Measles

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Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

I

It was before dinner and Dr. Iliashenko had just finished bathing with a student named Voskresenski. The warm, southeast wind had whipped the sea into eddies. Close to the shore, the water was murky and had a sharp smell of fish and sea-plants. The hot, swinging waves did not cool and refresh one's body, but on the contrary, fatigued and unnerved it still more.

"Come on out, my colleague," the doctor exclaimed as he splashed a handful of water over his own large white stomach. "We shall get faint if we go on bathing like this."

From the bathing-machine, they had to climb up the mountain along a narrow path which was laid in friable black slate, zigzag fashion, covered with small rough oak and pale green sea-cole heads. Voskresceski climbed up easily, his long muscular legs moving in spacious strides. But the fat doctor, who wore a wet towel instead of a hat, succumbed to the heat and to his asthma. He came to a dead stop at last with his hand on his heart, shaking his head and breathing laboriously.

"Phew! I can't stick it any longer. I'd almost rather be back in the water. Let's stop for a minute."

They halted in a flat circle between two joints of the path, and both of them turned round to face the sea.

Flogged by the wind, now dazzlingly lit up by the sun, now shadowed by clouds—it was a medley of patches of colour. By the shore, the white foam melted into a large fringe of tulle lace on the sand; further out ran a dirty ribbon of light chocolate colour, still further lay a miserable green band, all wrinkled up and furrowed by the crests of the waves, and last of all—the powerful, tranquil bluishness of the deep sea with those fantastically bright spots—sometimes of deep purple, sometimes of a tender malachite colour, with unexpected shining pieces like ice covered with snow. The whole of this living mosaic seemed to be belted at the horizon by the black, quiet, motionless ribbon of the shoreless distance.

"All the same, it's good, isn't it?" said the doctor. "It's a beauty, isn't it? Eh?"

He stretched out his short arm, fat like an infant's, and with widespread fingers theatrically

stroked, as it were, the course of the sea.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Voskresenski answered with a half-affected yawn, “but one soon gets sick of it. It’s just decoration.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve eaten it. There’s a yarn about that sort of thing,” Iliashenko explained. “A soldier came home to his village after the war. Well, of course, he lies like an elephant and the village folk were naturally wonder-struck: ‘We went,’ says he, ‘to the Balkans, that is to say, into the very clouds, right into the middle of them.’ ‘Oh, dear, have you really been in the clouds?’ The soldier answered indifferently: ‘Well, what are the clouds to us? We ate them the same as jelly.’ ”

Dr. Iliashenko loved telling stories, particularly those from the life of the people and from Jewish life. Deep down in his heart, he thought that it was only through a caprice of destiny that he had not become an actor. At home he would madden his wife and children with Ostrovski, and, when paying his patients a visit, he liked to recite Nikitine’s “The Driver,” for which he would unfailingly rise to his feet, turn a chair round, and lean on its back with his hands turned outwards. He read in the most unnatural, internal voice, as though he were a ventriloquist, under the impression that this was how a Russian muzhik would speak.

After telling the story about the soldier he immediately burst out into a free, boisterous laugh. Voskresenski forced himself to smile.

“You see, doctor, the south …” he began in his jaded way, as though he had difficulty in choosing his words. “I’m not fond of the south. Here everything … somehow or other … is oily … somehow … I don’t know … excessive. Look at that magnolia … but forgive me for asking, is it a plant? It seems as if it had been made up out of cardboard, painted green, and varnished at the top. Then look at Nature here. The sun goes up from the sea, we have the heat, in the evening it goes over the mountains and it is night at once. No birds! Nothing of our northern dawn with the smell of young grass in it, nothing of the poetry, of twilight with the beetles, the nightingales, the stamp of cattle trotting in the dust. It’s all opera scenery, but it isn’t Nature.”

“In your hou … se,” the doctor sang in a hoarse little tenor. “Of course you are a Moscow town bird.”

“And these moonlit nights, deuce take them!” Voskresenski continued, as old thoughts which, up till now, he had kept to himself, stirred in him with new force. “It’s a perfect torment. The sea is glossy, the stones are glossy, the trees are glossy. It’s a regular oleography; the stupid cicadas squall; you can’t hide from the moon. It’s sickening, and somehow or other you get agitated as if someone were tickling you in the nose with a straw.”

“What a barbarian you are! Why, in that Moscow of yours they’re having twenty-five degrees of frost, and even the policemen are almost frozen, while here the roses are in full bloom and one can bathe.”

“And I don’t like the southern people either,” the student went on, following stubbornly his own thoughts. “Rotten little people, lazy, sensual, with narrow foreheads, sly, dirty; they gobble up any sort of filth. Even their poetry is somehow or other oily and mawkish; in a word, I can’t bear them.”

The doctor pulled up again, swung his arms and made round, stupefied eyes.

“Tu-tu-tu,” he went in a long whistle. “Et tu, Brute? I catch in your words the spirit of our honoured patron. The Russian song, the Russian shirt, eh? The Russian God, and the Russian largeness? The Jews, the Sheenies, the Poles, and the other poor devils, eh?”

“That’s enough, Ivan Nikolaevitch. Stop that,” Voskresenski said curtly. His face had grown suddenly pale and wrinkled as though from toothache. “There is nothing to laugh at in this. You know my point of view very well. If I haven’t run away from this parrot, this fool, up till now, it is only because one must eat, but it’s all much more saddening than funny. It’s enough that for twenty-five roubles a month I deny myself every day the delight of expressing what suffocates me—strangles my very throat, what lowers all my thoughts.”

“First rate; but why get so hot about it?”

“Oh, I’d like to tell him many things,” the student exclaimed, furiously shaking his strong fist, which was whitened by the tension of the muscles. “I’d like to—Oh, this buffoon … Well, never mind—we’re not strapped to each other for a century.”

Suddenly the doctor’s eyes narrowed and glittered. He took hold of Voskresenski’s arm and, leaning his head playfully against his shoulder, whispered: “Listen, my boy; why boil up like this? What sense is there in insulting Zavalishine? It will only mean a row in a noble house, as one says, just that. You had much better combine the sweetness of vengeance with the delights of love. What about Anna Georgievna—eh? Or has that come off already?”

The student remained silent and tried to free his arm from the doctor’s hand. But the other pressed it still more tightly and continued to whisper, his laughing eyes playing all the time:

“You queer fellow, you’ve no notion of taste. The woman is thirty-five years old, in full bloom, all fire—and her figure! Haven’t you had enough of playing Joseph? She looks at you the way a cat looks at cream. Why be too scrupulous in your own country? Remember the

aphorism: A woman with experience is like a cherry picked by a sparrow—it's all the sweeter. Ah, where is my youth?" he began theatrically in a high-pitched, bleating, throaty voice. "Where is my youth? Where is my thick crop of hair, my thirty-two teeth in my mouth, my—"

Voskresenski managed at last to free himself from the doctor's clutch, but he did this so roughly that they both felt awkward.

"Forgive me, Ivan Nikolaevitch, but I simply can't listen to such meanness. It isn't bashfulness, it isn't chastity, but it merely feels dirty, and—speaking generally—I don't like it. I can't—"

The doctor threw up his arms mockingly and slapped his thighs: "My dear fellow, you mean that you can't take a joke? Personally, I have the greatest respect for other people's convictions and, honestly, I rejoice to see among the youth of today so many who look on these matters cleanly and honestly. But why can't one joke a little without your spreading your tail like a peacock immediately? Why?"

"Forgive me," the student said, in a muffled voice.

"Ah, my dear fellow, that's not why I am saying all this. The fact is, you've got into a twitching state, the whole lot of you young fellows. Look at you, a strong man with a big chest and shoulders—why, your nerves are like a schoolgirl's. By the by, look here," the doctor went on in a businesslike tone, "you oughtn't to bathe quite so often, particularly in such a hot spell. Not being used to it, you know, you might bathe yourself into a serious illness. One of my patients contracted a nervous eczema through overdoses of sea-bathing."

They were now walking along the last open stretch of the path, which had become practically smooth. To their right, the mountain rose almost to a perpendicular, while behind them, in the distance, the boiling sea seethed endlessly. To their left, bushes of dog-roses, covered with tender pink blossoms, clung to the slope, projecting above the reddish-yellow earth and the grey corked stones that resembled the backs of recumbent animals. The student was glancing at the ground between his feet with a look of angry confusion.

"It has turned out so badly," he thought with a frown. "Yes, somehow it has turned out stupidly. As a matter of fact, the doctor's a good sort, always attentive, patient, even-tempered. It's true that he's sometimes a bit of a clown, a chatterbox, reads nothing, uses bad language and has got slack, thanks to his easygoing practice at a healthresort. … But all the same, he's a good fellow and I've been brusque and rude to him—"

In the meanwhile, Iliashenko was carelessly knocking off with his walking-stick the little

thin white flowers that smelt like bitter almonds, while he sang to himself in an undertone:

“In your hou … se I knew fi … rst

The sweetness of a pure and tender love.”

II

They turned out on to the road. Over a high white wall, as massive as that of a fortress, rose a villa, ingeniously and stridently built after the pattern of a stylish Russian gynaeceum, with seahorses and dragons on the roof, the shutters ornamented with variegated flowers and herbs, and carved doorways, with twisted little bottle-shaped colonnades on the balconies. This pretentious, gingerbread-like construction produced a ponderous and incoherent impression in the full blaze of the Crimean sky, against the background of the aerial grey-bluish mountains, amid the dark, pensive, elegant cypresses and powerful plane-trees, covered from top to bottom with plush-like moss, in proximity to the beautiful joyous sea. But the owner of the villa, Pavel Arkadievitch Zavalishine—an ex-cornet of cavalry, afterwards an estate-agent, later on an attorney in a big port town in the south, and now a well-known dealer in naphtha, a shipowner, and the president of the stock exchange committee—was conscious of no incongruity.

“I am a Russian, and I have the right to despise all those renaissances, rococos, and gothics,” he would shout sometimes, striking his chest. “We’re not bound by what they think abroad. We’ve had enough of that in the past. We’ve bowed down to them enough. We have our own strong, original, creative power, and for a Russian gentleman like me there is only one thing to do, and that is to spit on all this foreignness.”

The table was already laid on the enormous lower balcony. They were waiting for Zavalishine, who had just arrived from town and was changing his clothes in his bedroom. Anna Georgievna was leaning languidly back in a rocking-chair, overcome with the heat. She wore a light peignoir of Moldavian stuff, gold-embroidered with large sleeves slit up underneath almost to the shoulders. She was still very handsome, with a heavy, assured, superb beauty—the beauty of a plump, well-preserved brunette of the southern type.

“Good morning, Doctor,” she said in a deep voice, and with a slight burr. “Why didn’t you guess that we wanted you yesterday? I had such a migraine.”

Without raising herself from the armchair, she lazily stretched out her hand to Ivan Nikolaevitch, while her drooping sleeve revealed her round, full shoulder with its white

vaccination mark, the small blue veins in the inner curve of the elbow, and a dark, pretty little mole slightly higher up the arm. Anna Georgievna (she insisted for some reason or other on being called “Nina” instead of Anna) knew the value of her hands and liked to show them.

The doctor leaned over the outstretched hand so respectfully that she had to pull it away by force.

“You see what a gallant doctor we have,” she said as she glanced at Voskresenski with laughing, caressing eyes. “You never kiss ladies’ hands. What a bear you are! Come here, and I’ll make your tie for you. You dress goodness knows how.”

The student came up awkwardly and, as he leaned over her, he caught through the strong aroma of her perfume the smell of her hair as the light agile fingers ran round his neck.

Voskresenski was chaste in the straightforward, healthy meaning of the word. Naturally, from the time that he entered his Lycée, he could not help learning everything about the most intimate relations of the sexes, but he never dreamed of doing what his comrades boasted of openly. The tranquil, healthy blood of an old Church family showed itself in him. For all that, he had no sanctimonious, hypocritical anathemas for the “shameless men.” He would listen indifferently to what was said on the subject and he would make no protest against those little anecdotes without which no conversation is possible in Russian intellectual society.

He knew well what Anna Georgievna’s constant playfulness really meant. When saying “good morning” or “goodbye,” she would keep his hand lingeringly in her soft, feminine and, at the same time, strong, fingers. Under the mask of playfulness, she liked to ruffle his hair, sometimes called him patronisingly by the diminutive of his name, and would say in front of him risky things with a double meaning. If by any chance they were looking over an album together or happened to be leaning side by side over the balcony watching a steamer out at sea, she would always press against him with her large bust and he would feel her hot breath on his neck, while the curls of her hard hair tickled his cheek.

And she roused in the student a medley of strange, mixed feelings—fear, shame, passionate desire and disgust. When he thought about her she seemed to him just as exaggerated and unnatural as southern Nature. Her eyes seemed much too expressive and liquid, her hair much too dark, her lips unnaturally bright. The lazy, backward, unprincipled, sensual southern woman could be detected in every one of her movements, in every smile. If she came too close to him he could even detect, through her clothes, the warmth oozing up from her large, over-developed body.

Two schoolboys, Voskresenski’s pupils, and three little girls were seated at the table

dangling their feet. Voskresenski glanced at them sideways as he stooped, and suddenly he felt ashamed of himself, ashamed for them and particularly for their mother's warm bare hands which were moving so close to his lips. Unexpectedly he drew himself up and said with a red face and a hoarse voice:

"Excuse me, I'll tie it myself."

Zavalishine was now on the balcony dressed in a fantastic national costume, a silk kaftan with a blue silk Russian shirt and high patent leather boots. This costume, which he always wore at home, made him resemble one of those provincial contractors who are so willing to exploit to the merchant-class their large Russian nature and their clothes in the Russian style. The likeness was completed by a heavy gold chain across his stomach which tinkled with dozens of trinkets.

Zavalishine came towards the group with a quick, heavy step, carrying his head high and smoothing picturesquely each side of his fluffy beard, which was turning slightly grey. As he came, the children jumped up from the table. Anna Georgievna rose slowly from her rocking-chair.

"Good morning, Ivan Nikolaevitch. Good morning, Cicero," said Zavalishine, as he stretched out his hand carelessly to the doctor and the student. "I have kept you waiting, perhaps? Boris, grace."

Boris, with a frightened expression, jabbered out: "Our Father, which art in Heaven."

"Now, gentlemen," said Zavalishine, waving towards the table. "Doctor, some vodka?"

The hors d'oeuvre were laid on a small side table. The doctor approached it, walking like a buffoon, stooping a little, bowing, clicking his heels together and rubbing his hands.

"A man was once offered some vodka," he began, as usual trying to be funny, "and he answered 'No, thank you; firstly, I don't drink, secondly, it's too early, and thirdly, I've had a drink already.' "

"Twentieth edition," observed Zavalishine. "Have some caviar."

He pushed over to the doctor a large wooden bucket in which a silver fish-basin of caviar was standing in ice.

"How can you drink vodka in such heat?" Anna Georgievna exclaimed, with a grimace.

Her husband looked at her solemnly, as he held to his lips a silver embossed goblet.

“There’s no harm in vodka for a Russian man,” he replied imposingly.

And the doctor, having finished his glass, quacked loudly and added in the bass voice of a deacon:

“This was in time, anyhow. Well, Pavel Arkadievitch? Does Father Meleti order a third one?”

A man in a dress suit was serving at table. Formerly he used to wear something like a coachman’s sleeveless coat, but one fine day Anna Georgievna discovered that it was improper for masters and servants to deck themselves out almost in the same costumes, and she insisted on a European dress for the footmen. On the other hand, all the dining-room furniture and ornaments displayed that restless, racking style which is called Russian decadence. Instead of a table, there was a long chest, closed on every side, and as one sat in front of it it was impossible to move one’s feet forward. One had to keep them cramped all the time, while one’s knees would be painfully knocking against the protuberances of the carved ornaments and one had to stretch to reach one’s plate. The heavy, low chairs, with high backs and widespread arms, were hard and uncomfortable, like wooden stage thrones. The wooden cans for kvass, the water-jugs and the wine ewers were of such monstrous dimensions and of such absurd shapes that one had to stand up to pour out from them. And all these things were carved, burnished, and adorned with multicoloured peacocks, fish, flowers, and the inevitable cock.

“One eats nowhere as one does in Russia,” Zavalishine began in a juicy voice, arranging his napkin in his collar with his white hairy hands. “Yes, Mr. Student, I know you don’t like to hear that, but unfortunately, that’s how it is. Take fish, to begin with. Where in the whole world will you find another Astrakan caviar? And the sterlets from Kama, the sturgeons, the salmon from the Dvina, the fish from Belozer? Be kind enough to tell me if you can find in France anything to match the Ladoga fish or the Gatchina trout. I’d just like you to find them! I beg you to do it with all my heart. Now take game: we have everything you can wish for and everything in abundance: wood-hens, heath-hens, duck, snipe, pheasants from the Caucasus, woodcocks. Then just think of our Tcherkass meat, Rostov sucking-pig, the Nijni cucumber, the Moscow milk-calf. In a word, we’ve got everything … Serguei, give me some more botvinia soup.”

Pavel Arkadievitch ate a great deal in an unpleasant and gluttonly way. He must have had hungry days in his youth, thought the student, looking at him sideways. Sometimes, in the middle of a sentence, Zavalishine would put too large a morsel into his mouth and then there would be a long torturing pause, during which he would chew with objectionable haste while he looked at his interlocutor with his eyes starting out of his head, grunting, moving his eyebrows and impatiently shaking his head and even his whole body. During such

pauses, Voskresenski would lower his eyes so as to conceal his antipathy.

“Wine, Doctor?” Zavalishine offered it with careless politeness. “Let me recommend this little white label. It’s Orianda ’93. Your glass, Demosthenes.”

“I don’t drink, Pavel Arkadievitch. You’ll excuse me.”

“This is as-ton-ishing. A young man who doesn’t drink and doesn’t smoke. It’s a bad sign.” Zavalishine suddenly raised his voice severely. “A bad sign. I’m always suspicious of a young fellow who neither drinks nor smokes. He’s either a miser or a gambler or a loose-liver. Pardon, I’m not referring to you, Mr. Empedocles. Another glass, Doctor? This is Orianda—really not half a bad sort of little wine. One asks oneself why one should get from the sausage-merchants different Moselle wines and other kinds of sourness, when they make such delicious wine right at home in our own Mother Russia. Eh, what do you think, Professor?” He addressed the student in his provoking way.

Voskresenski gave a forced smile.

“Everyone to his own taste.”

“ ‘De gustibus?’ I know. I’ve had a little learning, too, in my time. Besides, somewhere or other—it doesn’t matter where or how—the great Dostoevsky has expressed the same idea. Wine, of course, is nothing in itself, mere Kinderspiel, but the principle is important. The principle is important, I tell you,” he suddenly shouted. “If I am a true Russian, then everything round me must be Russian. And I want to spit on the Germans and the French. And on the Jews too. Isn’t it so, Doctor? Am I not speaking the truth?”

“Ye-es; in fact—the principle—that is, of course, yes,” Iliashenko said vaguely in his bass voice and with a gesture of doubt.

“I’m proud of being a Russian,” Zavalishine went on with heat. “Oh, I see perfectly that my convictions seem merely funny to you, Mr. Student, and, so to speak, barbarous. But what about it? Take me as I am. I speak my thoughts and opinions straight out, because I’m a straight man, a real Russian, who is accustomed to speaking his mind. Yes, I say, straight out to everyone: we’ve had enough of standing on our hind legs before Europe. Let her be afraid of us, not we of her. Let them feel that the last decisive powerful word is for the great, glorious, healthy Russian people and not for those cockroaches’ remains! Glory be to God …” Zavalishine suddenly crossed himself expansively, looked up at the ceiling, and gave a sob. “Thank God that you can find now more and more of those people who are beginning to understand that the short-tailed German jacket is already cracking on the mighty Russian shoulders. These people are not ashamed of their language, of their faith, of their country, and confidently they stretch out their hands to the wise Government and say: ‘Lead us.’ ”

“Paul, you’re getting excited,” Anna Georgievna remarked lazily.

“I’m not getting in the least excited,” her husband snarled angrily. “I’m only expressing what every honest Russian subject ought to think and feel. Perhaps someone is not of my opinion? Well then, let him answer me. I am ready to listen with pleasure to a different opinion. There, for instance, it seems funny to Mr. Vozdvijenski …”

The student did not raise his downcast eyes, but became pale and his nostrils quivered and dilated.

“My name is Voskresenski,” he said in a low voice.

“I beg your pardon, that’s exactly what I meant to say: Voznesenski. I beg your pardon. Well, I just ask you this: instead of making wry faces, hadn’t you better break down my arguments, show me my error, prove that I’m not right? I say this one thing: we’re spitting into our own soup. They’re selling our holy, mighty, adored country to any sort of foreign riffraff. Who manage our naphtha? The Sheenies, the Armenians, the Americans. In whose hands are the coal, the mines, the steamers, the electricity? In the hands of Sheenies, Belgians, Germans. Who have got the sugar factories? The Sheenies, the Germans, the Poles. And above all, everywhere, the Sheeny, the Sheeny, the Sheeny. … Who are our doctors? Sheenies. Who are our chemists, bankers, barristers? To Hell with the whole lot of you! The whole of our Russian literature dances to the Sheenies’ tune and never gets out of it. Why are you making such terrible eyes at me, Anitchka? You don’t know what that means? I’ll explain later. Yes, there’s point in the joke that every Sheeny is a born Russian littérateur. Oh, my goodness, the Sheenies, the Israelites, the Zionists, the Innocents oppressed, the Holy Tribe. I’ll say just this.”—Zavalishine struck the edge of the table loudly and fiercely with his outstretched finger—“I’ll say just this: Here, wherever you turn, you’re confronted with the mug of some noble affronted nation. Liberty, Language, National Rights. And we go into ecstasies under their noses. Oh, poor cultured Finland! Oh, unhappy enslaved Poland! Ah, the great tormented Jewish race. … Beat us, my pigeons, despise us, trample us under your feet, sit on our backs and drive! B-ut no—” Zavalishine roared in a threatening voice, growing suddenly scarlet and rolling his eyes. “No,” he repeated, striking himself on the chest with all his force. “This scandal is going to end. Up till now, the Russian people has been only scratching himself, half asleep; but tomorrow, with God’s blessing, he will awake. And then he will shake off from himself the mischievous Radical in-tel-lec-tuals as a dog would a flea, and will squeeze so tightly in his mighty palm all these innocents oppressed, all these dirty little Sheenies, Ukrainians, and Poles, that the sap will spurt out from them on all sides. And to Europe he will merely say: ‘Stand up, you dog.’ ”

“Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!” the doctor broke in with a voice like a gramophone.

The schoolboys, who had been frightened at first by the shouting, burst into a loud laugh at this, but Anna Georgievna said with a look of suffering:

“Paul, why do you go on like this in front of the children?”

Zavalishine drained a glass of wine at a gulp and poured out another hastily.

“Pardon, it slipped out. But I will say this, I was expressing my convictions just now, honestly and sincerely at least. Now let them—that is, I meant to say, let Mr. Student here, let him refute what I say, let him convince me. I’m ready for him. It would be very much more honest than to evade it by wry little smiles.”

Voskresenski shrugged his shoulders slowly.

“I’m not smiling at all.”

“Ah! You don’t even give yourself the trouble of answering? Of course. That is the be-s-t of all. You stand so high above any discussion or proofs?”

“No, not in the least above. But it’s like this—we’ll never understand each other. What’s the use of getting angry and spoiling one’s temper?”

“Quite so. I understand. You’re too high and mighty then?” Zavalishine was getting drunk and beginning to roar. “Ah, it’s a pity, a great pity, my precious youth. It would have been such a treat to enjoy the milk of your wisdom.”

At this instant Voskresenski raised his eyes towards Zavalishine for the first time. Suddenly he felt a wave of keen hatred for his round, light, protruding eyes, for his red nose, that seemed to be torn at the nostrils, for his white, bald, retreating forehead and his preposterous beard. And instinctively, as if against his will, he began to speak in a faint, stifled voice that was almost a stranger’s.

“You insist on dragging me into a discussion. But I assure you that it’s useless. Everything that you were good enough to express just now with such fire, I have heard and read hundreds of times. Hostility to everything European, a rancorous spite against kindred races, ecstacy before the might of the Russian fist, and so on, and soon … All this has been said, written, and preached on every doorstep. But what has the people here to do with it all, Pavel Arkadievitch?—that’s what I don’t understand. That’s what I cannot understand. The people—that is to say, not your valet or your porter or your workmen, but the people who composes the whole of Russia—the obscure muzhik, the troglodyte, the cave man, why have you buttoned him up in your national dreams? He is silent because he is thriving. You had better not touch him. Leave him in peace. It is not for you or for me to guess at his silence—”

“Allow me! My knowledge of the people is no worse than yours—”

“No,” the student interrupted impertinently. “Allow me now, please. You were good enough, a few minutes ago, to reproach me for laughing at your verbiage. Well, I will tell you now that there is nothing funny in it, just as there is nothing terrible. Your ideal, the a-all-Russian f-ist squeezing the sap out of all the little peoples, is dangerous to no one, but is merely repulsive, like every symbol of violence. You’re not a malady, not an ulcer, you are simply an inevitable, annoying rash, a kind of measles. But your comedy of the large Russian nature, all these symbols of yours—your Russian kaftan, your patriotic tears—yes, all this is really funny.”

“Ah, excellent. Go on, young man, in the same spirit,” Zavalishine said caustically with a grimace on his lips. “It’s a delicious system of polemics, isn’t it. Doctor?”

For his part Voskresenski felt in his heart that he was speaking loosely, clumsily, and confusedly, but he could not stop now. In his brain there was the sensation of a strange, cold void. His feet had become slack and heavy and his heart seemed to have fallen somewhere deep down and to be quivering there and breaking from too frequent strokes.

“What does the system matter? To the devil with it!” he exclaimed, and this exclamation flew out unexpectedly in such a full, strong sound that he suddenly experienced a fierce and joyous pleasure. “I have been too silent during these two months to pick and choose a system. Yes. One is ashamed and pitiful and amused in turn at your comedy, Pavel Arkadievitch. You know the strolling minstrels who sing in the recreation gardens in summer? You know the sort of thing—the hackneyed Russian song. It is something torturingly false, impudent, disgraceful. The same with you: ‘The Russian soup, the Russian kacha—our mother Russia.’ Have you ever had a look at the people’s soups? Have you ever had a real taste of it? One day with something to eat, and the next day with nothing at all. Have you tasted the peasants’ bread? Have you seen their children with swollen stomachs and legs like wheels? And in your house your cook gets sixty roubles a month, and the valet wears dress clothes, and the sterliadka is steamed. That’s how you are in everything. Russian patience. Russian iron endurance. But with what horrors of slavery, on what a bloodstained road was this patience bought! It is even ludicrous! Russian invincible health—give way to the shoulder there!—the Russian giant strength—have we got it in this huge, overworked, overstrained, famished, drunken man? And then, to cap everything, the frantic yell: ‘Down with European coats and dress clothes! Let us go back to our good, glorious, vast and picturesque Russian national clothes.’ And then, to the amusement of your servants, you masquerade in a Russian kaftan at seven roubles a yard with a moire lining. All your nationalism is silk-lined. My God! and when you start talking about the Russian songs, what rubbish! In it you hear the sea, and see the steppe, you catch the voice of the forest and some kind of boundless daring. But there is no truth in all this: you hear nothing, you feel

nothing beyond the sick groaning or the drunken hiccup. And you do not see any kind of large steppe, because it has no existence, and there is only a sweating face distorted by torture, swollen veins, bloodshot eyes, an open, sanguinary mouth ...”

“For you clergy it is easier to see from the belfry,” Zavalishine sneered scornfully.

But the student only waved him aside and went on:

“Then Russian architecture came into fashion, if you please. Carved cocks, some sort of wooden dressers, mugs, ewers, sunflowers, armchairs and benches on which it is impossible to sit, with idiotic covers. Good Lord! but don’t you feel how all this accentuates the frightful poverty of our national life, the narrowness and the lack of fantasy? A grey crepuscular creation, a Papuan architecture. A game, that’s what it is precisely. A vile game, if all this is done purposely to lead the fools and gapers by the nose; a miserable one if it is merely a fashionable fad, a sort of stupid disguise, as if the doctors in charge of a hospital were suddenly to put on hospital dressing-gowns and dance a cancan in them. That’s what it is, your Russian fashion with the moire lining.”

Something caught Voskresenski at the throat and he became silent. Now for the first time he realised that, in the course of his rambling speech, he had unconsciously risen to his feet and was banging his fists on the table.

“Perhaps you’d like to add something more, young man?” Zavalishine asked with forced politeness and in a voice of exaggerated softness. He was white, his lips were grimacing and twitching and the ends of his full beard shook visibly.

“That’s all,” the student answered in a dull tone. “There’s nothing else. ...”

“Then kindly let me have the last word.” Zavalishine rose from his place and threw down his napkin.

“Convictions are convictions, and fidelity to them is a respectable virtue. But all the same, I have to answer for my children, to my country, and my Church. Yes, I am obliged to defend them from evil, from deteriorating influences. And so—I ask you to forgive me—but one of us, either I or you, will have to retire from their education.”

Voskresenski made a sign with his head without speaking. Pavel Arkadievitch wheeled round sharply and left the table with long strides. But he stopped at the door. He was stifling with rage. He felt that the student had shown a moral superiority in this absurd discussion, a superiority obtained, not by conviction of thought, not by arguments, but by a youthful, untrammelled and, though nonsensical, a beautiful passion. And he wanted, before leaving the room, to give the tutor the last insult, a heavier one, with more sting in it.

…

“My man will bring you the money due to you upstairs,” he said through his nose in a jerky, self-satisfied way. “And also, as arranged, your journey money.”

And he went out, banging the door so noisily that the cut glass rang and vibrated on the table.

For a long time everyone was awkwardly silent on the balcony.

Voskresenski, with cold trembling fingers, was making bread pills as he bent low over the table. It seemed to him that even little six-year-old Vavotchka was looking at him with curiosity and contemptuous pity.

Shall I go after him and slap his face? Challenge him to a duel? How badly and miserably it has all turned out! Shall I give him back his money? Throw it in his face? Faugh! what a miserable business.

All these reflections flashed at random through his brain.

“Dear Sachenka,” Anna Georgievna spoke in a caressing voice as if to a child, “don’t attach any importance to this. It really isn’t worth it. In an hour he will admit that he was wrong, and he’ll apologise. To tell you the truth, you, too, said a good deal to him.”

He made no answer. He wanted, more than anything in the world, to get up at once and go somewhere far away, to hide in some dark, cool corner; but a complex, torturing indecision chained him to his place. The doctor began to speak about something or other too loudly and in an unnatural, detached tone. “That’s because he’s ashamed on my account,” Voskresenski thought to himself, and he listened, scarcely understanding the words:

“One of my acquaintances who knows Arabic very well used to compare Arabian sayings with our Russian ones. There are some most curious parallels. For instance, the Arabs say: ‘Honesty is a diamond, which makes a pauper the Sultan’s equal.’ And in Russian it comes out: ‘What about honesty if there’s nothing to eat?’ The same about hospitality. The Arabian proverb says …”

Voskresenski rose suddenly. Without looking at anyone, his eyes downcast, he went awkwardly round the table and rushed across the balcony to the flower garden, where there was a sweet and heavy scent of roses. Behind him, he could hear Anna Georgievna’s troubled voice:

“Sachenka, Alexander Petrovitch, where are you going? We’re having dessert at once …”

III

In his room upstairs, Voskresenski changed his clothes, pulled out from under the bed his old reddish box plastered all over with labels, and began to pack. Into it he flung furiously books and lectures, squeezed in his linen, crumpled anyhow in his precipitation, and furiously tightened the ropes and straps. As his physical force, whipped up by the recent explosion of still unsatisfied anger, was spending itself, he became slightly cooler and calmer.

His packing finished, he drew himself up and looked round. All of a sudden he regretted leaving his room, as if in it he were leaving a part of himself. As soon as he woke up in the morning, he had only to raise his head from the pillow to see right in front of him the dark blue stripe of the sea just level with the windows. The light, pink, transparent blind would be gently trembling from the breeze and the whole room would be so full of morning light, so impregnated by a strong and invigorating sea air, that in the early days, on waking up, the student used often to laugh aloud from some inner unconscious joy of life.

Voskresenski went on to the balcony. Far out in front, a long narrow cape, rounded at the end, jutted out into the sea. This rounded part was called the Battery, and behind it, circling it sharply, a small steamer was heading out to sea. Its panting snorts, like the heavy breathing of a dog, could be heard distinctly. Under the white awning, dark human figures were distinguishable. The steam-launch rocked a little, but boldly clambered up each wave and rolled over it, tucking its nose gallantly into the next, while the severed water washed over its deck. And still further out, as if midway between the shore and the horizon, the black, powerful mass of a huge steamer, with funnels bent behind, was moving with perfect balance noiselessly and evenly. And there came to Voskresenski in that moment, as through a tiny little cloud of invading sorrow, that delightful, audacious longing which he always experienced when thinking of long journeys, new impressions, new faces, all the limitless stretch of the young untasted life that lay before him.

“Tomorrow, I, too, shall find myself on board ship with others. I’ll make fresh acquaintances, look at new shores, at the sea,” he thought to himself. “It’s good.”

“Sachenka, where are you? Come here.” It was Anna Georgievna’s voice.

He returned quickly to his room, buttoning on the way the collar of his Russian shirt, and arranging his hair. A formless, vague fright, a sort of dark, enervating presentiment stirred for an instant in his soul.

“I’m tired,” Anna Georgievna was saying, slightly out of breath. “How nice it is in here, so cool.”

She sat down on the ledge of the window. Against the background of the dazzling whitish-blue sky and the deep blue of the sea beneath, the short, full figure, in its white peignoir, outlined itself with a soft and elegant precision. Her rough, reddish curls lit up her head in that light with a deep golden gleam.

“Well, what is it, my angry sparrow?” she asked, with tender familiarity. “Haven’t you cooled down yet?”

“Yes, I’ve cooled down. I’m going away at once,” he answered in a surly tone.

“Sacha.”

She pronounced his name in a low, strange, agitated tone that Voskresenski had never heard before in his life. He started and looked at her attentively. But she was sitting with her back to the bright light and it was impossible to distinguish her expression. For all that, it seemed to the student that her eyes were shining in an unusual way.

“Sacha, my own one,” she said suddenly in a hurried, stifled voice. “No, no, dear, you won’t go away. Do you hear? Come here to me … to me, I tell you. Oh, what a big stupid you are! Do you hear? You mustn’t think of going! I don’t wish it. My darling, you will stay …”

She seized his hands, pressed them tightly, and, without letting them out of her own, placed them on her knees so that, for an instant, he felt her firm and, as it were, sliding figure under the light rough material of her peignoir.

“You will stay? Yes?” she asked in a quick whisper, looking up into his face.

He raised his eyes and met her clouded, fixed, avid glance. A burning joy leaped from his heart, transfusing his breast, striking into his head and throbbing in his temples. All confusion and awkwardness had disappeared. On the contrary, it was a dreadful oppressive delight to gaze, so close and shamelessly, so endlessly, without pronouncing a single word, into those beautiful eyes, still shining with tears and senseless with passion. Half consciously he divined that her glance had fallen below his eyes, and he lowered his own to her full, bright, parted lips, behind which gleamed the moist whiteness of her teeth. Suddenly it seemed to him that the air in the room had become suffocating; his mouth was dry and he could scarcely breathe.

“You will stay? Yes? True?”

He put his arms round her and immediately felt the large beautiful body light and alive, obedient to every movement, every hint of his hands. A sort of burning, arid whirl caught him suddenly, crippling his will, his judgment, all his proud, chaste thoughts, everything in him that was clean and human. For some reason or other, he recalled the bathing before dinner and those warm, swinging insatiable waves.

“Darling, is it true, true?” she was repeating ceaselessly.

Roughly, like a savage animal, he caught her up and lifted her in his arms. Then, as if in delirium, he heard her frightened whisper: “The door—for God’s sake the—door—”

Mechanically he turned round, saw the wide-open door and beyond it the darkness of the corridor, but he did not understand the sense of these words, the significance of this door, and he immediately forgot it all. The dark, half-closed eyes were suddenly so close to his face that their contour seemed indefinite, blurred, and they themselves became enormous, fixed, monstrously shiny, and quite strange to him. Hot rocking waves broke on him, drowning his reason, burning him as with fiery circling coils. …

Later on he woke up and heard with surprise her voice, which seemed to be imploring him about something:

“I adore you … my young, strong, beautiful …”

She was sitting on his bed beside him, leaning her head against his shoulder with a submissive, fawning air and trying to catch his eye. But he was looking away, frowning and pulling nervously with a shaking hand at the fringe of his rug which was hanging on the foot of the bed. An invincible disgust was growing in him every second towards this woman, who had just given herself to him. He himself understood the injustice and selfishness of this feeling, but he could not overcome it, even out of gratitude, even out of compassion. Her proximity was physically repulsive to him, her touch, the noise of her rapid, jerky breathing; and though he blamed only himself for everything that had happened, a blind, senseless hatred and spite towards her was filling his soul.

“Oh, what a scoundrel I am! What a scoundrel!” he was thinking, and at the same time he was afraid of her reading his thoughts and feelings on his face.

“My darling adored one,” she was saying tenderly, “why have you turned away from me? Are you angry? Is anything the matter with you? Oh, my dear one, didn’t you really notice that I loved you? From the very beginning, from the very first day. … Ah, but no. When you came to us in Moscow I didn’t like you. What an angry one, I thought. But then afterwards … But, dearie, won’t you look at me?”

The student mastered himself and managed to give her awkwardly from under his eyebrows aside glance. His very throat contracted, so disgusting seemed the reddened face, splashed with powder at the nostrils and chin, the small wrinkles round the eyes and the upper lip, never noticed until this moment, and, above all, her suppliant, anxious, culpable devotion—a sort of dog's look. A shudder of repulsion came over him as he turned his head away.

"But why am I not repulsive to her?" he was thinking in despair. "Why? Ah, what a scoundrel I am!"

"Anna Georgievna—Nina," he stammered out in an unnatural, wooden voice, "you'll forgive me. … You'll excuse me. I'm agitated. I don't know what I'm saying. … Understand me. Don't be angry. … I must be by myself. My head is going round and round."

He made an involuntary movement, as if to turn away from her, and she understood it. Her arms, that had been clinging round his neck, fell helplessly along her knees and her head bent down. She sat like this for a few more minutes and then rose silently with a resigned expression.

She understood better than the student what was happening to him now. She knew that for men the first steps in sensual passion produced the same terrible sickly sensation on beginners as the first draughts of opium, the first cigarette, the first drunken bout. She knew, too, that until this he had been intimate with no other woman, that for him she was the first; knew this from his own words before, felt it by his savage, severe shyness, his awkwardness and roughness with her.

She wanted to console, to calm him, to explain in tender motherly words the cause of his suffering, for she knew that he suffered. But she—ordinarily so bold, so self-assured—could find no words. She felt confused and shy like a young girl and she felt at fault for his fall, for his silent anxiety, for her thirty-five years, and because she did not know, and was unable to discover, how she could help him.

"Sacha, this will pass," she said at last, almost under her breath. "This will pass, believe me. Calm yourself. But don't go away. You hear me? You'll tell me if you want to go away, won't you?"

"Yes. … All right, yes—yes," he repeated impatiently, looking at the door all the time.

She sighed and left the room noiselessly. Then Voskresenski clutched his hair with both hands and fell with a groan face downwards on the pillow.

IV

The next day Voskresenski was on his way to Odessa on the large steamship Xenia. Disgracefully and weakly he had run away from the Zavalishines, unable to bear his cruel remorse, unable to force himself to meet Anna Georgievna again face to face. After lying on his bed until dusk, he had put his things together as soon as it was dark and then noiselessly, stealthily, like a thief, he had stolen through the back entrance into the vineyard, and from there had clambered out into the road. And all the time, on his way to the post station, when driving in the diligence that was packed with silent Turks and Tartars, all through the night at the Yalta Hotel, his shame, his merciless disgust for himself, for Anna Georgievna, for everything that had happened the day before, and for his own boyish flight, never left him for a single second.

“It has all turned out as if it were a quarrel, as if it were out of revenge. I have stolen something from the Zavalishines and have run away from them,” he thought, angrily grinding his teeth.

It was a hot windless day. The sea lay quiet, caressing, of a pale emerald round the shore, light blue further out and touched only here and there by lazy little wrinkles of purple. Beneath the steamer, it was bright green, bottomless, light and transparent as air. Side by side with the steamer raced a flight of dolphins. From above, one could see perfectly how in the depths the powerful winding movements of their bodies cut through the thin water, and how, at intervals, one after the other, in quick dark semicircles, they leaped to the surface.

The shore receded slowly. Gradually the steep hills showed themselves and then became lost to view, palaces, vineyards, squat Tartar villages, white-walled villas, drowned in wavy green, and, in the background, the pale blue mountains, covered with black patches of forest, and over them the fine airy contours of the peaks.

The passengers were trooping to the taffrail that faced the shore, calling out the names of the places and the names of the owners. In the middle of the deck, near the hatchway, two musicians—a violinist and a harpist—were playing a waltz, and the stale, insipid melody sounded unusually beautiful and stimulating in the sea air,

Voskresenski searched impatiently for the villa that looked like a gynaeceum. And when it appeared again behind the dense woods of the Prince’s Park and became quite visible above its huge white fortress-like wall, he breathed faster and pressed his hands against his heart which had grown cold.

He thought that he could distinguish on the lower terrace a white spot, and he wished to think that she was sitting there now, this strange woman, who had suddenly become so mysterious, so incomprehensible, so attractive to him, and that she was looking out at the

boat, sorrowful as he was, and with her own eyes full of tears. He imagined himself standing there on the balcony close beside her, not his self of today, but that of yesterday, of a week ago—that former self which would never return to him. And he was sorry, unbearably, achingly sorry for that phase of life which had gone from him forever and would never return, would never repeat itself. With an unusual distinctness, his eyes veiled in a rainbow-like mist of tears, Anna Georgievna's face rose in front of him, no longer victorious, or self-assured, but with a gentle, suppliant expression, self-accusing; and she seemed to him now small, hurt, weak, and close to him, as though grafted on to his heart forever.

And with these delicate, sad, compassionate sensations there was blended imperceptibly, like the aroma of a fine wine, the memory of her warm naked, arms, her voice trembling with sensual passion, her beautiful eyes glancing down to his lips.

Hiding itself behind the trees and villas, then showing itself again for a moment, the gynaeceum receded further and further and then suddenly disappeared. Pressing his cheek against the taffrail, Voskresenski looked for a long time in that direction. All this, indeed, had passed like a shadow. He recalled the bitter verse of Solomon, and he cried. But these tears, the tears of youth, clear and light, and this sorrow, were blessed.

Below deck, in the saloon, the lunch bell sounded. A chattering, noisy student, whose acquaintance Voskresenski had made in the port, came up behind him, tapped him on the shoulder and shouted out gaily:

"I've been looking for you, my friend; you have provisions, haven't you? Let's have a glass of vodka."