The Last Word

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Translated from Russian by Rosa Savary Graham and Stephen Graham

Yes, gentlemen, I killed him!

In vain do you try to obtain for me a medical certificate of temporary aberration. I shall not take advantage of it.

I killed him soberly, conscientiously, coldly, without the least regret, fear or hesitation. Were it in your power to resurrect him, I would repeat my crime.

He followed me always and everywhere. He took a thousand human shapes, and did not shrink—shameless creature—to dress in women's clothes upon occasion. He took the guise of my relative, my dear friend, colleague, good acquaintance. He could dress to look any age except that of a child (as a child he only failed and looked ridiculous). He has filled up my life with himself, and poisoned it.

What has been most dreadful was that I have always foreseen in advance all his words, gestures and actions.

When I met him he would drawl, crushing my hand in his:

"Aha! Whom—do—I—see? Dear me! You must be getting on in years now. How's your health?"

Then he would answer as for himself, though I had not asked him anything:

"Thank you. So so. Nothing to boast of. Have you read in today's paper … ?"

If he by any chance noticed that I had a flushed cheek, flushed by the vexation of having met him, he would be sure to croak:

"Eh, neighbour, how red you're getting."

He would come to me just at those moments when I was up to the neck in work, would sit down and say:

"Ah! I'm afraid I've interrupted you."

For two hours he would bore me to death, prattling of himself and his children. He would see I was tearing my hair and biting my lips till the blood came, and would simply delight in my torments.

Having poisoned my working mood for a whole month in advance, he would stand, yawn a little, and then murmur:

“Lord knows why I stay here talking. I’ve got lots to do.”

When I met him in a railway carriage he always began:

“Permit me to ask, are you going far?” And then:

“On business or … ?”

“Where do you work?”

“Married?”

Oh, well do I know all his ways. Closing my eyes I see him. He strikes me on the shoulder, on the back, on the knees. He gesticulates so closely to my eyes and nose that I wince, as if about to be struck. Catching hold of the lappet of my coat, he draws himself up to me and breathes in my face. When he visits me he allows his foot to tremble on the floor Under the table, so that the shade of the lamp tinkles. At an “at home” he thrums on the back of my chair with his fingers, and in pauses of the conversation drawls, “y-e-s, y-es.” At cards he calls out, knocks on the table and quacks as he loses: “What’s that? What? What?”

Start him in an argument, and he always begins by:

“Eh, neighbour, it’s humbug you’re talking.”

“Why humbug?” you ask timidly.

“Because it is nonsense.”

What evil have I done to this man? I don’t know. He set himself to spoil my existence, and he spoiled it. Thanks to him, I now feel a great aversion from the sea, the moon, the air, poetry, painting, music.

“Tolstoy”—he bawled orally, and in print—“made his estate over to his wife, and he himself. … Compared with Turgenief, he. … He sewed his own jackboots … great writer of the Russian earth. … Hurrah! …

“Pushkin? He created the language, didn’t he? Do you remember ‘Calm was the Ukraine night, clear was the sky’? You remember what they did to the woman in the third act. Hsh! There are no ladies present, do you remember?

“ ‘In our little boat we go,

Under the little boat the water.’

“Dostoevsky … have you read how he went one night to Turgenief to confess … Gogol, do you know the sort of disease he had?”

Should I go to a picture gallery, and stand before some quiet evening landscape, he would be sure to be on my heels, pushing me forward, and saying to a girl on his arm:

“Very sweetly drawn … distance … atmosphere … the moon to the life. … Do you remember Nina—the coloured supplement of the *Neva*—it was something like it. …”

I sit at the opera listening to *Carmen*. He is there, as everywhere. He is behind me, and has his feet on the lower bar of my fauteuil. He hums the tune of the duet in the last act, and through his feet communicates to my nerves every movement of his body. Then, in the entr’act, I hear him speaking in a voice pitched high enough for me to hear:

“Wonderful gramophone records the Zadodadofs have. Shalapin absolutely. You couldn’t tell the difference.”

Yes, it was he or someone like him who invented the barrel organ, the gramophone, the bioscope, the photophone, the biograph, the phonograph, the pathephone, the musical box, the pianino, the motor car, paper collars, oleographs, and newspapers.

There’s no getting away from him. I flee away at night to the wild seashore, and lie down in solitude upon a cliff, but he steals after me in the shadow, and suddenly the silencers broken by a self-satisfied voice which says:

“What a lovely night, Katenka, isn’t it? The clouds, eh, look at them! Just as in a picture. And if a painter painted them just like it, who would say it was true to Nature?”

He has killed the best minutes of my life—minutes of love, the dear sweet nights of youth. How often, when I have wandered arm in arm with the most beauteous creation of Nature, along an avenue where, upon the ground, the silver moonlight was in pattern with the shadows of the trees, and he has suddenly and unexpectedly spoken up to me in a woman’s voice, has rested his head on my shoulder and cried out in a theatrical tone:

“Tell me, do you love to dream by moonlight?”

Or:

“Tell me, do you love Nature? As for me, I madly adore Nature.”

He was many shaped and many faced, my persecutor, but was always the same underneath. He took upon occasion the guise of professor, doctor, engineer, lady doctor, advocate, girl-student, author, wife of the excise inspector, official, passenger, customer, guest, stranger, spectator, reader, neighbour at a country house. In early youth I had the stupidity to think that these were all separate people. But they were all one and the same. Bitter experience has at last discovered to me his name. It is—the Russian *intelligent*.

If he has at any time missed me personally, he has left everywhere his traces, his visiting cards. On the heights of Barchau and Machuka I have found his orange peelings, sardine tins, and chocolate wrappings. On the rocks of Aloopka, on the top of the belfry of St. John, on the granites of Imatra, on the walls of Bakhchisari, in the grotto of Lermontof, I have found the following signatures and remarks:—

“Pusia and Kuziki 1908 year 27 February.”

“Ivanof.”

“A. M. Plokhokhostof (Bad-tail) from Saratof.”

“Ivanof.”

“Pechora girl.”

“Ivanof.”

“M.D. ... P.A.P. ... Talotchka and Achmet.”

“Ivanof.”

“Trophim Sinepupof. Samara Town.”

“Ivanof.”

“Adel Soloveitchik from Minsk.”

“Ivanof.”

“From this height I delighted in the view of the sea.—C. Nicodemus Ivanovitch Bezuprechny.”

“Ivanof.”

I have read his verses and remarks in all visiting books, and in Puskhin’s house, at Lermontof’s Cliff, and in the ancient monasteries have read: “The Troakofs came here from Penza, drank kvass and ate sturgeon. We wish the same to you,” or “Visited the natal ashtray of the great Russian poet, Chichkin, teacher of caligraphy, Voronezh High School for Boys,” or—

“Praise to thee, Ai Petri, mountain white,

In dress imperial of fir.

I climbed up yesterday unto thy height,

Retired Staff-Captain Nikoli Profer.”

I needed but to pick up my favourite Russian book, and I came upon him at once. “I have read this book.—Pafnutenko.” “The author is a blockhead.” “Mr. Author hasn’t read Karl Marx.” I turn over the pages, and I find his notes in all the margins. Then, of course, no one like he turns down corners and makes dog-ears, tears out pages, or drops grease on them from tallow candles.

Gentlemen, judges, it is hard for me to go on. This man has abused, fouled, vulgarised all that was dear to me, delicate and touching. I struggled a long while with myself. Years went by. My nerves became more irritable I saw there was not room for both of us in the world. One of us had to go.

I foresaw for a long while that it would be just some little trifle that would drive me to the crime. So it was.

You know the particulars. In the compartment there was a crush; the passengers were sitting on one another’s heads. He, with his wife, his son, a schoolboy in the preparatory class, and a pile of luggage, were occupying four seats. Upon this occasion he was wearing the uniform of the Department of Popular Education. I went up to him and asked:

“Is there not a free seat here?”

He answered like a bulldog with a bone, not looking at me:

“No. This seat is taken by another gentleman. These are his things. He’ll be back in a minute.”

The train began to move.

I waited, standing, where I was. We went on about ten miles. The gentleman didn’t come. I was silent, and I looked into the face of the pedagogue, thinking that there might yet be in him some gleam of conscience.

But no. We went another fifteen miles. He got down a basket of provisions and began to eat. He went out with a kettle for hot water, and made himself tea. A little domestic scandal arose over the sugar for the tea.

“Peter, you’ve taken a lump of sugar on the sly!”

“Word of honour, by God, I haven’t! Look in my pockets, by God!”

“Don’t swear, and don’t lie. I counted them before we set out, on purpose. … There were eighteen and now there are seventeen.”

“By God!!”

“Don’t swear. It is shameful to lie. I will forgive you everything, only tell me straight out the truth. But a lie I can never forgive. Only cowards lie. One who is capable of lying is capable of murdering, of stealing, of betraying his king and his country. …”

So he ran on and ran on. I had heard such utterances from him in my earliest childhood, when he was my governess, afterwards when he was my class teacher, and again when he wrote in the newspaper.

I interrupted.

“You find fault with your son for lying, and yet you yourself have, in his presence, told a whopping lie. You said this seat was occupied by a gentleman. Where is that gentleman? Show him to me.”

The pedagogue went purple, and his eyes dilated.

“I beg you, don’t interfere with people who don’t interfere with you. Mind your own business. How scandalous! Conductor, please warn this passenger that he will not be

allowed to interfere with other people in the railway carriage. Please take measures, or I'll report the matter to the gendarme, and write in the complaint book."

The conductor screwed up his eyes in a fatherly expression, and went out. But the pedagogue went on, unconsoled:

"No one speaks to you. No one was interfering with you. Good Lord! a decent-looking man too, in a hat and a collar, clearly one of the intelligentia. ... A peasant now, or a workman ... but no, an intelligent!"

Intel-li-gent! The executioner had named me executioner! It was ended. ... He had pronounced his own sentence.

I took out of the pocket of my overcoat a revolver, examined the charge, pointed it at the pedagogue between the eyes, and said calmly:

"Say your prayers."

He turned pale and shrieked:

"Guard-d-d! ..."

That was his last word. I pulled the trigger.

I have finished, gentlemen. I repeat: I do not repent. There is no sorrow for him in my soul. One desolating doubt remains, however, and it will haunt me to the end of my days, should I finish them in prison or in an asylum.

He has a son left! What if he takes on his father's nature?

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