A Nervous Breakdown

Anton Chekhov

A medical student called Mayer, and a pupil of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture called Rybnikov, went one evening to see their friend Vassilyev, a law student, and suggested that he should go with them to S. Street. For a long time Vassilyev would not consent to go, but in the end he put on his greatcoat and went with them.

He knew nothing of fallen women except by hearsay and from books, and he had never in his life been in the houses in which they live. He knew that there are immoral women who, under the pressure of fatal circumstances — environment, bad education, poverty, and so on — are forced to sell their honor for money. They know nothing of pure love, have no children, have no civil rights; their mothers and sisters weep over them as though they were dead, science treats of them as an evil, men address them with contemptuous familiarity. But in spite of all that, they do not lose the semblance and image of God. They all acknowledge their sin and hope for salvation. Of the means that lead to salvation they can avail themselves to the fullest extent. Society, it is true, will not forgive people their past, but in the sight of God St. Mary of Egypt is no lower than the other saints. When it had happened to Vassilyev in the street to recognize a fallen woman as such, by her dress or her manners, or to see a picture of one in a comic paper, he always remembered a story he had once read: a young man, pure and self-sacrificing, loves a fallen woman and urges her to become his wife; she, considering herself unworthy of such happiness, takes poison.

Vassilyev lived in one of the side streets turning out of Tverskoy Boulevard. When he came out of the house with his two friends it was about eleven o'clock. The first snow had not long fallen, and all nature was under the spell of the fresh snow. There was the smell of snow in the air, the snow crunched softly under the feet; the earth, the roofs, the trees, the seats on the boulevard, everything was soft, white, young, and this made the houses look quite different from the day before; the street lamps burned more brightly, the air was more transparent, the carriages rumbled with a deeper note, and with the fresh, light, frosty air a feeling stirred in the soul akin to the white, youthful, feathery snow. "Against my will an unknown force," hummed the medical student in his agreeable tenor, "has led me to these mournful shores."

"Behold the mill . . ." the artist seconded him, "in ruins now. . . ."

"Behold the mill . . . in ruins now," the medical student repeated, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head mournfully.

He paused, rubbed his forehead, trying to remember the words, and then sang aloud, so well that passers-by looked round:

"Here in old days when I was free,

Love, free, unfettered, greeted me."

The three of them went into a restaurant and, without taking off their greatcoats, drank a couple of glasses of vodka each. Before drinking the second glass, Vassilyev noticed a bit of cork in his vodka, raised the glass to his eyes, and gazed into it for a long time, screwing up his shortsighted eyes. The medical student did not understand his expression, and said:

"Come, why look at it? No philosophizing, please. Vodka is given us to be drunk, sturgeon to be eaten, women to be visited, snow to be walked upon. For one evening anyway live like a human being!"

"But I haven't said anything . . ." said Vassilyev, laughing. "Am I refusing to?"

There was a warmth inside him from the vodka. He looked with softened feelings at his friends, admired them and envied them. In these strong, healthy, cheerful people how wonderfully balanced everything is, how finished and smooth is everything in their minds and souls! They sing, and have a passion for the theatre, and draw, and talk a great deal, and drink, and they don't have headaches the day after; they are both poetical and debauched, both soft and hard; they can work, too, and be indignant, and laugh without reason, and talk nonsense; they are warm, honest, self-sacrificing, and as men are in no way inferior to himself, Vassilyev, who watched over every step he took and every word he uttered, who was fastidious and cautious, and ready to raise every trifle to the level of a problem. And he longed for one evening to live as his friends did, to open out, to let himself loose from his own control. If vodka had to be drunk, he would drink it, though his head would be splitting next morning. If he were taken to the women he would go. He would laugh, play the fool, gaily respond to the passing advances of strangers in the street. . . .

He went out of the restaurant laughing. He liked his friends — one in a crushed broad-brimmed hat, with an affectation of artistic untidiness; the other in a sealskin cap, a man not poor, though he affected to belong to the Bohemia of learning. He liked the snow, the pale street lamps, the sharp black tracks left in the first snow by the feet of the passers-by. He liked the air, and especially that limpid, tender, naïve, as it were virginal tone, which can be seen in nature only twice in the year — when everything is covered with snow, and in spring on bright days and moonlight evenings when the ice breaks on the river.

"Against my will an unknown force,

Has led me to these mournful shores,"

he hummed in an undertone.

And the tune for some reason haunted him and his friends all the way, and all three of them hummed it mechanically, not in time with one another.

Vassilyev's imagination was picturing how, in another ten minutes, he and his friends would knock at a door; how by little dark passages and dark rooms they would steal in to the women; how, taking advantage of the darkness, he would strike a match, would light up and see the face of a martyr and a guilty smile. The unknown, fair or dark, would certainly have her hair down and be wearing a white dressing-jacket; she would be panic-stricken by the light, would be fearfully confused, and would say: "For God's sake, what are you doing! Put it out!" It would all be dreadful, but interesting and new.

II

The friends turned out of Trubnoy Square into Gratchevka, and soon reached the side street which Vassilyev only knew by reputation. Seeing two rows of houses with brightly lighted windows and wide-open doors, and hearing gay strains of pianos and violins, sounds which floated out from every door and mingled in a strange chaos, as though an unseen orchestra were tuning up in the darkness above the roofs, Vassilyev was surprised and said:

"What a lot of houses!"

"That's nothing," said the medical student. "In London there are ten times as many. There are about a hundred thousand such women there."

The cabmen were sitting on their boxes as calmly and indifferently as in any other side street; the same passers-by were walking along the pavement as in other streets. No one was hurrying, no one was hiding his face in his coat-collar, no one shook his head reproachfully. . . . And in this indifference to the noisy chaos of pianos and violins, to the bright windows and wide-open doors, there was a feeling of something very open, insolent, reckless, and devil-may-care. Probably it was as gay and noisy at the slave-markets in their day, and people's faces and movements showed the same indifference.

"Let us begin from the beginning," said the artist.

The friends went into a narrow passage lighted by a lamp with a reflector. When they opened the door a man in a black coat, with an unshaven face like a flunkey's, and sleepy-looking eyes, got up lazily from a yellow sofa in the hall. The place smelt like a laundry with an odor of vinegar in addition. A door from the hall led into a brightly lighted room. The

medical student and the artist stopped at this door and, craning their necks, peeped into the room.

“Buona sera, signori, rigolleto — hugenotti — traviata!” began the artist, with a theatrical bow.

“Havanna — tarakano — pistoleto!” said the medical student, pressing his cap to his breast and bowing low.

Vassilyev was standing behind them. He would have liked to make a theatrical bow and say something silly, too, but he only smiled, felt an awkwardness that was like shame, and waited impatiently for what would happen next.

A little fair girl of seventeen or eighteen, with short hair, in a short light-blue frock with a bunch of white ribbon on her bosom, appeared in the doorway.

“Why do you stand at the door?” she said. “Take off your coats and come into the drawing-room.”

The medical student and the artist, still talking Italian, went into the drawing-room. Vassilyev followed them irresolutely.

“Gentlemen, take off your coats!” the flunkey said sternly; “you can’t go in like that.”

In the drawing-room there was, besides the girl, another woman, very stout and tall, with a foreign face and bare arms. She was sitting near the piano, laying out a game of patience on her lap. She took no notice whatever of the visitors.

“Where are the other young ladies?” asked the medical student.

“They are having their tea,” said the fair girl. “Stepan,” she called, “go and tell the young ladies some students have come!”

A little later a third young lady came into the room. She was wearing a bright red dress with blue stripes. Her face was painted thickly and unskillfully, her brow was hidden under her hair, and there was an unblinking, frightened stare in her eyes. As she came in, she began at once singing some song in a coarse, powerful contralto. After her a fourth appeared, and after her a fifth. . . .

In all this Vassilyev saw nothing new or interesting. It seemed to him that that room, the piano, the looking-glass in its cheap gilt frame, the bunch of white ribbon, the dress with the blue stripes, and the blank indifferent faces, he had seen before and more than once. Of the

darkness, the silence, the secrecy, the guilty smile, of all that he had expected to meet here and had dreaded, he saw no trace.

Everything was ordinary, prosaic, and uninteresting. Only one thing faintly stirred his curiosity — the terrible, as it were intentionally designed, bad taste which was visible in the cornices, in the absurd pictures, in the dresses, in the bunch of ribbons. There was something characteristic and peculiar in this bad taste.

“How poor and stupid it all is!” thought Vassilyev. “What is there in all this trumpery I see now that can tempt a normal man and excite him to commit the horrible sin of buying a human being for a rouble? I understand any sin for the sake of splendor, beauty, grace, passion, taste; but what is there here? What is there here worth sinning for? But . . . one mustn’t think!”

“Beardy, treat me to some porter!” said the fair girl, addressing him.

Vassilyev was at once overcome with confusion.

“With pleasure,” he said, bowing politely. “Only excuse me, madam, I . . . I won’t drink with you. I don’t drink.

Five minutes later the friends went off into another house.

“Why did you ask for porter?” said the medical student angrily. “What a millionaire! You have thrown away six roubles for no reason whatever — simply waste!”

“If she wants it, why not let her have the pleasure?” said Vassilyev, justifying himself.

“You did not give pleasure to her, but to the ‘Madam.’ They are told to ask the visitors to stand them treat because it is a profit to the keeper.”

“Behold the mill . . .” hummed the artist, “in ruins now. . . .”

Going into the next house, the friends stopped in the hall and did not go into the drawing-room. Here, as in the first house, a figure in a black coat, with a sleepy face like a flunkey’s, got up from a sofa in the hall. Looking at this flunkey, at his face and his shabby black coat, Vassilyev thought: “What must an ordinary simple Russian have gone through before fate flung him down as a flunkey here? Where had he been before and what had he done? What was awaiting him? Was he married? Where was his mother, and did she know that he was a servant here?” And Vassilyev could not help particularly noticing the flunkey in each house. In one of the houses — he thought it was the fourth — there was a little spare, frail-looking flunkey with a watch-chain on his waistcoat. He was reading a newspaper, and took no

notice of them when they went in. Looking at his face Vassilyev, for some reason, thought that a man with such a face might steal, might murder, might bear false witness. But the face was really interesting: a big forehead, gray eyes, a little flattened nose, thin compressed lips, and a blankly stupid and at the same time insolent expression like that of a young harrier overtaking a hare. Vassilyev thought it would be nice to touch this man's hair, to see whether it was soft or coarse. It must be coarse like a dog's.

III

Having drunk two glasses of porter, the artist became suddenly tipsy and grew unnaturally lively.

"Let's go to another!" he said peremptorily, waving his hands. "I will take you to the best one."

When he had brought his friends to the house which in his opinion was the best, he declared his firm intention of dancing a quadrille. The medical student grumbled something about their having to pay the musicians a rouble, but agreed to be his *vis-à-vis*. They began dancing.

It was just as nasty in the best house as in the worst. Here there were just the same looking-glasses and pictures, the same styles of coiffure and dress. Looking round at the furnishing of the rooms and the costumes, Vassilyev realized that this was not lack of taste, but something that might be called the taste, and even the style, of S. Street, which could not be found elsewhere—something intentional in its ugliness, not accidental, but elaborated in the course of years. After he had been in eight houses he was no longer surprised at the color of the dresses, at the long trains, the gaudy ribbons, the sailor dresses, and the thick purplish rouge on the cheeks; he saw that it all had to be like this, that if a single one of the women had been dressed like a human being, or if there had been one decent engraving on the wall, the general tone of the whole street would have suffered.

"How unskillfully they sell themselves!" he thought. "How can they fail to understand that vice is only alluring when it is beautiful and hidden, when it wears the mask of virtue? Modest black dresses, pale faces, mournful smiles, and darkness would be far more effective than this clumsy tawdriness. Stupid things! If they don't understand it of themselves, their visitors might surely have taught them. . . ."

A young lady in a Polish dress edged with white fur came up to him and sat down beside him.

“You nice dark man, why aren’t you dancing?” she asked. “Why are you so dull?”

“Because it is dull.”

“Treat me to some Lafitte. Then it won’t be dull.”

Vassilyev made no answer. He was silent for a little, and then asked:

“What time do you get to sleep?”

“At six o’clock.”

“And what time do you get up?”

“Sometimes at two and sometimes at three.”

“And what do you do when you get up?”

“We have coffee, and at six o’clock we have dinner.”

“And what do you have for dinner?”

“Usually soup, beefsteak, and dessert. Our madam keeps the girls well. But why do you ask all this?”

“Oh, just to talk. . . .”

Vassilyev longed to talk to the young lady about many things. He felt an intense desire to find out where she came from, whether her parents were living, and whether they knew that she was here; how she had come into this house; whether she were cheerful and satisfied, or sad and oppressed by gloomy thoughts; whether she hoped some day to get out of her present position. . . . But he could not think how to begin or in what shape to put his questions so as not to seem impertinent. He thought for a long time, and asked:

“How old are you?”

“Eighty,” the young lady jested, looking with a laugh at the antics of the artist as he danced.

All at once she burst out laughing at something, and uttered a long cynical sentence loud enough to be heard by everyone. Vassilyev was aghast, and not knowing how to look, gave a constrained smile. He was the only one who smiled; all the others, his friends, the

musicians, the women, did not even glance towards his neighbor, but seemed not to have heard her.

“Stand me some Lafitte,” his neighbor said again.

Vassilyev felt a repulsion for her white fur and for her voice, and walked away from her. It seemed to him hot and stifling, and his heart began throbbing slowly but violently, like a hammer — one! two! three!

“Let us go away!” he said, pulling the artist by his sleeve.

“Wait a little; let me finish.”

While the artist and the medical student were finishing the quadrille, to avoid looking at the women, Vassilyev scrutinized the musicians. A respectable-looking old man in spectacles, rather like Marshal Bazaine, was playing the piano; a young man with a fair beard, dressed in the latest fashion, was playing the violin. The young man had a face that did not look stupid nor exhausted, but intelligent, youthful, and fresh. He was dressed fancifully and with taste; he played with feeling. It was a mystery how he and the respectable-looking old man had come here. How was it they were not ashamed to sit here? What were they thinking about when they looked at the women?

If the violin and the piano had been played by men in rags, looking hungry, gloomy, drunken, with dissipated or stupid faces, then one could have understood their presence, perhaps. As it was, Vassilyev could not understand it at all. He recalled the story of the fallen woman he had once read, and he thought now that that human figure with the guilty smile had nothing in common with what he was seeing now. It seemed to him that he was seeing not fallen women, but some different world quite apart, alien to him and incomprehensible; if he had seen this world before on the stage, or read of it in a book, he would not have believed in it. . . .

The woman with the white fur burst out laughing again and uttered a loathsome sentence in a loud voice. A feeling of disgust took possession of him. He flushed crimson and went out of the room.

“Wait a minute, we are coming too!” the artist shouted to him.

IV

“While we were dancing,” said the medical student, as they all three went out into the street,

“I had a conversation with my partner. We talked about her first romance. He, the hero, was an accountant at Smolensk with a wife and five children. She was seventeen, and she lived with her papa and mamma, who sold soap and candles.”

“How did he win her heart?” asked Vassilyev.

“By spending fifty roubles on underclothes for her. What next!”

“So he knew how to get his partner’s story out of her,” thought Vassilyev about the medical student. “But I don’t know how to.”

“I say, I am going home!” he said.

“What for?”

“Because I don’t know how to behave here. Besides, I am bored, disgusted. What is there amusing in it? If they were human beings — but they are savages and animals. I am going; do as you like.”

“Come, Grisha, Grigory, darling. . .” said the artist in a tearful voice, hugging Vassilyev, “come along! Let’s go to one more together and damnation take them! . . . Please do, Grisha!”

They persuaded Vassilyev and led him up a staircase. In the carpet and the gilt banisters, in the porter who opened the door, and in the panels that decorated the hall, the same S. Street style was apparent, but carried to a greater perfection, more imposing.

“I really will go home!” said Vassilyev as he was taking off his coat.

“Come, come, dear boy,” said the artist, and he kissed him on the neck. “Don’t be tiresome. . . . Gri-gri, be a good comrade! We came together, we will go back together. What a beast you are, really!”

“I can wait for you in the street. I think it’s loathsome, really!”

“Come, come, Grisha. . . . If it is loathsome, you can observe it! Do you understand? You can observe!”

“One must take an objective view of things,” said the medical student gravely.

Vassilyev went into the drawing-room and sat down. There were a number of visitors in the room besides him and his friends: two infantry officers, a bald, gray-haired gentleman in

spectacles, two beardless youths from the institute of land-surveying, and a very tipsy man who looked like an actor. All the young ladies were taken up with these visitors and paid no attention to Vassilyev.

Only one of them, dressed *à la Aïda*, glanced sideways at him, smiled, and said, yawning: "A dark one has come. . . ."

Vassilyev's heart was throbbing and his face burned. He felt ashamed before these visitors of his presence here, and he felt disgusted and miserable. He was tormented by the thought that he, a decent and loving man (such as he had hitherto considered himself), hated these women and felt nothing but repulsion towards them. He felt pity neither for the women nor the musicians nor the flunkeys.

"It is because I am not trying to understand them," he thought. "They are all more like animals than human beings, but of course they are human beings all the same, they have souls. One must understand them and then judge. . . ."

"Grisha, don't go, wait for us," the artist shouted to him and disappeared.

The medical student disappeared soon after.

"Yes, one must make an effort to understand, one mustn't be like this. . ." Vassilyev went on thinking.

And he began gazing at each of the women with strained attention, looking for a guilty smile. But either he did not know how to read their faces, or not one of these women felt herself to be guilty; he read on every face nothing but a blank expression of everyday vulgar boredom and complacency. Stupid faces, stupid smiles, harsh, stupid voices, insolent movements, and nothing else. Apparently each of them had in the past a romance with an accountant based on underclothes for fifty roubles, and looked for no other charm in the present but coffee, a dinner of three courses, wines, quadrilles, sleeping till two in the afternoon. . . .

Finding no guilty smile, Vassilyev began to look whether there was not one intelligent face. And his attention was caught by one pale, rather sleepy, exhausted-looking face. . . . It was a dark woman, not very young, wearing a dress covered with spangles; she was sitting in an easy-chair, looking at the floor lost in thought. Vassilyev walked from one corner of the room to the other, and, as though casually, sat down beside her.

"I must begin with something trivial," he thought, "and pass to what is serious. . . ."

"What a pretty dress you have," and with his finger he touched the gold fringe of her fichu.

“Oh, is it? . . .” said the dark woman listlessly.

“What province do you come from?”

“I? From a distance. . . . From Tchernigov.”

“A fine province. It’s nice there.”

“Any place seems nice when one is not in it.”

“It’s a pity I cannot describe nature,” thought Vassilyev. “I might touch her by a description of nature in Tchernigov. No doubt she loves the place if she has been born there.”

“Are you dull here?” he asked.

“Of course I am dull.”

“Why don’t you go away from here if you are dull?”

“Where should I go to? Go begging or what?”

“Begging would be easier than living here.”

How do you know that? Have you begged?”

“Yes, when I hadn’t the money to study. Even if I hadn’t anyone could understand that. A beggar is anyway a free man, and you are a slave.”

The dark woman stretched, and watched with sleepy eyes the footman who was bringing a trayful of glasses and seltzer water.

“Stand me a glass of porter,” she said, and yawned again.

“Porter,” thought Vassilyev. “And what if your brother or mother walked in at this moment? What would you say? And what would they say? There would be porter then, I imagine. . . .”

All at once there was the sound of weeping. From the adjoining room, from which the footman had brought the seltzer water, a fair man with a red face and angry eyes ran in quickly. He was followed by the tall, stout “madam,” who was shouting in a shrill voice:

“Nobody has given you leave to slap girls on the cheeks! We have visitors better than you, and they don’t fight! Impostor!”

A hubbub arose. Vassilyev was frightened and turned pale. In the next room there was the sound of bitter, genuine weeping, as though of someone insulted. And he realized that there were real people living here who, like people everywhere else, felt insulted, suffered, wept, and cried for help. The feeling of oppressive hate and disgust gave way to an acute feeling of pity and anger against the aggressor. He rushed into the room where there was weeping. Across rows of bottles on a marble-top table he distinguished a suffering face, wet with tears, stretched out his hands towards that face, took a step towards the table, but at once drew back in horror. The weeping girl was drunk.

As he made his way though the noisy crowd gathered about the fair man, his heart sank and he felt frightened like a child; and it seemed to him that in this alien, incomprehensible world people wanted to pursue him, to beat him, to pelt him with filthy words. . . . He tore down his coat from the hatstand and ran headlong downstairs.

V

Leaning against the fence, he stood near the house waiting for his friends to come out. The sounds of the pianos and violins, gay, reckless, insolent, and mournful, mingled in the air in a sort of chaos, and this tangle of sounds seemed again like an unseen orchestra tuning up on the roofs. If one looked upwards into the darkness, the black background was all spangled with white, moving spots: it was snow falling. As the snowflakes came into the light they floated round lazily in the air like down, and still more lazily fell to the ground. The snowflakes whirled thickly round Vassilyev and hung upon his beard, his eyelashes, his eyebrows. . . . The cabmen, the horses, and the passers-by were white.

“And how can the snow fall in this street!” thought Vassilyev. “Damnation take these houses!”

His legs seemed to be giving way from fatigue, simply from having run down the stairs; he gasped for breath as though he had been climbing uphill, his heart beat so loudly that he could hear it. He was consumed by a desire to get out of the street as quickly as possible and to go home, but even stronger was his desire to wait for his companions and vent upon them his oppressive feeling.

There was much he did not understand in these houses, the souls of ruined women were a mystery to him as before; but it was clear to him that the thing was far worse than could have been believed. If that sinful woman who had poisoned herself was called fallen, it was

difficult to find a fitting name for all these who were dancing now to this tangle of sound and uttering long, loathsome sentences. They were not on the road to ruin, but ruined.

“There is vice,” he thought, “but neither consciousness of sin nor hope of salvation. They are sold and bought, steeped in wine and abominations, while they, like sheep, are stupid, indifferent, and don’t understand. My God! My God!”

It was clear to him, too, that everything that is called human dignity, personal rights, the Divine image and semblance, were defiled to their very foundations — “to the very marrow,” as drunkards say — and that not only the street and the stupid women were responsible for it.

A group of students, white with snow, passed him laughing and talking gaily; one, a tall thin fellow, stopped, glanced into Vassilyev’s face, and said in a drunken voice:

“One of us! A bit on, old man? Aha-ha! Never mind, have a good time! Don’t be down-hearted, old chap!”

He took Vassilyev by the shoulder and pressed his cold wet mustache against his cheek, then he slipped, staggered, and, waving both hands, cried:

“Hold on! Don’t upset!”

And laughing, he ran to overtake his companions.

Through the noise came the sound of the artist’s voice:

“Don’t you dare to hit the women! I won’t let you, damnation take you! You scoundrels!”

The medical student appeared in the doorway. He looked from side to side, and seeing Vassilyev, said in an agitated voice:

“You here! I tell you it’s really impossible to go anywhere with Yegor! What a fellow he is! I don’t understand him! He has got up a scene! Do you hear? Yegor!” he shouted at the door. Yegor!”

“I won’t allow you to hit women!” the artist’s piercing voice sounded from above. Something heavy and lumbering rolled down the stairs. It was the artist falling headlong. Evidently he had been pushed downstairs.

He picked himself up from the ground, shook his hat, and, with an angry and indignant face, brandished his fist towards the top of the stairs and shouted:

“Scoundrels! Torturers! Bloodsuckers! I won’t allow you to hit them! To hit a weak, drunken woman! Oh, you brutes! . . .”

“Yegor! . . . Come, Yegor! . . .” the medical student began imploring him. “I give you my word of honor I’ll never come with you again. On my word of honor I won’t!”

Little by little the artist was pacified and the friends went homewards.

“Against my will an unknown force,” hummed the medical student, “has led me to these mournful shores.”

“Behold the mill,” the artist chimed in a little later, “in ruins now. What a lot of snow, Holy Mother! Grisha, why did you go? You are a funk, a regular old woman.”

Vassilyev walked behind his companions, looked at their backs, and thought:

“One of two things: either we only fancy prostitution is an evil, and we exaggerate it; or, if prostitution really is as great an evil as is generally assumed, these dear friends of mine are as much slaveowners, violators, and murderers, as the inhabitants of Syria and Cairo, that are described in the ‘Neva.’ Now they are singing, laughing, talking sense, but haven’t they just been exploiting hunger, ignorance, and stupidity? They have — I have been a witness of it. What is the use of their humanity, their medicine, their painting? The science, art, and lofty sentiments of these soul-destroyers remind me of the piece of bacon in the story. Two brigands murdered a beggar in a forest; they began sharing his clothes between them, and found in his wallet a piece of bacon. ‘Well found,’ said one of them, ‘let us have a bit.’ ‘What do you mean? How can you?’ cried the other in horror. ‘Have you forgotten that to-day is Wednesday?’ And they would not eat it. After murdering a man, they came out of the forest in the firm conviction that they were keeping the fast. In the same way these men, after buying women, go their way imagining that they are artists and men of science. . . .”

“Listen!” he said sharply and angrily. “Why do you come here? Is it possible — is it possible you don’t understand how horrible it is? Your medical books tell you that every one of these women dies prematurely of consumption or something; art tells you that morally they are dead even earlier. Every one of them dies because she has in her time to entertain five hundred men on an average, let us say. Each one of them is killed by five hundred men. You are among those five hundred! If each of you in the course of your lives visits this place or others like it two hundred and fifty times, it follows that one woman is killed for every two of you! Can’t you understand that? Isn’t it horrible to murder, two of you, three of you, five of you, a foolish, hungry woman! Ah! isn’t it awful, my God!”

“I knew it would end like that,” the artist said frowning. “We ought not to have gone with

this fool and ass! You imagine you have grand notions in your head now, ideas, don't you? No, it's the devil knows what, but not ideas. You are looking at me now with hatred and repulsion, but I tell you it's better you should set up twenty more houses like those than look like that. There's more vice in your expression than in the whole street! Come along, Volodya, let him go to the devil! He's a fool and an ass, and that's all. . . ."

"We human beings do murder each other," said the medical student. "It's immoral, of course, but philosophizing doesn't help it. Good-by!"

At Trubnoy Square the friends said good-by and parted. When he was left alone, Vassilyev strode rapidly along the boulevard. He felt frightened of the darkness, of the snow which was falling in heavy flakes on the ground, and seemed as though it would cover up the whole world; he felt frightened of the street lamps shining with pale light through the clouds of snow. His soul was possessed by an unaccountable, faint-hearted terror. Passers-by came towards him from time to time, but he timidly moved to one side; it seemed to him that women, none but women, were coming from all sides and staring at him. . . .

"It's beginning," he thought, "I am going to have a breakdown."

VI

At home he lay on his bed and said, shuddering all over: "They are alive! Alive! My God, those women are alive!"

He encouraged his imagination in all sorts of ways to picture himself the brother of a fallen woman, or her father; then a fallen woman herself, with her painted cheeks; and it all moved him to horror.

It seemed to him that he must settle the question at once at all costs, and that this question was not one that did not concern him, but was his own personal problem. He made an immense effort, repressed his despair, and, sitting on the bed, holding his head in his hands, began thinking how one could save all the women he had seen that day. The method for attacking problems of all kinds was, as he was an educated man, well known to him. And, however excited he was, he strictly adhered to that method. He recalled the history of the problem and its literature, and for a quarter of an hour he paced from one end of the room to the other trying to remember all the methods practiced at the present time for saving women. He had very many good friends and acquaintances who lived in lodgings in Petersburg. . . . Among them were a good many honest and self-sacrificing men. Some of them had attempted to save women. . . .

“All these not very numerous attempts,” thought Vassilyev, “can be divided into three groups. Some, after buying the woman out of the brothel, took a room for her, bought her a sewing-machine, and she became a semptress. And whether he wanted to or not, after having bought her out he made her his mistress; then when he had taken his degree, he went away and handed her into the keeping of some other decent man as though she were a thing. And the fallen woman remained a fallen woman. Others, after buying her out, took a lodging apart for her, bought the inevitable sewing-machine, and tried teaching her to read, preaching at her and giving her books. The woman lived and sewed as long as it was interesting and a novelty to her, then getting bored, began receiving men on the sly, or ran away and went back where she could sleep till three o’clock, drink coffee, and have good dinners. The third class, the most ardent and self-sacrificing, had taken a bold, resolute step. They had married them. And when the insolent and spoilt, or stupid and crushed animal became a wife, the head of a household, and afterwards a mother, it turned her whole existence and attitude to life upside down, so that it was hard to recognize the fallen woman afterwards in the wife and the mother. Yes, marriage was the best and perhaps the only means.”

“But it is impossible!” Vassilyev said aloud, and he sank upon his bed. “I, to begin with, could not marry one! To do that one must be a saint and be unable to feel hatred or repulsion. But supposing that I, the medical student, and the artist mastered ourselves and did marry them — suppose they were all married. What would be the result? The result would be that while here in Moscow they were being married, some Smolensk accountant would be debauching another lot, and that lot would be streaming here to fill the vacant places, together with others from Saratov, Nizhni-Novgorod, Warsaw. . . . And what is one to do with the hundred thousand in London? What’s one to do with those in Hamburg?”

The lamp in which the oil had burnt down began to smoke. Vassilyev did not notice it. He began pacing to and fro again, still thinking. Now he put the question differently: what must be done that fallen women should not be needed? For that, it was essential that the men who buy them and do them to death should feel all the immorality of their share in enslaving them and should be horrified. One must save the men.

“One won’t do anything by art and science, that is clear . . .” thought Vassilyev. “The only way out of it is missionary work.”

And he began to dream how he would the next evening stand at the corner of the street and say to every passer-by: “Where are you going and what for? Have some fear of God!”

He would turn to the apathetic cabmen and say to them: “Why are you staying here? Why aren’t you revolted? Why aren’t you indignant? I suppose you believe in God and know that it is a sin, that people go to hell for it? Why don’t you speak? It is true that they are strangers to you, but you know even they have fathers, brothers like yourselves. . . .”

One of Vassilyev's friends had once said of him that he was a talented man. There are all sorts of talents — talent for writing, talent for the stage, talent for art; but he had a peculiar talent — a talent for *humanity*. He possessed an extraordinarily fine delicate scent for pain in general. As a good actor reflects in himself the movements and voice of others, so Vassilyev could reflect in his soul the sufferings of others. When he saw tears, he wept; beside a sick man, he felt sick himself and moaned; if he saw an act of violence, he felt as though he himself were the victim of it, he was frightened as a child, and in his fright ran to help. The pain of others worked on his nerves, excited him, roused him to a state of frenzy, and so on.

Whether this friend were right I don't know, but what Vassilyev experienced when he thought this question was settled was something like inspiration. He cried and laughed, spoke aloud the words that he should say next day, felt a fervent love for those who would listen to him and would stand beside him at the corner of the street to preach; he sat down to write letters, made vows to himself. . . .

All this was like inspiration also from the fact that it did not last long. Vassilyev was soon tired. The cases in London, in Hamburg, in Warsaw, weighed upon him by their mass as a mountain weighs upon the earth; he felt dispirited, bewildered, in the face of this mass; he remembered that he had not a gift for words, that he was cowardly and timid, that indifferent people would not be willing to listen and understand him, a law student in his third year, a timid and insignificant person; that genuine missionary work included not only teaching but deeds. . . .

When it was daylight and carriages were already beginning to rumble in the street, Vassilyev was lying motionless on the sofa, staring into space. He was no longer thinking of the women, nor of the men, nor of missionary work. His whole attention was turned upon the spiritual agony which was torturing him. It was a dull, vague, undefined anguish akin to misery, to an extreme form of terror and to despair. He could point to the place where the pain was, in his breast under his heart; but he could not compare it with anything. In the past he had had acute toothache, he had had pleurisy and neuralgia, but all that was insignificant compared with this spiritual anguish. In the presence of that pain life seemed loathsome. The dissertation, the excellent work he had written already, the people he loved, the salvation of fallen women — everything that only the day before he had cared about or been indifferent to, now when he thought of them irritated him in the same way as the noise of the carriages, the scurrying footsteps of the waiters in the passage, the daylight. . . . If at that moment someone had performed a great deed of mercy or had committed a revolting outrage, he would have felt the same repulsion for both actions. Of all the thoughts that strayed through his mind only two did not irritate him: one was that at every moment he had the power to kill himself, the other that this agony would not last more than three days. This last he knew by experience.

After lying for a while he got up and, wringing his hands, walked about the room, not as usual from corner to corner, but round the room beside the walls. As he passed he glanced at himself in the looking-glass. His face looked pale and sunken, his temples looked hollow, his eyes were bigger, darker, more staring, as though they belonged to someone else, and they had an expression of insufferable mental agony.

At midday the artist knocked at the door.

“Grigory, are you at home?” he asked.

Getting no answer, he stood for a minute, pondered, and answered himself in Little Russian: “Nay. The confounded fellow has gone to the University.”

And he went away. Vassilyev lay down on the bed and, thrusting his head under the pillow, began crying with agony, and the more freely his tears flowed the more terrible his mental anguish became. As it began to get dark, he thought of the agonizing night awaiting him, and was overcome by a horrible despair. He dressed quickly, ran out of his room, and, leaving his door wide open, for no object or reason, went out into the street. Without asking himself where he should go, he walked quickly along Sadovoy Street.

Snow was falling as heavily as the day before; it was thawing. Thrusting his hands into his sleeves, shuddering and frightened at the noises, at the trambells, and at the passers-by, Vassilyev walked along Sadovoy Street as far as Suharev Tower; then to the Red Gate; from there he turned off to Basmannya Street. He went into a tavern and drank off a big glass of vodka, but that did not make him feel better. When he reached Razgulya he turned to the right, and strode along side streets in which he had never been before in his life. He reached the old bridge by which the Yauza runs gurgling, and from which one can see long rows of lights in the windows of the Red Barracks. To distract his spiritual anguish by some new sensation or some other pain, Vassilyev, not knowing what to do, crying and shuddering, undid his greatcoat and jacket and exposed his bare chest to the wet snow and the wind. But that did not lessen his suffering either. Then he bent down over the rail of the bridge and looked down into the black, yeasty Yauza, and he longed to plunge down head foremost; not from loathing for life, not for the sake of suicide, but in order to bruise himself at least, and by one pain to ease the other. But the black water, the darkness, the deserted banks covered with snow were terrifying. He shivered and walked on. He walked up and down by the Red Barracks, then turned back and went down to a copse, from the copse back to the bridge again

“No, home, home!” he thought. “At home I believe it’s better. . . .”

And he went back. When he reached home he pulled off his wet coat and cap, began pacing

round the room, and went on pacing round and round without stopping till morning.

VII

When next morning the artist and the medical student went in to him, he was moving about the room with his shirt torn, biting his hands and moaning with pain.

“For God’s sake!” he sobbed when he saw his friends, “take me where you please, do what you can; but for God’s sake, save me quickly! I shall kill myself!”

The artist turned pale and was helpless. The medical student, too, almost shed tears, but considering that doctors ought to be cool and composed in every emergency said coldly:

“It’s a nervous breakdown. But it’s nothing. Let us go at once to the doctor.”

“Wherever you like, only for God’s sake, make haste”

“Don’t excite yourself. You must try and control yourself.”

The artist and the medical student with trembling hands put Vassilyev’s coat and hat on and led him out into the street.

“Mihail Sergeyitch has been wanting to make your acquaintance for a long time,” the medical student said on the way. “He is a very nice man and thoroughly good at his work. He took his degree in 1882, and he has an immense practice already. He treats students as though he were one himself.”

“Make haste, make haste! . . .” Vassilyev urged.

Mihail Sergeyitch, a stout, fair-haired doctor, received the friends with politeness and frigid dignity, and smiled only on one side of his face.

“Rybnikov and Mayer have spoken to me of your illness already,” he said. “Very glad to be of service to you. Well? Sit down, I beg. . . .”

He made Vassilyev sit down in a big armchair near the table, and moved a box of cigarettes towards him.

“Now then!” he began, stroking his knees. “Let us get to work. . . . How old are you?”

He asked questions and the medical student answered them. He asked whether Vassilyev's father had suffered from certain special diseases, whether he drank to excess, whether he were remarkable for cruelty or any peculiarities. He made similar inquiries about his grandfather, mother, sisters, and brothers. On learning that his mother had a beautiful voice and sometimes acted on the stage, he grew more animated at once, and asked:

"Excuse me, but don't you remember, perhaps, your mother had a passion for the stage?"

Twenty minutes passed. Vassilyev was annoyed by the way the doctor kept stroking his knees and talking of the same thing.

"So far as I understand your questions, doctor," he said, "you want to know whether my illness is hereditary or not. It is not."

The doctor proceeded to ask Vassilyev whether he had had any secret vices as a boy, or had received injuries to his head; whether he had had any aberrations, any peculiarities, or exceptional propensities. Half the questions usually asked by doctors of their patients can be left unanswered without the slightest ill effect on the health, but Mihail Sergeyitch, the medical student, and the artist all looked as though if Vassilyev failed to answer one question all would be lost. As he received answers, the doctor for some reason noted them down on a slip of paper. On learning that Vassilyev had taken his degree in natural science, and was now studying law, the doctor pondered.

"He wrote a first-rate piece of original work last year, . . ." said the medical student.

"I beg your pardon, but don't interrupt me; you prevent me from concentrating," said the doctor, and he smiled on one side of his face. "Though, of course, that does enter into the diagnosis. Intense intellectual work, nervous exhaustion. . . . Yes, yes. . . . And do you drink vodka?" he said, addressing Vassilyev.

"Very rarely."

Another twenty minutes passed. The medical student began telling the doctor in a low voice his opinion as to the immediate cause of the attack, and described how the day before yesterday the artist, Vassilyev, and he had visited S. Street.

The indifferent, reserved, and frigid tone in which his friends and the doctor spoke of the women and that miserable street struck Vassilyev as strange in the extreme. . . .

"Doctor, tell me one thing only," he said, controlling himself so as not to speak rudely. "Is prostitution an evil or not?"

“My dear fellow, who disputes it?” said the doctor, with an expression that suggested that he had settled all such questions for himself long ago. “Who disputes it?”

“You are a mental doctor, aren’t you?” Vassilyev asked curtly.

“Yes, a mental doctor.”

“Perhaps all of you are right!” said Vassilyev, getting up and beginning to walk from one end of the room to the other. “Perhaps! But it all seems marvelous to me! That I should have taken my degree in two faculties you look upon as a great achievement; because I have written a work which in three years will be thrown aside and forgotten, I am praised up to the skies; but because I cannot speak of fallen women as unconcernedly as of these chairs, I am being examined by a doctor, I am called mad, I am pitied!”

Vassilyev for some reason felt all at once unutterably sorry for himself, and his companions, and all the people he had seen two days before, and for the doctor; he burst into tears and sank into a chair.

His friends looked inquiringly at the doctor. The latter, with the air of completely comprehending the tears and the despair, of feeling himself a specialist in that line, went up to Vassilyev and, without a word, gave him some medicine to drink; and then, when he was calmer, undressed him and began to investigate the degree of sensibility of the skin, the reflex action of the knees, and so on.

And Vassilyev felt easier. When he came out from the doctor’s he was beginning to feel ashamed; the rattle of the carriages no longer irritated him, and the load at his heart grew lighter and lighter as though it were melting away. He had two prescriptions in his hand: one was for bromide, one was for morphia. . . . He had taken all these remedies before.

In the street he stood still and, saying good-by to his friends, dragged himself languidly to the University.