it men have derived subjects for filthy, rubbishy operettas; for lewd pictures and statues, shameless stories and disgusting 'rhymes.' That is what we officers do. Yesterday I had a visit from Ditz. He sat where you are sitting now. He toyed with his gold pince-nez and talked about women. Romashov, my friend, I tell you that if an animal, a dog, for instance, possessed the faculty of understanding human speech, and had happened to hear what Ditz said yesterday, it would have fled from the room ashamed. Ditz, as you know, Romashov, is a 'good fellow,' and even the others are 'good,' for really bad people do not exist; but for fear of forfeiting his reputation as a cynic, 'man about town,' and 'lady-killer,' he dares not express himself about women otherwise than he does. Amongst our young men there is a universal confusion of ideas that often finds expression in bragging contempt, and the cause of this is that the great majority seek in the possession of women only coarse, sensual, brutish enjoyment, and that is the reason why love becomes to them only something contemptible, wanton – well, I don't know, damn it! how to express exactly what I mean – and, when the animal instincts are satisfied, coldness, disgust, and enmity are the natural result. The man of culture has said good-night to love, just as he has done to robbery and murder, and seems to regard it only as a sort of snare set by Nature for the destruction of humanity."

"That is the truth about it," agreed Romashov quietly and sadly.

"No, that is *not* true!" shouted Nasanski in a voice of thunder. "Yes, I say it once more – it is a lie. In this, as in everything else, Nature has revealed her wisdom and ingenuity. The fact is merely that whereas Lieutenant Ditz finds in love only brutal enjoyment, disgust, and surfeit, Dante finds in it beauty, felicity, and harmony. True love is the heritage of the elect, and to understand this let us take another simile. All mankind has an ear for music, but, in the case of millions, this is developed about as much as in stock-fish or Staff-Captain Vasilichenko. Only one individual in all these millions is a Beethoven. And the same is the case in everything – in art, science, poetry. And so far as love is concerned, I tell you that even this has its peaks which only one out of millions is able to climb."

He walked to the window, and leaned his forehead against the sill where Romashov sat gazing out on the warm, dark, spring night. At last he said in a voice low, but vibrating with strong inward excitement —

"Oh, if we could see and grasp Love's innermost being, its supernatural beauty and charm – we gross, blind earth-worms! How many know and feel what happiness, what delightful tortures exist in an undying, hopeless love? I remember, when I was a youth, how all my yearning took form and shape in this single dream: to fall in love with an ideally beautiful and noble woman far beyond my reach, and standing so high above me that every thought of possessing her I might harbour was mad and criminal; to consecrate to her all my life, all my thoughts, without her even suspecting it, and to carry my delightful, torturing secret with me to the grave; to be her slave, her lackey, her protector,

or to employ a thousand arts just to see her once a year, to come close to her, and – oh, maddening rapture! – to touch the hem of her garment or kiss the ground on which she had walked – ”

“And to wind up in a mad-house,” exclaimed Romashov in a gloomy tone.

“Oh, my dear fellow, what does that matter?” cried Nasanski passionately. “Perhaps – who knows? – one might then attain to that state of bliss one reads of in stories. Which is best – to lose your wits through a love which can never be realized, or, like Ditz, to go stark mad from shameful, incurable diseases or slow paralysis? Just think what felicity – to stand all night in front of her window on the other side of the street. Look, there’s a shadow visible behind the drawn curtain – can it be *she*? What’s she doing? What’s she thinking of? The light is lowered – sleep, my beloved, sleep in peace, for Love is keeping vigil. Days, months, years pass away; the moment at last arrives when Chance, perhaps, bestows on you her glove, handkerchief, the concert programme she has thrown away. She is not acquainted with you, does not even know that you exist. Her glance passes over you without seeing you; but there you stand with the same unchangeable, idolatrous adoration, ready to sacrifice yourself for her – nay, even for her slightest whim, for her husband, lover, her pet dog, to sacrifice life, honour, and all that you hold dear. Romashov, a bliss such as this can never fall to the lot of our Don Juans and lady-killers.”

“Ah, how true this is! how splendidly you speak!” cried Romashov, carried away by Nasanski’s passionate words and gestures. Long before this he had got up from the window, and now he was walking, like his eccentric host, up and down the long, narrow room, pacing the floor with long, quick strides. “Listen, Nasanski. I will tell you something – about myself. Once upon a time I fell in love with a woman – oh, not here; no, in Moscow. I was then a mere stripling. Ah, well, she had no inkling of it, and it was enough for me to be allowed to sit near her when she sewed, and to draw quietly and imperceptibly, the threads towards me. That was all, and she noticed nothing; but it was enough to turn my head with joy.”

“Ah, yes, how well I understand this!” replied Nasanski with a friendly smile, nodding his head all the time. “A delicate white thread charged with electrical currents. What a store of poetry is enshrined in that! My dear fellow, life is so beautiful!”

Nasanski, absorbed in profound reverie, grew silent, and his blue eyes were bright with tears. Romashov also felt touched, and there was something nervous, hysterical, and spontaneous about this melancholy of his, but these expressions of pity were not only for Nasanski, but himself.

“Vasili Nilich, I admire you,” cried he as he grasped and warmly pressed both Nasanski’s hands. “But how can so gifted, far-sighted, and wide-awake a man as you rush, with his eyes open, to his own destruction? But I am the last person on earth who ought to read you a lesson on morals. Only one more question: supposing in the course of your life you happened to meet a woman worthy of you, and capable of appreciating you, would you then – ? I’ve thought of this so often.”

Nasanski stopped and stared for a long time through the open window.

“A woman – ” he uttered the word slowly and dreamily. “I’ll tell you a story,” he continued suddenly and in an energetic tone. “Once in my life I met an exceptional – ah! wonderful – woman, a young girl, but as Heine somewhere says: ‘She was worthy of being loved, and he loved her; but he was not worthy, and she did not love him.’ Her love waned because I drank, or perhaps it was I drank because she did not love me. *She*– by the way, it was not here that this happened. It was a long time ago, and you possibly know that I first served in the infantry for three years, after that for four years with the reserves, and for a second time, three years ago, I came here. Well, to continue, between her and me there was no romance whatever. We met and had five or six chats together – that was all. But have you ever thought what an irresistible, bewitching might there is in the past, in our recollections? The memory of these few insignificant episodes of my life constitutes the whole of my wealth. I love her even to this very day. Wait, Romashov, you deserve to hear it – I will read out to you the first and only letter I ever received from her.” He crouched down before the old trunk, opened it, and began rummaging impatiently among a mass of old papers, during which he kept on talking. “I know she

never loved any one but herself. There was a depth of pride, imperiousness, even cruelty about her, yet, at the same time, she was so good, so genuinely womanly, so infinitely pleasant and lovable. She had two natures – the one egoistical and calculating, the other all heart and passionate tenderness. See here, I have it. Read it now, Romashov. The beginning will not interest you much" (Nasanski turned over a few lines of the letter), "but read from here; read it all."

Romashov felt as if some one had struck him a stunning blow on the head, and the whole room seemed to dance before his eyes, for the letter was written in a large but nervous and compressed hand, that could only belong to Alexandra Petrovna – quaint, irregular, but by no means unsympathetic. Romashov, who had often received cards from her with invitations to small dinners and card parties, recognized this hand at once.

"It is a bitter and hard task for me to write this," read Romashov under Nasanski's hand; "but only you yourself are to blame for our acquaintance coming to this tragic end. Lying I abominate more than anything else in life. It always springs from cowardice and weakness, and this is the reason why I shall also tell you the whole truth. I loved you up to now; yes, I love you even now, and I know it will prove very hard for me to master this feeling. But I also know that, in the end, I shall gain the victory. What do you suppose our lot would be if I acted otherwise? I confess I lack the energy and self-denial requisite for becoming the housekeeper, nurse-girl, or sister of mercy to a weakling with no will of his own. I loathe above everything self-sacrifice and pity for others, and I shall let neither you nor any one else excite these feelings in me. I will not have a husband who would only be a dog at my feet, incessantly craving alms or proofs of affection. And you would never be anything else, in spite of your extraordinary talents and noble qualities. Tell me now, with your hand upon your heart, if you are capable of it. Alas! my dear Vasili Nilich, if you could. All my heart, all my life yearns for you. I love you. What is the obstacle, then? No one but yourself. For a person one loves, one can, you know, sacrifice the whole world, and now I ask of you only this one thing; but can you? No, you cannot, and now I bid you good-bye for ever. In thought I kiss you on your forehead as one kisses a corpse, and you are dead to me – for ever. I advise you to destroy this letter, not that I blush for or fear its contents, but because I think it will be a source to you of tormenting recollections. I repeat once more – "

"The rest is of little interest to you," said Nasanski abruptly, as he took the letter from Romashov's hand. "This, as I have just told you, was her only letter to me."

"What happened afterwards?" stammered Romashov awkwardly.

"Afterwards? We never saw one another afterwards. She went her way and is reported to have married an engineer. That, however, is another matter."

"And you never visit Alexandra Petrovna?"

Romashov uttered these words in a whisper, but both officers started at the sound of them, and gazed at each other a long time without speaking. During these few seconds all the barriers raised by human guile and hypocrisy fell away, and the two men read each other's soul as an open book. Hundreds of things that had hitherto been for them a profound secret stood before them that moment in dazzling light, and the whole of the conversation that evening suddenly took a peculiar, deep, nay, almost tragic, significance.

"What? you too?" exclaimed Nasanski at last, with an expression bordering on fear in his eyes, but he quickly regained his composure and exclaimed with a laugh, "Ugh! what a misunderstanding! We were discussing something quite different. That letter which you have just read was written hundreds of years ago, and the woman in question lived in Transcaucasia. But where was it we left off?"

"It is late, Vasili Nilich, and time to say good-night," replied Romashov, rising.

Nasanski did not try to keep him. They separated neither in a cold or unfriendly way, but they were, as it seemed, ashamed of each other. Romashov was now more convinced than ever that the letter was from Shurochka. During the whole of his way home he thought of nothing except this

letter, but he could not make out what feelings it aroused in him. They were a mingling of jealousy of Nasanski – jealousy on account of what had been – but also a certain exultant pity for Nasanski, and in himself there awoke new hopes, dim and indefinite, but delicious and alluring. It was as if this letter had put into his hand a mysterious, invisible clue that was leading him into the future.

The breeze had subsided. The tepid night's intense darkness and silence reminded one of soft, warm velvet. One felt, as it were, life's mystic creative force in the never-slumbering air, in the dumb stillness of the invisible trees, in the smell of the earth. Romashov walked without seeing which way he went, and it seemed to him as if he felt the hot breath of something strong and powerful, but, at the same time, sweet and caressing. His thoughts went back with dull, harrowing pain to bygone happy springs that would never more return – to the blissful, innocent days of his childhood.

When he reached home he found on the table another letter from Raisa Alexandrovna Peterson. In her usual bad taste she complained, in turgid, extravagant terms, of his "deceitful conduct" towards her. She "now understood everything," and the "injured woman" within her invoked on him all the perils of hatred and revenge.

Now I know what I have to do (the letter ran). If I survive the sorrow and pain of your abominable conduct, you may be quite certain I shall cruelly avenge this insult. You seem to think that nobody knows where you are in the habit of spending your evenings. You are watched! and even walls have ears. Every step you take is known to me. But all the same, you will never get anything *there* with all your soft, pretty speeches, unless N. flings you downstairs like a puppy. So far as I am concerned, you will be wise not to lull yourself into fancied security. I am not one of those women who let themselves be insulted with impunity.

> A Caucasian woman am I
> Who knows how to handle a knife.

– Once yours, now nobody's,
RAISA.

PS. – I command you to meet me at the soirée on Saturday and explain your conduct. The third quadrille will be kept for you; but mind, there is no special importance *now* in that.
R. P.

To Romashov this ill-spelled, ungrammatical letter was a breath of the stupidity, meanness, and spiteful tittle-tattle of a provincial town. He felt for ever soiled from head to foot by this disgusting *liaison*, scarcely of six months' standing, with a woman he had never loved. He threw himself on his bed with an indescribable feeling of depression. He even felt as if he were torn to tatters by the events of the day, and he involuntarily called to mind Nasanski's words that very night: "his thoughts were as grey as a soldier's cloak."

He soon fell into a deep, heavy sleep. As he had always done of late, when he had had bitter moments, he saw himself, even now in his dreams, as a little child. There were no impure impulses in him, no sense of something lacking, no weariness of life; his body was light and healthy, and his soul was luminous and full of joy and hope; and in this world of radiance and happiness he saw dear old Moscow's streets in the dazzling brightness that is presented to the eyes in dreamland. But far away by the horizon, at the very verge of this sky that was saturated with light, there arose quickly and threateningly a dark, ill-boding wall of cloud, behind which was hidden a horrible provincial hole of a place with cruel and unbearable slavery, drills, recruit schools, drinking, false friends, and utterly corrupt women. His life was nothing but joy and gladness, but the dark cloud was waiting patiently for the moment when it was to fold him in its deadly embrace. And it so happened that little Romashov, amidst his childish babble and innocent dreams, bewailed in silence the fate of his "double."

He awoke in the middle of the night, and noticed that his pillow was wet with tears. Then he wept afresh, and the warm tears again ran down his cheeks in rapid streams.

VI

WITH the exception of a few ambitious men bent on making a career for themselves, all the officers regarded the service as an intolerable slavery to which they must needs submit. The younger of them behaved like veritable schoolboys; they came late to the drills, and wriggled away from them as soon as possible, provided that could be done without risk of serious consequences to themselves afterwards. The captains, who, as a rule, were burdened with large families, were immersed in household cares, scandals, money troubles, and were worried the whole year through with loans, promissory notes, and other methods of raising the wind. Many ventured – often at the instigation of their wives – secretly to divert to their own purposes the moneys belonging to the regiment and the soldiers' pay – nay, they even went so far as "officially" to withhold their men's private letters when the latter were found to contain money. Some lived by gambling – vint, schtoss, lansquenet – and certain rather ugly stories were told in connection with this – stories which high authorities had a good deal of trouble to suppress. In addition to all this, heavy drinking, both at mess and in their own homes, was widespread amongst the officers.

With regard to the officers' sense of duty, that, too, was, as a rule, altogether lacking. The non-commissioned officers did all the work; the pay-sergeants set in motion and regulated the inner mechanism of the company, and were held responsible for the despatch of it; hence very soon, and quite imperceptibly, the commander became a mere marionette in the coarse, experienced hands of his subordinates. The senior officers, moreover, regarded the exercises of the troops with the same aversion as did their junior comrades, and if at any time they displayed their zeal by punishing an ensign, they only did it to gain prestige or – which was more seldom the case – to satisfy their lust of power or desire for revenge.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.