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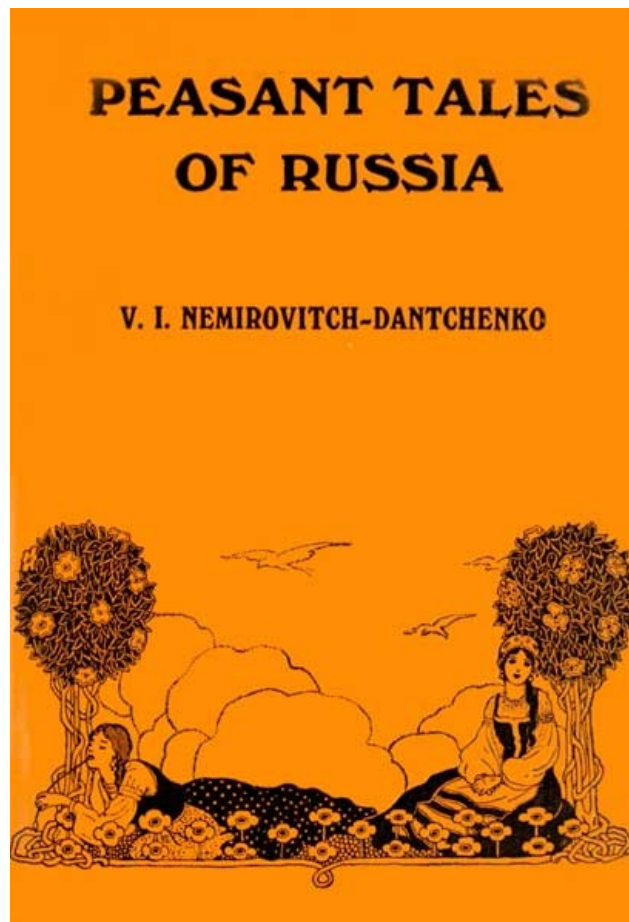
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PEASANT TALES OF RUSSIA

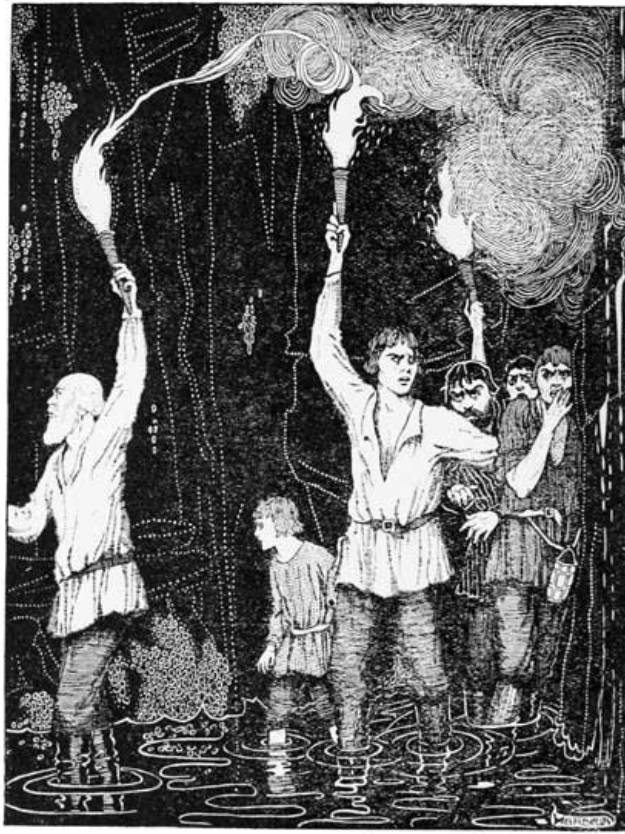
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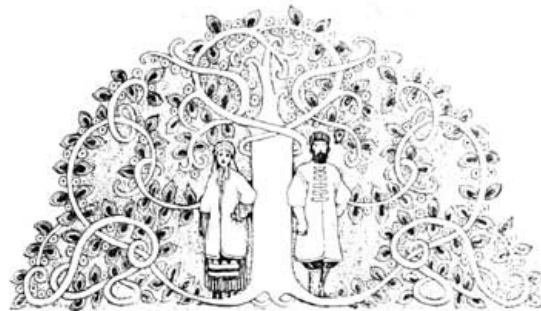
TRANSLATED BY

CLAUD FIELD, M.A.

Editor of "Jewish Legends of the Middle Ages."



"Holding his torch high, Ivan skirted the precipice."
[Frontispiece.]



PEASANT TALES
OF RUSSIA



**PEASANT TALES
OF RUSSIA**

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THE DESERTED MINE

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I

At the entrance of the Voskressensky mine stood a group of miners. All were quite silent.

It was still dark, for the autumn days begin late. Heavy grey clouds glided slowly over the sky, in which the first streaks of dawn were hardly visible. These clouds glided so low that they seemed to wish to lie on the earth in order to hide this black hole, this well-like orifice which was about to swallow up the miners one by one. The air was saturated with a cloud of damp dust, particles of which fell on the men's hair and faces. The miners wore leather jerkins, and small lamps, whose light flickered fitfully, hung at their belts. An imaginative person might have thought that they trembled with fear at having to descend into the heavy dense darkness of the mine.

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"Listen, old man! You can never go down alone," said the young overseer to an old miner who was of tall stature, thin and withered. His long grey beard fell in disarray over his hollow chest, and his breath came and went with a thin whistling sound, as though the damp air of this dark morning found as much difficulty in entering as in leaving it. The features of the old miner's face were strongly marked, and his two black eyes burned in the depths of their sockets with a brilliant, almost fantastic light. This death's-head seemed almost buried from sight between two very high shoulders. When he walked, his back was arched, and his whole long body leaned forward, so that he seemed to be looking for something he had lost, or to be picking his steps very carefully. His feeble arms hung languidly by his side, and his legs tottered and gave way every moment under the weight of his body, slight as it was.

"You will never be able to descend the ladders! We will put you into the basket! Hullo! you fellows over there, come and help to start old Ivan!" the overseer called to the rest.

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"Here we are, Father Ivan!" they cried, saying to each other jocosely, "Fancy his wishing to go down the ladders with us!"

The old miner turned towards them. It was a long time ago since he had been born in a mine about five versts distant which had been subsequently closed. His mother, who had lost her husband by the falling-in of one of the mine-galleries, continued to work in the same gallery after it had been repaired. Ivan had been born in the eternal darkness. His first cry had been drowned by the noise of blasting rocks, his first glance met nothing but the gloom of the subterranean gallery. He was hoisted to the surface of the ground in a large bucket full of ore. All the first impressions of his sad childhood were intimately connected with the mine where his mother, who was obliged to earn her living, always worked. As she had no one to whom to entrust the child, she took him with her, and he remained lying beside her, fixing his wide-open eyes on his mother's flickering lamp, while he sucked at his milk-bottle. It was this black hole which echoed to his laughter and his crying, especially to the latter. His mother, who was naturally taciturn, had scarcely time to caress her child, for she would have had to quit her work; when she heard the little one's sobs, she redoubled the blows of her pickaxe against the dark mass of coal, as though she wished by the noise they made to drown the feeble wailing of the infant.

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It was in this mine that he grew and made his first experiments in walking; later on he began to explore, first the narrow passage where his mother worked at her daily task, then venturing into the other galleries of this subterranean kingdom. As his mind developed, a whole world of phantoms created by his imagination rose around him. All these masses of black earth with their blocks of metal, which had slumbered for centuries in the depths, seemed to him living beings, and all the mysterious muffled sounds which came one knew not whence, sounded in his ears like the groans of victims imprisoned by evil genii in gloomy caves. For him the water which filtered through the walls of the mine was a shower of tears, and that which trickled, yellow of tint, across the ore resembled flowing blood. The darkness was constantly traversed by vague and ever new apparitions, vanishing as soon as they appeared, which nevertheless left a trace of their passage on the child's impressionable mind.

When a miner's song reached him, deadened by distance, it seemed to him to issue from the depths of the rocks. By dint of practice, his sense of hearing had acquired a fine subtlety, and sometimes putting his ear to the rugged walls, he listened with so much attention that he could catch the faintest unknown and inexplicable sounds. It was perhaps only the wrathful murmur of some imprisoned spring, but for Ivan it was the groan of a human being struggling in his dungeon. All the objects round him—the ore, the rocks, the water—were animated with a life visible and comprehensible to him alone. These things were not for him, simple parts of inanimate nature, but creatures with souls, full of life, similar to himself, watching and listening to him as he watched and listened to them.

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Later on he made friends with an old man. He was a miner of a somewhat sombre disposition, but his eyes always grew moist when the child ran towards him. He would lay his wrinkled hand, hard as iron, tenderly on the head of the little one, and, as he rested, tell him how one day our Lord Jesus Christ had descended to the depths of this subterranean kingdom, and since then remained there with the miners. "Jesus is in the midst of us, I tell you," the old man would say dreamily, peering intently into the darkness, as though his half-blind eyes could really distinguish the divine Saviour there. As long as he was a child, Ivan saw Him also, and seeing Him feared Him, because he knew that Jesus does not love evil deeds and dark thoughts. Jesus is everywhere at once; He has thousands of eyes at His disposal; He sees and knows the slightest movements of men's hearts.

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One day when the child was sitting on the old miner's knees, they heard far off in the direction where Ivan's mother was working a dull shock—a noise like a sigh escaping from the breast of Mother Earth herself. The shock re-echoed in all the mine-shafts and smallest recesses of all the galleries. The earth fell in in several places.

"Save us, Lord!" cried the old man, rising quickly. "Pray to God, little one. A child's prayer avails much with Him."

Little Ivan knelt down, and prayed without knowing why or for what. All his prayer consisted in repeating, "Kind Jesus!... Good Jesus!... Dear old Jesus!" Since for him goodness was personified in the old miner, and as on the other hand Jesus was the very incarnation of goodness, it followed that Jesus must be old, very old. It was thus that the child imagined Him, and under this aspect that he sometimes saw Him standing in the darkness of the mine.

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The subterranean shocks re-echoed to a great distance and did not cease till they passed beyond the boundaries of the mine. Then only a vague vibration remained in the air like the presentiment of a great calamity. The old miner turned in the direction where Ivan's mother had been working. He walked with uncertain steps and then returned hesitatingly towards the child. When they reached the gallery they found it narrower and contracted above where the earth had sunk. Presently they came to a point where it shrank to a narrow hole. The old man and the child crawled through it with difficulty. Soon, fortunately, they could stand upright. A few steps more and the old man abruptly fell on his knees.

The place where Ivan's mother had been working no longer existed. The child and the old man were confronted by a huge mass of damp earth. Its dampness was constantly increasing, for it was traversed by a thread of water from a spring which had suddenly been liberated, one knew not how, from its long imprisonment. From underneath this damp mass projected the feet of

Ivan's mother. The child rushed forward, seized the coarse boots which she wore and tugged at them, but in vain; the earth which lay on his mother guarded its prey well.

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"Maria! Maria!" cried the old miner in a despairing voice.

There was no reply. The feet in their coarse boots, feebly lighted by the little lamp, remained motionless.

When Ivan grew up and became a miner in his turn his surroundings changed their aspect in his eyes and became inanimate. The springs and the metals, these bondslaves of the earth, no longer possessed a soul for him. The dark rocks, when his pickaxe laid their sides open, were as inanimate as the damp masses of ore. Jesus also, Whom he saw so clearly in his childhood, had disappeared from the time that they had abandoned the old mine for another one. But the impressions made on him in childhood remained hidden and shut up in the profoundest depth of Ivan's heart, resembling in this the hidden springs in the heart of the rock. Later on, under the inexorable pressure of time when Ivan had become old, these impressions rose again to the surface, and he found himself once more surrounded by vague apparitions and mysterious murmurs. Only Jesus remained absent, though the fixed gaze of the old Ivan searched for Him perseveringly in the darkness of the subterranean kingdom.

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II

"Well, old man, get in!" said the miners. The moving windlass brought to the mouth of the shaft the bucket in which the ore was brought up. The rusty iron chain unrolled slowly with a harsh grating sound. Below the darkness was so dense that one could not even perceive the reflection of water which is always visible at the bottom of the deepest wells. Ivan squatted down in the bucket.

"Now, in the name of God! you will turn round a bit, old man."

"It won't hurt him to swing a little," said others jokingly.

"Look, you fellows, we will get him down in the twinkling of an eye."

The windlass creaked, the rusty chain groaned plaintively, and the bucket began to descend by jerks, knocking against the wooden lining of the shaft with a metallic echo. Ivan raised his eyes; above him the pit-mouth looked like a greyish patch, round him was impenetrable darkness. The bucket turned with the chain and descended slowly. The little lamp fastened to his waist cast trembling gleams on the damp walls, and its light flickered timidly, hardly making visible the drops of water which trickled across the wooden lining of the shaft; in fact it seemed on the point of going out. Any one unused to such a descent would at once have become giddy, but to old Ivan it seemed a mere trifle. How often already he had thus descended and come up!

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The walls of the shaft became more and more damp. Above, the grey patch shrank and shrank. It seemed as though the day staring fixedly into the darkness of the pit gradually closed its grey eye, baffled at its depth.

"Yes, this shaft is very old," thought the miner to himself; "I remember the day it was sunk, and it must be quite sixty years ago, if I recollect right. It is quite time to repair the lining; the wood has decayed till it is black. I wonder how it can still hold together. Jesus must certainly be watching over us. I am getting old too; they say I am eighty-four. It is a lucky thing that they don't dismiss me, and only give me easy work; otherwise I should starve, or at any rate be obliged to beg."

Thoughts of all kinds passed through the old man's head. He was accustomed to think much but never spoke. It was a long time since any one had heard the sound of his voice, and it was thought that he had forgotten how to speak because he had always lived surrounded by the silence of the mine. The fact was that, hearing nothing but the sound of his pickaxe, the noise of the ore being crushed, etc., he had lost the habit of replying to questions. When any one spoke to him, he quickly removed his leather cap, and answered by a bow so low that one could see the top of his head adorned only by two locks of yellow hair. People finished by leaving him in peace.

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No one went so far as to ridicule him. He was, so to speak, one of the curiosities of the mine, for it was known that he had been present at its opening. The proprietors of the mine knew that in former days he was always the first to go down, and that it was he who had loosened the first yellow block from which the first piece of copper had been extracted. All his contemporaries who were not dead had grown old around him, and he himself, decrepit and bent, was still alive and even worked, as far as his strength permitted.

"Old Ivan is a true miner; he was born in a gallery of the old mine," the workmen often said to one another. They had forgotten for a long time past where the old worked-out mine which had been abandoned sixty years ago was situated. His disuse of speech only augmented the respect they felt for him. Some even thought that his silence was in consequence of a vow. "He is Ivan the Silent," they would say. "Disbelieve it if you like, but it is quite ten years since he has been silent."

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Meanwhile the bucket suspended from the chain which rattled remorselessly continued to descend. The greyish patch of the orifice was no more visible at all, and its last vague glimmer had been swallowed up in the damp cold darkness of the pit. The wooden lining had come to an end, and the walls were formed of strata of different metals. On one hand the sides and sharp

edges of a great black stone projected, on the other was damp mud encrusted with fragments of rock. Then the pale light of the little lamp glided windingly over the rounded outlines of flint fossils. It then zigzagged over a layer of brilliant white mineral, which was soon succeeded by another of mud.

Through all—the earth, the flints, the edges of rent rocks—there trickled innumerable water-drops. Was it the blood of the earth escaping from a deep wound? Or was it shedding tears over the hard lot of hundreds of men shut up in the eternal darkness of its mysterious kingdom?

The tears fell thickly, one by one, forming threads of water, which in their turn formed rivulets. Now the old man heard something else beside the creaking of the rusted chain, every link of which seemed to be complaining of extreme weariness, the result of long service. His ear, accustomed to silence, caught the murmur of rivulets, and the noise of water-drops, falling one by one, resembling the sound of grains of lead falling on stone. Here is a spring which has escaped from its narrow prison in the heart of the mountain and which forms a wide stream, but which, finding on its escape from its long bondage only darkness as deep as that of its prison, seems to moan as it glides over the damp stones.

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The bucket continued its descent. He could no longer see above or below him and the journey appeared interminable. The light of the little lamp, which had nearly gone out, grew suddenly brighter. Around him innumerable springs were trickling, running and descending on all sides. Here and there uniting in large streams, they came down in cascades, splashing Ivan's clothes. The darkness was full of the babbling, rushing and noise of this water.

The old man knew that for sixty years it had been ceaselessly undermining this shaft. Long ago, when he first went down it, only a few drops of water used to filter through its sides. Later on these became more numerous, and collecting together, finished by channelling for themselves convenient passages and by flowing in streams. By this time the work of destruction had become more and more threatening and the earth was everywhere like a sponge. It seemed as though the springs imprisoned in the mountain had found out the existence of this shaft and had united to flow into it.

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"They will certainly end by flooding the shaft," thought the old man. "What is to be done? One can only hope in God. As long as He wills, the shaft will exist, but as soon as He does not will it, it will be destroyed from top to bottom."

Formerly the shaft was supported by the rocks, but the water had succeeded in undermining them, sometimes by infiltration underneath them, sometimes by dislodging them from their places and making them lose their equilibrium; some of them projected through the walls of the shaft and their sides were black with moisture. Presently these undermined rocks would collapse, dragging down in their fall all the surrounding earth. What a disaster it would be. The miners would be buried alive like earth-worms. Only their feet would be visible, thought the old man, as had been the case with his mother. "Entombed by the will of God." It would be no use digging and trying to reach them; they would be too far down; the shaft was three hundred fathoms deep and the whole mine was dangerous. The walls of its galleries were as thin as those of a bee-hive. So much ore had been extracted from it that entire caves had been formed in the spongy earth. Whenever the shaft should collapse, the walls of the galleries would not hold out any more, the whole mine would fall in, and nothing would be left but an enormous cavity to show the curious sightseer.

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The old man regarded the prospect of such a collapse calmly, for to die in a mine seemed to him quite natural as he had been born there. He would have found it strange if his sad existence had ended on the surface of the ground; on the other hand a death down here seemed quite simple and natural. Here he felt at home. He remembered how when seized with illness on one occasion, before he had become old, he had not even ascended to the surface, but remained in the gallery where he worked all the time, his comrades bringing him food. He had often passed the night in his gallery stretched on comparatively soft ground. In old times he had been often seized with a desire to ascend, to see again the sun and the starry nights, but all that was now far away. Now he felt at home here in this darkness where it was so warm and so comfortable, that, but for the dampness, one would like to remain there always!

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The water kept on coming down in resonant cascades. But in spite of this, the old man distinctly heard not far off the blows of the miners' innumerable pickaxes, the dull echoes of explosions in distant galleries, and vague human noises. Here and there in the walls of the shaft one saw black holes, once the entrances to ancient galleries which had long ago been exhausted of their ore and abandoned.

The miners were now working in another stratum. But the old Ivan had not forgotten these ancient galleries, for he had left in each of them a little of his strength, and each of them had been moistened by his perspiration. He rose and looked downwards; the flickerings of little lamps like his own were visible, and vague sounds came up to him. The gleam of water was also to be seen, for the bottom of the shaft was entirely flooded. Pumps were no longer of any use to expel the water, for pump as one might, the water kept pouring in. However, they had to keep on pumping, for if they stopped, even for an hour, the whole mine would have been flooded and the water would have rapidly penetrated all the galleries, drowning the miners who were working in them.

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"Earth and water—both are in the hands of God," said the miner to himself.

The rusty chain ceased to unwind and the bucket stopped its descent half-submerged in the water which covered the bottom of the shaft. The miners ran up from all sides, holding their little lamps. "See who comes!" they said with a laugh. "Good day, father!" They laid a plank for him and helped him to get out. Then, as he always did, he removed his cap and made a low bow to the miners, showing his bald head.

Numerous galleries diverged from this point in all directions, and their darkness was pierced by little lights which ran hither and thither. Sounds of voices were heard clearly as well as the noise of subterranean explosions, but all other sounds were dominated by the roar of the waters.

The old man re-lighted his little lamp, which had gone out, and stooping forward, as though he were examining some mysterious footprints, he went towards his gallery with unsteady steps.

III

The gallery in which the old man worked was fairly high. Here and there beams sustaining the roof were visible, but their decrepit condition testified to their age. Above these worm-eaten beams, the earth formed protuberances bristling with pointed rocks. The ground was strewn with fragments of rock which had fallen from the roof.

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Old Ivan remembered having seen one day one of these fragments kill as it fell a little boy who had been a great pet of his. This little boy generally accompanied his father, and his gay bursts of careless laughter animated a little the sepulchral silence of the mine. It seemed but yesterday that the old man had seen the child running merrily along the gallery. All at once a misshapen block protruded from the roof. The child stopped, out of curiosity, raised his clear eyes to see what it was, and the huge stone suddenly dropped, burying and crushing him entirely. His father was in utter despair and the other miners could not restrain their tears; as for Ivan, he persisted in prowling for a long time round the great black stone, as though he were expecting to hear from under the enormous block the well-known laugh of the little one. But nothing came to awaken the melancholy silence of the gallery.

The old man now halted near this murderous rock and held his lamp near it, lighting up the indistinct outlines of a cross rudely engraved in the stone. After looking round, as though he were afraid of being seen, he rapidly made the sign of the cross above the "tomb." If the miners had been able to watch him just then, they would have been astonished to his perpetually closed lips moving. But no one could have said whether he only wished to speak or actually spoke, for none but himself heard the vague murmur which issued from his lips.

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On his left hand there was an extremely narrow passage; the old man entered it, crawled through it, and stood upright again, for he had reached the place where he worked, which was fairly roomy. However, although one could stand upright in it, the place had a sepulchral aspect.

The old man raised his lamp, whose tiny gleam lit up for a moment the black walls discoloured by stains of yellowish rust. Here it was almost dry and the light of the lamp revealed no moisture. Little irregular heaps of ore dotted the ground. However, there was one damp corner, and in it grew thickly together a little group of mushrooms with little flat hoods of a sickly white colour on stalks which were also white and very slender. The old man took care of them and avoided covering them with any of the earth which he dug out. One day he had even brought to this corner a piece of turf in the midst of which were some field-flowers. But neither the buttercups nor the daisies consented to live without the sun; they gradually died, fading away by stages like consumptives who are deprived of the sun and of its warmth. Only one little flower had a tougher life than the rest and held out a long time, although it completely lost its colour in the eternal darkness of this tomb. Ivan watched it with curiosity until it also hung its head over its desiccated stalk. Then he had nothing left but the mushrooms and a kind of greyish lichen which spotted the rock at intervals.

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To-day old Ivan was very tired; he sat down on a heap of ore, placed his little lamp in a niche of the rock, which was already blackened with smoke, and buried his head in his hands. Not a single echo reached this spot. A melancholy silence reigned in this vault, but the old man was accustomed to it. He for whom the darkness was peopled by mysterious apparitions vanishing as soon as they appeared, heard also strange voices down here. Sometimes it was like the fragment of an incomplete song or a distant call which pierced the silence. At other times, when his pickaxe penetrated deeply the heart of the rock, he fancied he heard a stifled sigh as if the tool had pierced the breast of a living creature. All these vague sounds seemed to him full of significance. Having nothing in common with the world of reality, he lived in fancies and dreams.

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Sometimes, after making sure that he had a supply of matches, he put out his lamp, lay on his back on the ground and fixed his wide-open eyes on the darkness. Then it seemed to him that the walls of his black prison expanded indefinitely. The vaulted roof overhead rose to a prodigious height, and he felt himself for the first few moments lost in such a terrible void that his breath seemed to stop. He felt a strange uneasiness mixed with fear, for in the absolute darkness he seemed suspended alone and without the least support in the immensity of space, and every moment about to fall.

But this lasted only a short time, and the darkness gradually became less dense. First of all the blackness was diversified by spots of light, then by blazing spirals of fire; these then changed into golden circles, which in their turn disappeared in showers of sparks. Then the spots of light assumed all the colours of the rainbow and the fiery spirals shone with a dazzling light, revolving

rapidly in the darkness, which, however, was not dispersed by this lightning-like splendour. Then they melted together and rose to giddy heights, appearing up there like glittering mirages. Sometimes the spots of light assumed indistinct shapes which seemed to have transparent wings, while white robes fluttered behind them. Mysterious spirits who shunned the light of the lamp escaped from the black rock bastion and gathered round the old man, leaning over him and gazing intently into his wide-open eyes. At such times he heard a vague rustling around him.

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He seemed to feel the breath of the rocks reaching him through invisible fissures. He heard the musical complaint of a spring imprisoned in the rock, or it might be a distant song. His ear caught distinctly harmonious sounds, which sometimes melted together and sometimes followed each other, sporting like butterflies in the field, and he eagerly listened to their ineffable melody. Thus he would pass hours and even entire nights while, forgotten by his comrades, he remained alone in the enormous mine, alone with his visions and the fantastic echoes of a world unknown and invisible. But to-day these things hardly occupied his mind at all.

The next day was a Saturday, and he had to break as much ore possible and convey it, together with the piles already prepared, to the principal gallery, where the overseer of the mine would take it over. In the evening he would receive his pay, the whole of which he would take to an old woman living in the village. She looked after him, prepared his meagre repasts, mended his clothes, and bought his boots. People said she was his sister, but he felt doubtful about it. He knew that he had passed his childhood far away from her, for while he was always in the mine with his mother, she was growing up in a strange family who took care of her. He never spoke to her. When he entered in the evening he silently placed his money on the table, let his head drop in his hands, and remained sitting in this attitude. When she called him to sit down at table, he rose and obeyed, otherwise he would have remained as he was till the morning, as motionless as a log. When he happened to remain in the mine for the night, his sister was not anxious about it; she knew that he had taken with him a large chunk of bread and a handful of salt; as for water, there was no lack of that in the mine! She knew also that in a corner of the sepulchral vault, where he worked like a mole from morning to night, there was a can of oil, and that he could re-light his lamp whenever it went out.

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Ivan stooped down, looked for his pickaxe, found it, and sat down to break pieces from a block of ore which projected from the wall. This ferruginous earth was as hard to break as stone. Ivan worked slowly, sparing his strength because he could not do otherwise; care had been taken to show him a place where the rock was not so hard as elsewhere. Fragments of yellowish earth fell on the ground, and the rays of the little lamp lit up the particles of copper which glittered here and there in the pieces of rock. After two hours' work the pickaxe fell from the old man's hand. Feeling quite exhausted, he squatted down on the ground, cut himself a large slice of bread, sprinkled it plentifully with salt, and began to munch the soft part of it with the remnants of his teeth.

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There was in one corner a wheelbarrow light enough for the old man to push it. After having rested, he filled it with ore, and crawled, pushing the barrow in front of him, through the narrow passage which led to the main gallery. At the end of the passage a point of yellow light was visible. This proceeded from the main gallery where a large number of miners worked, and the yellow light was that cast by their lamps. Several times the old man sank exhausted on his stomach on the ground; then after resting a minute or two to recover strength, he began to crawl on again, pushing his load in front of him. The point of light grew larger from moment to moment and soon became a broad luminous disk against which the outline of a miner stood out in sharp relief. A few minutes more and the wheelbarrow issued from the passage, pushed by the old man, who sank as he did so on the ground.

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"Stop a minute! You are tired: let me help you, old man," said a young miner who had finished his work. The old man lifted his head, looked at him for a moment, and sank down again. The younger laid hold of the wheelbarrow, but Ivan took it brusquely from him, and shook his head with an air of disapproval.

"What fly is buzzing in your head, comrade?" several of the other miners said to the young one. "Have you forgotten the old man's habits? You know that he never allows any one to enter his hole, nor to touch his barrow, for he has heaped up riches in it. Since he has worked in the mine, he has found so much gold that he has become a regular Cræsus."

The miners laughed good-naturedly, tapping the old man's shoulder with their horny fingers.

"March on in front, Ivan, and the other one will follow," they said to soothe him.

Instead of answering, Ivan removed his old leather cap and commenced bowing to right and to left as if to give his comrades a good view of his bald head.

"That's enough, old man! Yes, we know your zeal!" said the miners, laughing. "He is quite a child, eh?"

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"He has forgotten how to talk," some one remarked.

"Yes, he is an innocent. Ah, my God! What is that?"

In the twinkling of an eye every one was on their feet. It seemed as though the huge mountain was breathing with all its lungs. The noise came from a distance and drowned all the others. The miners were deafened. Suddenly a gust of wind rushed violently through the gallery,

extinguishing nearly all the lamps. Somewhere, one knew not where, rose cries of anguish which were soon lost in an immense uproar. After hurriedly re-lighting their lamps, the miners rushed in the direction of the cries. A gleam of intelligence lit up the eyes of old Ivan as he tottered after them on his feeble legs.

IV

In front of what had been the exit from the gallery the miners stood silent. Others were running up from the more or less distant side galleries; their steps could be heard approaching and their lamps seen.

"What has happened, sir?" they exclaimed in alarm, as they came staring in a stupefied way at the place where a moment before had stood the principal shaft of the mine. [Pg 29]

If the vaulted roof of the gallery had resisted the formidable shock of the collapse, it was only because it was part of the solid rock. Already the miners' feet were standing in water which had been liberated by this displacement of masses of earth and flowed into the gallery, reflecting the faint lights of the lamps and the vivid flame of the torch which the overseer of the mine held above his head, while its smoke ascended towards the high black vaulted roof.

"Lost! We are lost!" some one exclaimed in the crowd with a sob.

Old Ivan pushed his way to the front of the crowd. Neither he nor the others noticed that the water was flowing round their ankles. They found themselves confronted by a huge and visibly growing mass, composed of a mixture of stones from the ruined shaft and fragments of timber-work and earth. In the midst of all lay upside-down, the bucket which had become detached from its chain and carried away.

The overseer held his torch near a mass of earth which had assumed a round shape. It lit up the head of a miner with eyes immensely wide open whose fixed look seemed to be concentrated on the flame of the torch. There was something terrible in the sight of those motionless eyelids, those white teeth gleaming between two torn lips, that deep wound in the temple from which blood was oozing. A little lower down one saw projecting from the earth a hand with wide-extended fingers and a broken wrist. Still lower down could be seen the feet of miners whose bodies were invisible, buried under the earth. Not a single one moved. [Pg 30]

Up to that moment no one had noticed them, but when the torch lit up this tragic spectacle the whole crowd of miners instinctively started backward. As he turned round, the overseer only saw faces pale with fright and shrinking from his torch as though there were something terrible about it. However, one miner, leaning his hand on the wall, bent forward, looking attentively at the dead man's face. What did he see extraordinary in it? He could not have said himself, but it was plain that he had not the power to turn his terrified eyes away from it. Another miner approached and touched something with his pickaxe which he quickly withdrew.

"Look at that piece of bread!" he exclaimed.

The overseer looked in his turn. He saw another hand projecting from underneath the earth holding a slice of bread sprinkled with coarse salt in its curved fingers. But the owner of the hand was completely buried and invisible. [Pg 31]

Other miners ran up. Each pushed his way to the front, eager to see, then having contemplated the huge mass, retired with his face working. One of them put his hand over his eyes in order not to see the terrible sight. Others stood motionless, their faces turned to the wall, as though petrified, and seemed unable to turn their heads. One young workman, pale with fear, had seized hold of another, who as though rendered temporarily idiotic, kept on passing his finger over the damp black wall of the rock.

"There are perhaps still living men below," stammered the overseer in a low voice. A plaintive groan as though in answer to his question came to his ears from below the mass of fallen earth. He approached it again, but the groan was not repeated.

"Now, comrades, we must dig!" he said.

"Come you there, Orefieff Smirnoff! Let us get to work."

So speaking, the overseer seized a miner by the hand, led him before the mass of collapsed earth and began to work with him. Hardly had they commenced than a second landslip took place, and the first mass of earth, pressed by the second which had just fallen, spread in liquid mud over the gallery. The two men only leaped back just in time. [Pg 32]

The overseer could now properly estimate the magnitude of the disaster. It was evident that they were imprisoned and that no help could reach them from without. But at any rate they could breathe easily, and the fact that the air circulated in the gallery much more freely than before the accident, showed that there was still some means of ventilation left. They must hasten to take advantage of it. In a few hours the whole mine would collapse owing to this immense falling-in of earth.

"Come here quickly, comrades!" said the overseer.

In the twinkling of an eye they surrounded him.

"There is only one way of saving ourselves," he said, "and that is by reaching the old upper gallery. Let those who care for their lives follow me. Perhaps the shaft is still intact on that side. It ought to be so, for the air circulates freely. Call those who are working in the side galleries, and all of you come back here."

Some of the miners, who had preserved more presence of mind than the rest, rushed to the side galleries to summon their companions.

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V

In less than a quarter of an hour, all the survivors of the catastrophe were collected. The overseer ordered them to provide themselves with torches, of which a reserve store was always kept in a dry place under the roof. Then the roll of names was called and seven miners were found to be missing. They had been buried alive and there was no hope of finding them.

"Now, listen to me, comrades," said the overseer. "I mean to be obeyed. Above all, no quarrelling; this is not the time for it. If we begin that, we are all lost. I think that if we try by the old gallery above we shall reach the shaft, which is possibly only flooded below, and may still be practicable above. You, Ivan, lean on somebody. Support the old man, comrades. We must not leave him here. You are the strongest of all, Terenti, help him. God will reward you. And now forward with God's help!"

He uncovered and crossed himself. Every one followed his example.

"What are we to do with these?" asked a miner, pointing to the dead bodies.

"Nothing. God has undertaken to bury them," answered several voices. "They are well where they are, for to die thus in an accident is the same thing as dying after confession. God Himself has willed it. Every one knows that among us in the Ural."

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"Well, may the earth lie lightly upon them."

The overseer raised his torch still higher and the march began. The miners followed him, skirting the walls timidly. They soon reached the slanting passage leading to the old deserted gallery, which was above the one they were leaving.

The overseer entered it resolutely. Keeping closely together, the miners began to climb up the steep incline, stopping at moments, sometimes to see if they would be able to advance, sometimes to listen whether there was not a noise behind them, and whether the gallery they had just quitted had not fallen in. Before and behind them there was nothing but darkness, the only light being the flame of the torch. The miners walked in this dim light while the darkness seemed to follow them and dog their footsteps. They thus climbed upwards for twenty minutes, sometimes stooping when the roof came low, then walking erect when possible. If one of them found himself lagging a little behind, he hastened to rejoin the rest, their chief fear seeming now to be left alone, as those who loitered too long were sure to perish.

From time to time the overseer slackened his pace, in order to make sure that all were present; then he resumed the march.

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Suddenly a strong gust of air made the flame of the torch waver. As the draught became stronger the flame was blown backward and became a long tongue of fire. A thick smoke blackened the miners' faces, but they took no notice of it and still advanced. The passage became wider. Remnants of old beams, decayed with age, projected from the walls and barred their way, but they strode over them. Suddenly the end of the procession found itself plunged in darkness—the torch had disappeared. The overseer and several others had finally reached the old gallery.

He gave the order to light several torches. Now they saw the old gallery stretching before them. The rock appeared intact. When the torches were raised, the roof was seen to be still solid, though here and there water filtered through. On the ground was a pool in the midst of which a slight gurgling noise was heard, evidently caused by a subterranean spring. A long thread of water escaped from this pool, flowing to the exit from the gallery which opened on the shaft. The miners followed it.

"Stop, comrades!" said the chief miner, turning round. "Wait for me here a moment. I will first go alone and see if there is any danger in proceeding farther."

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In alarm, the miners halted, keeping close one to another. The overseer's torch gradually became more distant and soon was only a little luminous point in the darkness. Then they saw this little point stop, rise and sink again, finally rest motionless, and soon commence to grow larger as it approached. Then the overseer's figure was distinctly seen. His face was pale with alarm. He approached the miners without speaking, while they also remained silent.

"My friends, there is nothing left us but to die!"

A strong agitation ran through the crowd of miners. The overseer approached the exit of the gallery, and at the risk of falling into the shaft, he leant over and lit it up with his torch. Then one could see to what extent the mine had been damaged. Huge fragments of rock were displaced and threatened to fall at any moment. One great block undermined by the water had been detached immediately above the shaft, whose opening it obstructed, destroying all hope of getting out that way. As for the ladders, they existed no longer.

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VI

"It is impossible to go back, my friends, for in an hour or two the other gallery will fall in."

The miners listened in silence to the words of the overseer, whose words sounded hollowly. The flame of the torch quivered, agitated by currents of air coming from all sides.

"Shall we wait here?" suggested a miner timidly.

"Wait for what?"

"Perhaps help will come from outside."

"What help can one hope for, when the mine has entirely collapsed? This gallery, moreover, affords no safety. When the one we have just left falls in, this will not resist long."

There was no answer, and nothing was audible but the crackling of torches and the breath which came in gasps from many chests.

"However, I still have an idea!" said the overseer.

The crowd of miners gathered closely around him again.

"You know that this mine is next to the old abandoned one. Is there among you any one who has worked in it?"

"Only old Ivan."

"There is nothing to be done then. In the first place, he must have forgotten everything; and secondly, one cannot extract a word from him." [Pg 38]

During this time old Ivan, who seemed to have no idea that any one was talking of him, was gazing intently into the deep darkness which filled the gallery; he stood erect, his dim eyes were wide open, and a tremor passed over his wrinkled face, the expression of which was constantly changing from one moment to another, and betrayed now terror, now a kind of joy, then surprise. Finally he put his hand before his eyes as though they could not endure a dazzling splendour which issued from that darkness.

"If he wished, he could get us out of this," said a miner. "He worked for a long time in the old mine. But we cannot reckon on him; he is not even able to speak. He has been silent for ten years."

Suddenly something startling and unexpected happened. Ivan had just seized the miner who was nearest to him by the hand, and pointed into the darkness. When the miner saw the dilated pupils of the old man's eyes, he staggered with astonishment.

"Look at him! He is going mad!" they whispered. [Pg 39]

"Here I am!" cried Ivan, as though answering a call.

The crowd fell back from him.

"Here I am! Here I am!" repeated Ivan.

The overseer approached him with his torch uplifted. Ivan turned his face toward him radiant with an inner light.

"Look! There He is Jesus! It is sixty years since He came, and now—there He is. He is calling us!"

"But what do you see? Who is calling us?"

"Jesus, I tell you. Stop! Look! There He is standing, in a white robe. He signs to us to follow Him.... Here I am, Lord! Here I am!"

Suddenly, when no one was expecting it, old Ivan snatched the torch from the overseer's hand, and held it above his head.

"Jesus will save us! I tell you He will save us all! Here I am, Lord, I am coming! Behold Him, our Lord full of mercy. I am coming! Here I am!..."

Then without looking round, or lowering the torch which he held aloft with a firm hand, the old man, suddenly grown quite cheerful, walked steadily towards the end of the gallery. Who had given this strength to his feeble legs, and straightened his hollow chest? Old Ivan was unrecognizable. [Pg 40]

After a moment's hesitation the chief miner signed to the others to obey, and all followed the old man, holding their breath and not daring to speak. A mysterious force seemed to be guiding him, for without even looking at his feet he avoided the very numerous crevasses, and strode over huge stones which had fallen from the roof. As they went along the overseer had some more torches lit, and the crowd, which advanced in silence, was followed by a broad train of black smoke, momentarily lit up by the red reflection of the flame, and at other times lost in the increasing darkness behind them. The walls and wet roofs of the gallery were visible by its flickering light. Now and again drops of water fell on the torches with a hissing sound.

Some one behind him called to the old man, "Ivan!" but the latter did not turn his head, only gazing in front of him intently. He seemed to see some one who was only visible to himself.

"Here I am, Lord, here I am!" he repeated from time to time, and it was surprising to hear how his voice sounded like that of a young man. What strange cause had roused him so far as to restore to him his former strength, and what inner flame glowed within him?

"Who is there then?" asked the chief miner, catching him up. "Whom do you see, Ivan?"

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"It is a very long time since I saw Him. When I was a little fellow, I saw him often. There He is in front of me, all in white. I see His halo. He marches in the darkness like the sun.... Here I am, Lord, here I am!"

After that no one asked Ivan any more questions.

At the end of the gallery they came up against an obstructing wall formed by the rock itself; but the old man seemed to see a gleam of light.

"Here He has passed ... here! There are His shining footsteps," he said, pointing to the blocks of earth which lay on one side.

The miners began to ply their picks. The earth was so soft that in a few seconds an opening was made through which the air rushed with such violence that it nearly extinguished the already flickering flames of the torches. It was plain that the gallery extended still much farther, and that if just where it turned round the rock it was obstructed by a mass of earth, this must be caused by a landslip.

Before they had time to enlarge the opening which had been made, the old man had already entered it.

"I see Him! There He is! I come, Lord. I come!" These words were heard from the other side of the passage which was lit up by old Ivan's torch. The miners followed him, crawling one after the other.

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On the other side of the opening the gallery, which was hollowed through the rock itself, was much higher. The torches showed seams of flint and strata of white marble. The air circulated freely, and it seemed as though there were somewhere an invisible outlet; the flames of the torches flickered violently and it felt cold. A torrent of water fell down from the top of the rocky walls, and ran noisily along the gallery, winding from one wall to another. Soon it fell roaring into the black gaping mouth of a crevasse and disappeared in the bottomless depth. Still holding his torch high, Ivan skirted the precipice without appearing to notice it.

"There is one thing I should like to know," said a little boy, pressing up close to a miner in the gloom.

"What is that?" asked the latter in a low voice.

"What is it the old man sees there?"

"Hush! Some heavenly power is guiding him."

The gallery through which they were passing just now still formed part of the Voskressensky mine, but it had been deserted for a long time, after having been worked out. As it had been cut through the native rock, the walls were solid and unshakable. Suddenly Ivan stopped.

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"Well, what is it?"

"He is there.... Standing. Oh, listen! Do you hear?"

Ivan leant forward, straining his ear to catch mysterious sounds. As a matter of fact distant and strange moanings were audible. Was it the complaint of a spring imprisoned in the rock? Was it the noise of a landslip? Or was it simply the sound made by a current of air passing through the fissures of the rock?

"A terrible thing happened here. Blood has been shed, yes, yes, I remember," murmured the old man, talking to himself and glancing about him. "Yes, it is there. He struck him on the head with his pick. He killed his brother ... like Cain. This is where they buried him.... Here I am, Lord, here I am!" And he resumed his march.

The chief miner who had heard him remembered a long-forgotten tragedy, that of two brothers who had quarrelled just here. The elder, goaded to fury by the jeers of the younger, had raised his pickaxe and struck his brother with the point. Without even uttering a cry, the latter had collapsed. He had been probably buried on the spot where he had fallen.

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VII

However, the more they went on, the more alarmed the miners grew. Whither was the old man leading them? What would happen if they lost themselves in the labyrinth of these subterranean galleries, whose silence had not been disturbed for long years? The darkness itself seemed startled by the sight of this terrified crowd. The miners would have gladly halted, but what would happen then? To go back was to go to certain destruction. As long as they followed Ivan, they had a vague hope of some mysterious aid, reckoning on the unknown power which supported him and

had restored to him for some hours a little of his former vigour for the deliverance of his comrades perhaps. Those who had no belief in this hesitated nevertheless to separate from the rest, knowing not what to do in this silence and darkness. If they had to die, they would die together. At any rate, they soon understood that they would have inevitably perished in the gallery which they had just left, for they had hardly been following the old man for an hour when a dull and prolonged sound was heard in the distance. Then it came nearer, as though it were pursuing them. Its last echo seemed to them quite close, behind the wall they were skirting at that moment. It was evident that the gallery where they worked, as well the one which they had just quitted, had both fallen in. If they had remained there, they would have shared the fate of those of their comrades whose hands and feet only were projecting from the mass of earth which covered them.

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The distant shock also re-echoed in the gallery they were traversing when they heard it. Fragments of earth fell from the roof and a great rock suddenly projected just above old Ivan's head, while the wall on the right hand bulged out. The miners rushed forward terrified, but Ivan stopped them and made them go more slowly. Some cowards flung themselves on their stomachs and hid their faces, but they were lifted up and obliged to proceed. The gallery they were now in became narrower and narrower. After having begun their march five abreast, they could now only go two by two with difficulty. A few minutes more, and they were obliged to walk in single file. Then the chief miner let the rest go in front of him and took the last place. He was among the few who had not lost their heads and acted thus, lest some cowards might remain behind stretched on the ground in an access of blind fear.

The gallery became ever more contracted. However, that did not seem to trouble old Ivan, who continued to advance with confidence. He still saw distinctly the white Apparition Who shed a mysterious radiance in the darkness. From time to time he murmured, "Here I am Lord, here I am!" and that renewed his strength.

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Even now when his two elbows touched the walls, and the lowness of the rocky roof above his head prevented him raising his torch which he was obliged to hold in front of him a little slanted and at arm's length, the old man never doubted that he was guided by our Lord in person, Who pointed him out the way. Behind him the miners were half suffocated because the thick smoke of the torches filled the narrow passage in which it was difficult to breathe, as the confined atmosphere had been unchanged for an immeasurable time. This was apparent by the way in which the flames of the torches lengthened themselves, seeming to seek the oxygen they required, and then burning dimly in the darkness.

All at once Ivan halted. He was confronted by a dead wall without any apparent outlet. However, doubt was not possible for him, for he had distinctly seen the white Apparition pass through the wall. Now it was waiting for him on the other side of the wall which had so unexpectedly intervened.

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"He has stopped there; I have seen Him!" Ivan stretched out his lean arm in front of him, no one knew why.

The chief miner decided to make a last attempt, "Let us dig, my children! We must make a way for ourselves."

But though he gave the order, he doubted whether there was anything on the other side of the wall but a mass of earth, rocks and ore. Fortunately, just here the passage was a little wider and they could work three abreast. They set to work bravely. However, the flames of the torches exhausted the air and they grew very dim. Their smoke blinded and half-choked the miners, but they persisted and dug huge holes in the earth which was not very hard.

Leaning his back against a wall, Ivan looked straight in front of him. He knew that behind this mass of earth and stones the Apparition which he had known so well in his childhood awaited him.

"We are buried alive!" murmured one of the men.

"Are we making any way?" asked the chief miner, ignoring the remark.

But the men, with perspiration pouring from them, continued their work without replying.

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VIII

Half an hour passed in this way. Half-suffocated, some of the miners lay down flat on the ground. Many of them hid their faces as though unwilling to see death face to face—death which seemed so horrible in this black hole so far from the earth's surface. The pickaxes and shovels which were at work on the wall which barred their progress moved but slowly. Finally, the last batch who were working stopped, having no longer the strength to continue. In vain were their chests expanded to take deeper breaths—they were stifled, their throats were contracted, blood rushed to their heads; the air was failing them. The horrible consciousness of certain death was weighing upon them. But in any case the unfortunate men would not have had the strength to escape from this grim cul-de-sac. Their torches, flung to the earth, burnt no longer, but filled with smoke the gloom in which they were plunged.

The chief miner had an attack of vertigo. At his side a young miner began to bleed copiously at the mouth; another was struggling on the ground in an epileptic fit. Some began cursing and

quarrelling or accusing old Ivan and the chief miner. One man uttered a cry, for another stretched at his side, had, in his frenzy, seized him by the throat. The chief miner thought he saw red streaks in the black darkness and felt as though something damp and slimy glided over his face. He collected all his remaining strength, rose with difficulty and took up his pickaxe again. His legs tottered. Several times he buried the pick in the black mass of earth which scattered and crumbled beneath his blows; his tool sank under the projecting rock and fragments of damp earth fell with a dull sound. He felt his arms grow numb and threaten to drop the tool.

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"Can any of you help me?" he murmured, but he perceived with terror that he was voiceless, for although he thought he had spoken aloud, no one had heard him. It was like a struggle in a nightmare when the dreamer sees some terrible sight, e.g., an assassin creeping towards his bed, and tries to cry but in vain, for he is dumb. He makes a fresh effort as fruitless as the last and sees the assassin's knife come nearer. A fiendish face bends over him. He collects his last strength; it seems to him that his cry must wake the whole house and be heard in the street, yet the sleeping cat curled up on his bed does not hear the feeble groan which escapes from his labouring chest, "Come and help me!"

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Well, it was the end. There was nothing more to hope for. Mechanically his hand again thrust the pick under the projecting rock. He felt a shock of surprise; the pick passed right through it; a shudder thrilled him; he clenched his teeth, made a superhuman effort, buried his pick still more deeply, throwing as much weight into it as he could, and then fell prostrate, his face towards the ground. His pickaxe had escaped from his hand and fallen through to the other side.

Through the opening thus formed there rushed a gust of refreshing air which at once increased in strength. The smoking torches which had been flung on the ground were spontaneously re-kindled. Their flame licked the walls. The miners began to breathe heavily; those who had half swooned revived a little and began to move. Many raised their heads, drinking in the air with such avidity that they became sick. The chief miner crept with difficulty through the opening and began to breathe with deep gasps the vivifying air.

"It is there ... there!" repeated old Ivan dreamily.

"Yes, old man, it *is* there, you are right," the miners answered, suddenly recovering their courage.

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All the men who had been half-insane a moment before were now convinced that they were saved. In any case, it was a respite; they would not die yet. Death had been left behind in the race once more; they would be able to wrestle with it, and they must profit by this respite to get out of this place. If they had to die after all, well, they would die, but elsewhere, not in this cramped black hole. They set to work again, and this time so zealously that in a short time they succeeded in clearing away the mass of earth which obstructed the opening into the neighbouring gallery. To judge from the quantity of air which came from below they guessed it must be much larger than the narrow passage in which they were working. They hastened to work at this outlet which promised deliverance. The pickaxes struck the rocks violently, and the shovels dug deeply. They disputed with each other the right to work, and he who could clear away the most won; they nearly came to blows in order to dig near the opening in order to reach the new passage. The opening grew larger every moment. Old Ivan glanced at it and his face grew radiant with joy, because he saw beyond it the white Apparition waiting.

"Here I am, Lord, here I am!" he murmured, and if his comrades had not prevented him, he would have tried to pass through the opening at the risk of blocking it up.

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After another half-hour of work they could pass through the opening, although they had to stoop very low. The chief miner went first followed by all the rest. Once he was in the new gallery, old Ivan lifted his torch as high as before.

"I have never seen this gallery!" exclaimed the chief miner. He turned towards Ivan, but at the sight of him the words died in his throat, and he could only stammer, "What is the matter?"

Great tears were running down the old man's wrinkled cheeks; he was contemplating with an expression of profound grief the dark entrance of a side gallery.

"Well, old man! What is the matter?" the miners asked, surrounding him. He continued to gaze in the same direction. "Does this place remind you of something?" asked the chief miner. They all listened eagerly for his answer.

"It is here that my mother was buried in a landslip. Yes, here on this side."

"Comrades!" the chief miner exclaimed joyfully. "There is no doubt about it! We are in the Znamensky mine!"

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So true is it that one man's grief is another man's happiness.

Old Ivan himself was forgotten. They saw that he had guided them all to the old mine, which had been long abandoned, but which he remembered from his childhood. As the mine had been dug in the rock itself, the shaft was undamaged, but they had to find the entrance to it.

The old man remained motionless where he was, his eyes fixed on the place where his mother had perished. The chief miner, who had recovered his collectedness of mind, approached him.

"Well, old man, has Jesus gone without you?"

"No ... He is there.... He waits for me. Here I am, Lord, here I am."

He resumed his march, and the miners followed him cheerfully.

IX

This last part of the journey was not very long. The old mine was not so narrow as the one they had just left. Large and lofty galleries led directly to the shaft; it had not been necessary to dig very deep here in order to find copper ore, and the shaft, which was of a moderate depth and dry, remained as it had always been. Although they no longer needed the old man, he still continued to lead them. The exaltation of spirit which he had shown, gave no sign of sinking, his walk was firm, and he held with a steady hand his brilliantly-burning torch. There still seemed to be some living occupants of the mine, though it had been quite abandoned, for now and then, as the miners proceeded, something fled out of their path, either a mole frightened by the unexpected sight of men, or a pole-cat which had made its home in these subterranean passages.

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Ivan continued to see in front of him the white Apparition, and he believed that he heard Jesus calling and inviting him to follow.

The ground they were now passing over was almost entirely dry. It was evident that if here water had ever streamed from the roofs and the walls, it had long ago drained off down the slanting passages, probably into the neighbouring mine. Here and there some water-drops were visible shining on the stones, but one did not hear the loud noise of the water-springs, nor the roar of the torrents rushing down the crevasses. When the miners reached the shaft they beheld above their heads a greyish light, a certain indication that they were no longer very far from the surface of the earth.

"Well, now, how are we to get up?"

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"There are still ladders left, but so rotten that they would not support us."

"Listen to me," said the chief miner. "One of us must try to get up there. Once he has got up, he will go and get help from the village. Hullo! Where is the old man?"

Still under the impression of his fixed idea, the old man had seen Jesus mounting the ladders and did not wish to remain behind. He thought no more of his comrades; he had forgotten them. However, the higher he climbed, clinging to the ladders, the more weary he felt. His weakness overcame him again, and long-forgotten phantoms seemed to be climbing at his side—he did not know whether they were phantoms or living beings. He saw his mother; she was wearing the same miner's boots which he had seen projecting from the mass of earth which covered her. He saw also the old man who had loved and petted him when he was a child. He saw him with his beard just as he used to be, wearing the same coarse shirt with unbuttoned collar, showing his chest covered with grey hair. Both these dumb companions smiled affectionately at him.

Overhead the orifice of the shaft continued to grow larger. The old man could already distinguish a fragment of pure blue sky, for what seemed from below the grey light of morning was, above the surface, the splendour of a sunny day. And in this splendour, Jesus was continually ascending, and was now well above the opening of the shaft.

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He reached the last rung of the ladder. The earth was basking under the bright autumnal sun. The grass, although withered, appeared rejuvenated by it; yellowed leaves hung thickly on the branches of the birches. Birds were winging a zigzag flight through the cloudless sky. On the horizon mountains showed their forest-clothed summits. The air was impregnated with a pleasant warmth.

Ivan gazed above him with an expression of astonishment. The Apparition ascended higher and higher, inviting him to follow. His mother stood on one side, the old man on the other, gazing at him....

The miners had seen the old man scale the ladders of the shaft. Then, without listening to the chief miner, they hastened to follow him. They followed so close one after the other that they seemed to be climbing on each others' backs. When they reached the surface of the ground, they suddenly paused and remained without moving, after having uncovered their heads. They did not dare to disturb by a word the mystery which was being consummated before their eyes. Nor was the consummation long in coming. The miners formed a circle in the midst of which lay old Ivan stretched on the ground, his face turned towards the sky, his arms already numb, stretched far apart; his wide-open eyes saw no one; they were intently fixed on the blue vault above him as though following some one who was mounting in infinite space. His lips were seen to be feebly moving, and when the chief miner bent over him, his keen ear caught the dying old man's last whispers, "Here I am, Lord.... I am following You!"

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[Pg 58-59]

MAHMOUD'S FAMILY

[Pg 60]



"Your prediction is fulfilled. The Turk has escaped."

[Pg 61]

MAHMOUD'S FAMILY

I. MAHMOUD

A fusillade of musketry fire had just broken out between the Russian and Turkish advance-posts.

The fog was so dense that the confused masses of the Balkan mountains could hardly be distinguished. They seemed more like clouds which had descended on the earth to pass the night there. A red light showed through the fog from a distance; perhaps it was a Turkish bivouac-fire or the conflagration of some lonely farm. The Cossacks turned their piercing eyes in this direction, but in vain, for it was absolutely impossible to make out what it was in such dense gloom.

It was the Turks who had begun firing; the Russians were content with merely replying. Neither side was visible to the other, but they fired, fearing lest, owing to the denseness of the fog, the enemy might approach close to them without being seen. On such occasions one fires involuntarily; it is a kind of mutual warning, "I am not asleep, you understand; take care!"

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The sounds of firing died away in the damp and heavy atmosphere. Slowly the night fell, gradually blotting out from view the field of battle, and the corpses still lying on the snow. Everything was silent; only a groan from a wounded man or the death-rattle of a horse was audible from time to time. But that was all, and the soldiers, exhausted by marching during the day and fighting in the evening, had not sufficient energy left to think of carrying away the bodies

of their comrades. They wished for nothing but a night of rest and sleep.

"Not very cheerful for us, the night of the New Year, eh, Major?" said the Colonel, a short stout man addressing a tall thin one, who had his arm in a sling. The two were sitting on the balcony of a Turkish house.

"No, it isn't! And no letters from home either."

"That is the least of my anxieties; I know our military post too well."

"Ah, how gladly one would see those one loves, were it only for a single moment! But to spend Christmas in the Shipka Pass and the New Year here, sapristi! there is no fun in that. In our house the Christmas tree is lighted and the children are running round it. Your wife and children are sure to be with mine, and they will be talking of us. Probably they are anxious because of our silence. As if we could write—we who only rush on, like madmen, at the risk of breaking our heads! By the way, how is your arm?"

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"Not very grand, you know."

"Well, make use of it!"

"To do what?"

"To go away. Apply for leave for health's sake."

"*You* ought not to say so to me."

"Why?"

"Because we are already short of officers as you know very well. In my battalion there are sub-lieutenants commanding whole companies. Moreover, you and I are not in the habit of separating. We will return home together, that is all. Don't let us talk any more about it."

It was now quite dark, and the horizon was hidden. Here and there the darkness was pierced by the luminous points of some windows in the village which were still lit up. Suddenly there appeared in the street the red moving flame of torch and in the circle of light formed by it a red face wearing a pair of moustaches. At moments there also came to view in the same luminous circle a horse's head with its ears erect.

"Panteleieff!" cried the Colonel in the direction of the torch. The torch entered into the courtyard, and soon the horse stood before the officers, snorting and scraping the hard snow with its hoofs. The Cossack who was riding it reversed his torch, and clouds of black smoke, rising heavily, surrounded his arm.

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"Where are you going like that?"

"To the advance-posts, Colonel."

"Why?"

"The firing has begun again."

"Go and tell them, that if it is nothing unusual, it is useless to reply. When the Turks are tired of throwing away ammunition, they will stop of themselves."

Several soldiers entered the courtyard, stamping heavily. Panteleieff lifted his torch and it was seen that they had some one in their midst.

"March on, march on, shaven pate! There is no chance of getting any rest with you fellows about; may the Devil take you!" the soldiers said, grumbling. It was evident that they were not yet aware of the officers' presence.

"Well, well! Must we then encourage you with a butt-end?"

"What is it, my children?" said the Colonel, rising.

"We are bringing a Turk, Colonel. We met him by chance—picked him up under a bush."

"Under a bush? How?"

"He was crouched down like a quail. Lieutenant Vassilieff told us to take him alive and to bring him to you, Colonel. His name is Mahmoud."

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"Give us a light, Panteleieff."

The Cossack held his torch near the group and the red light showed distinctly a face with a large nose and straggling grey moustaches. The nose had a lump in the middle; the reddish scar of a recent wound was visible on the forehead surmounted by a turban formed of a piece of dirty cloth snatched from some old tent. Mahmoud also wore a yellow cloak made of camel-skin.

"Stop! Stop! he is an officer," said the Colonel, turning towards his friend.

The Major looked at the Turk attentively. "Yes, and he is also an old acquaintance. Don't you recognize him. That scar to begin with, and I am sure he has two fingers missing from his left hand. Show us his left hand."

The soldier who was standing next to Mahmoud took hold of his hand and held it up.

"Yes, it is Mahmoud Bey, a Turkish Colonel. Prisoner and runaway; his account is settled. The general will probably have him shot. That depends on the mood he is in. It is a pity. Bring him here, my children. One of you stay with us; the rest go as quickly as possible."

Mahmoud Bey was brought into the room next to the balcony. A soldier armed with a musket stationed himself on the threshold. [Pg 66]

The prisoner was almost a giant, thickset and broad-shouldered. He appeared to be over fifty. His eyes had a melancholy expression under their bristling grey eyebrows; his ragged moustache, also grey, was constantly twitching; his feet were bound round with rags, his cloak was torn and had a blood-stain on one shoulder.

"What is this blood?"

"Kyriloff tickled him up a little with his bayonet behind the bush, Colonel."

"Why?"

"Because, Colonel, it was in vain that we called to him in good Russian, 'Come out, shaven-pate!' He did not listen to us, but only waved his hands. Kyriloff was annoyed, and pricked him a little. Then he left his bush. To tell the truth, we wanted to finish him on the spot, but Lieutenant Vassilieff told us to bring him here."

"Somione! give him a chair."

The prisoner sat down, after placing his hand on his heart, his mouth, and his head successively. His expression was still melancholy; he evidently did not expect anything pleasant from his new masters. His large nose drooped over his ragged moustaches, his head was sunk between his shoulders. [Pg 67]

II. THE EXAMINATION

Having, in the course of his military career, served in the regiment on the frontier of the Caucasus, the Major had picked up a little Turkish. So they dispensed with an interpreter.

"I think we have met before?" he said to the prisoner. "You are Colonel Mahmoud Bey?"

The Turk lowered his head, and assumed an attitude of utter prostration.

"Perhaps there is a mistake, and I am taking you for some one else?" added the Major.

"I never lie!" said the prisoner, rising. "I escaped here from Kazanlik and have been recaptured by your soldiers. One cannot go far on foot!" he added, smiling sadly, "especially when one is, like myself, wounded in the head and the leg. And I have been again wounded in the shoulder."

"You should know that according to the usages of war," answered the Major, who attempted, but in vain, to speak in an official tone.

"It is superfluous to tell me that. The power is on your side. You are the victors; tell them to kill me. I knew perfectly well the risk I ran when last night I escaped from the house of the officer in whose charge I was. I have played, I have lost, and I must die." [Pg 68]

The Major, touched by the prisoner's tone, began to speak to him more gently.

"Were you uncomfortable where you lodged?"

"No."

"Did they treat you well?"

"The officer with whom I lodged is a very generous man. He obliged me to take his bed; he gave me food and drink; he treated me like a brother not like an enemy."

"But were you afraid of being ill-treated in Russia?"

"No. I know that the Russians always treat their prisoners well."

"In that case, why did you run away?"

"What is that to you? Here I am in your hands; do your duty. But be quick! be quick!"

Something very like a choked-down sob contracted the throat of the old Turk, and again his head sank.

"What did you hope to get by escaping? The Turks are retreating everywhere, famine reigns among you, and the population has fled. Would you not have done better to have waited? The war will soon be over, and you would have been able to go home to your own house."

"Home to my own house? Where is that?"

"I don't understand you."

"Well, you soon will. I know how things are going on and have no illusions. An order has recently [Pg 69]

come from Constantinople telling people to emigrate to Asia Minor. Every one will go; my family with the rest. Where will they go? How am I to find them again? Bah! Don't let us talk about it; it is useless. I did what I thought was my duty; do your own. No one escapes death. That which is to happen, will happen; it is written. No one lives beyond the limit fixed by destiny. What I did was certainly not for myself...."

The prisoner's voice broke again, and he made a despairing gesture.

"You spoke of your family.... I also have a family," said the Major with a pensive air.

"You are very lucky then to be alive, and to be able to go and meet them. You are not a prisoner."

"It is for the sake of your family that I question you. You have children?"

The prisoner's head sank still lower. There was silence.

"Have you many children?" added the Major.

"Four," murmured Mahmoud Bey in a low voice.

"Are they grown up?"

"No, all little. The eldest of the little girls is just six."

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"Just the age of my rascal," said the Major, as though speaking to himself.

"My girl will be very beautiful when she grows up," said the prisoner in a livelier tone. "She has large eyes, which glow already. It is five months since I saw her; she wept much when I went away. My youngest is not yet a year old; he could not yet walk at the time of my departure. They all live down there just outside Adrianople. I had a house and vineyard ... it is so pleasant there. I hoped to see them growing up under my eyes, the little brats. Then this war had to come. A curse on those who provoked it. God is just; He will punish those who have shed our blood and destroyed the happiness of our children."

"Yes, what is the good of war?" exclaimed the Major. "What is the use of it? All my fortune is my officer's pay. If I am killed to-morrow, what will become of my family?"

The examination of the prisoner had changed its character and become a conversation about families. The Major translated everything to the Colonel and the latter felt a keen sympathy with the prisoner's misfortunes.

"Tell him, my friend, that if he really had love for his children, he would have quietly let himself be taken to Russia, instead of trying to escape at the risk of death. On his return, he could have taken up their education again. It would not have been a long interval, only some months."

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Mahmoud Bey replied sadly: "If our wives and kinsmen knew what the Russians really are, they would all have quietly remained at home, waiting our return. But no! In a few days from now the whole population will have fled, and soon as your soldiers arrive in sight of Adrianople, the town will be abandoned by the inhabitants. Only the Christians will remain.

"You asked me just now," he continued with a sudden heat, "why I escaped from the generous officer in whose charge I was. Simply on account of my family. I wished to go and save my wife and children. You who talk to me about them, do you know what will become of them? I will tell you. My wife will be panic-struck and begin by abandoning the house, the kitchen-garden and everything. It will all become the prey of some Greek or Armenian. My wife will depart for Constantinople, taking the children with her. When she has arrived there, she will get no help from the Government, for where do you think there will be money enough to satisfy the needs of so many ruined families? There are more than a hundred thousand of them. Then they will be sent over to Asia Minor, to Scutari, where they will be forgotten. What will she do herself alone? There will be only one result. My daughters being beautiful and healthy, she will be able to sell them to harems, where the poor young things will forget the very name of their father. My boys will become slaves, while my daughters will be sold again some day to some rich old man of Aleppo or Damascus. As to my wife, her first grief once over, she also will go into some harem. And after a year, when I return, what shall I find? Nothing, neither house, nor family! I shall not even know where they are gone; people will not be able to give me any information. I shall have lost all that I possess, and my house will have changed its master.

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"You asked why I escaped. Because I could not support the mental anguish which tortured me. I wept all the night, previous to taking flight; I knew I was exposing myself to the risk of death. But at such a time, to live or to die—is it not the same thing? If I had succeeded, I would have saved my children; I have not succeeded—well, I shall die. Kismet! It is not that death frightens me. Since the beginning of the war I have been exposed to it every day, and have been accustomed to face it without trembling. What dismays me is to know that my family are deserted, unhappy and dying of hunger—to know that they are quite near me and that I cannot fly to their help...."

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The old Turk, burying his head in his hands, began to sob, to the great embarrassment of the officers. The Colonel leaped from his seat, and began to stride up and down the room. He made a gesture with his hand, as though he wished to brush away something which prevented him seeing distinctly; then he got angry with himself.

"The deuce!" he said, "I was nearly becoming a woman." He looked at the Major, who as pale as himself, remained sitting at the table, on which his fingers were tracing strange designs.

"Yes, war is a dreadful thing," he murmured.

The prisoner resumed his talk. "Before this war I had never left my house. I had seen all my children born and watched their growth every day. As they grew, their minds developed; no details escaped me; neither the moment when they recognized me for the first time, nor the moment when they began to stammer their first letters. I remember everything, everything—their little limbs when still weak ... their mouths open like nestlings. Who will bring them their daily food now? Their mother? She is in danger herself. Only the other day...."

He could not finish; his strength failed him.

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"Just as it is with us at home, my friend. The same thing exactly," said the Colonel, pacing nervously up and down the room.

"What shall we do in the meantime? I think myself we might wait till to-morrow before sending him to the general. What do you say, Colonel?"

"Yes, yes, to-morrow will do."

"Shall he stay with us for the present?"

"Yes, he can stay with us. I will tell Somione to make up a bed for him. Four children! What a story!"

"And if the general has him shot, Colonel?"

"Hm! yes.... It all depends on the mood he is in. One cannot talk about children with the general."

"War is a horrible thing, Colonel. Is it not?"

"Yes, it is, if you want my opinion. But duty, you know, and the uniform and the military oath. I'd as soon they all went to the devil. Don't let us think of it any more till to-morrow. It gives me a feeling of constriction at the heart. Ask him if he will take wine. We will have supper together."

III. DREAMS

The prisoner's bed was placed in the same room with the Colonel and the Major.

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Soon all was silent. From time to time came the noise of single cannon-shots, deadened by the fog. It was the Turks who would not be quiet, but continued to fire at the Russians. But as the latter did not reply, they also finally ceased. Night now reigned alone over the world, wrapping everything in darkness and dampness—both the snow-covered summits of the mountains and their peaceable defiles covered with Turkish villages abandoned by their inhabitants as though a plague had been raging.

In the valley below lay thousands of corpses with fixed eyes widely open gazing at the dark mysterious heavens. Their intent gaze seemed to wish to penetrate the darkness as though obstinately asking heaven whither had passed that something which had animated their bodies that very morning, and what had become of the last sigh which escaped from their bayonet-pierced or bullet-riddled breasts. But the dark inaccessible sky regarded them sadly from above, letting fall now and then cold tears on these disfigured faces.

The Major could not get to sleep. He turned and turned again under the felt cloak which served him as a blanket, throwing it aside and pulling it over himself again, recommencing for the tenth time to read a newspaper and letting it fall, casting furtive glances at the slumbering Turk, and hearing the vague words which escaped him in his uneasy sleep. Weary with his restlessness, the Major tried to oblige himself to think of something else, but his thoughts always returned to the same point.

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Even when he had finally closed his eyes and his breath had become more equal, when night had cast its soft spell over the room, his thoughts continued without change to work in the same direction. He dreamt of children, not the prisoner's unfortunate brats, but of his own surrounded by all the care of a mother and sheltered from danger in the midst of the profound quiet of the steppe which surrounded the little Russian town where his family dwelt. His thoughts flew to them over thousands of versts.

All else had vanished; nothing of the present remained, neither the battles, nor the innumerable corpses, nor that ocean of disasters which for a long time had been rolling its blood-stained waves under the Major's eyes.

This is what he saw—a moderately-sized room with a sacred icon^[1] in one corner. A night-light burns softly before the icon as though intimidated by the constant sight of the saint's austere face, whose expression appears still more sombre in contrast with the silver ornaments of the frame in which it is set. The feeble rays of this pale light show in the shadow the outlines of two little beds with very white curtains from behind which proceeds the sound of equable breathing. The Major lifts one of these curtains; the little girl in this bed is too hot; she has pushed off her coverlet, and all rosy with sleep, she slumbers without dreaming, her little plump legs gathered up close to her body, and her pulpy mouth half-open. The little monkey is tired with running about the whole day. She has rolled down ice-slopes, she has teased her favourite fowls and her cock, she has fed the pigeons, and among other things she has fought with her little brother. Now

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she slips her little fat hand under her head. She seems about to open her eyes and close them again, smiling at the sight of her father's face as he hangs over her. He takes a long look at her.

"Sleep, my darling, sleep, my angel," he murmurs, making the sign of the cross above her.

Then he turns to the other little bed. Do you see this brat? He is not yet two years old, but he is already covered with scratches because he does nothing but fight, sometimes with the cat, and sometimes with his little sister, whom he torments. Accordingly, his cheek is marked all over by the cat's claws, who, however, appears at present to have made a truce with her enemy, for there she lies rolled up, looking like a ball of grey wool. Isn't he fat and sturdy, the Major's rascal? He is so fat that his pretty hands, his little feet and his neck look as though they were encircled with a thread, as those of quite young infants do. And what red and chubby cheeks, so chubby that they have almost extinguished the nose, which appears between them only like a little button! His round head is covered with hair so blond that it is almost white, and there is a dimple in his elbow. Suppose he were to kiss the dimple? But no—the child might wake up. Good! Good! Let him sleep. And the father makes the sign of the cross over the spoilt child. Then he approaches the night-lamp. Its wick is charred and he turns it up a little, so that the room is better lighted.

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In a corner snores the old nurse; it sounds like the purring of a cat. The Major goes on tip-toe towards the next room. His eldest son is there who looks down on his little sister and his brat of a brother with profound disdain. In the absence of his father he sleeps in his mother's bed, where he is rolled up like a ball. The languid light of a lamp covered with a blue shade falls on both of them. By the bed-side is a little round table. The Major's wife must have been reading newspapers before going to sleep, for there are some on the table, open at the page where his detachment is spoken of. On the wall there is a portrait of him, and there are others on the table. His memory seems to pervade the place; he has certainly not been forgotten. Full of gratitude, he leans over the sleepers, he touches softly and carefully the half-open lips of his wife, he kisses gently her forehead and her closed eyes. She seems to him to have grown thinner. Her nightdress is open at her neck, on which the light of the lamp directly falls. It is quite natural that she should have grown thinner through anxiety on account of her husband. She has put one arm round the neck of her boy, who sleeps cosily, his curly head resting on his mother's shoulder, his mouth a little open. What teeth he has! And one eye is blackened!

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What peace reigns here! It seems as though a spirit of purity brooded in the atmosphere. Everything here breathes of love, calm and serenity. It is as though an angel's prayer hovered over these two rooms, protecting these dear heads from all evil thoughts, from despair and hatred.

If any one at this moment had watched the face of the Major as he lay asleep, he would have seen a happy smile pass over the lips of this thin tall man—so happy that the old Turk who lay not far from him could not have supported the sight of it.

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The latter was, all the night long, tormented by painful thoughts; he turned uneasily on his couch, and now and then a scalding tear rolled down his face. The night herself seemed struck by the contrast. She sent him a mysterious vision, and as soon as the sleeper perceived it, his expression changed immediately. His contracted muscles relaxed, his mouth, almost invisible before under the great nose, showed a smile. The tears on his cheeks dried; the prisoner was evidently dreaming of something happy. The night hung over him, her visage veiled in black; she murmured beloved names in his ear, and sent him only dreams of happiness; then, softly and gently, she glided towards the Major.

What is the matter with him? He seems to be having a trembling-fit. Night hangs over him and covers him with her black veil. Any one who watched him just now would be struck with the sudden change in his expression. His features betray astonishment and terror. He tries to rise, to shake off the heavy chains of sleep, but night holds him in her grasp. She has placed her hand on his chest. He sees a thing so strange and extravagant that his blood turns to ice in his veins. The quiet rooms of his home seem to be filled with a strange murmur. The children rise in their beds and fix their eyes, dilated with terror, on a black menacing cloud which hovers slowly above their heads. The father looks at it. What is there in the cloud which so alarms his children? His heart beats violently.

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The cloud continues to descend. The children jump down from their beds. The little boy who was sleeping in the next room runs hither. They call their nurse—she has disappeared; there is nothing but a heap of old rags in the place where she was lying. The children call to their mother, but the black cloud hides her from their eyes. There they are alone, face to face with it. It sinks slowly on the ground as though it were descending into the waves of the ocean. Its vague fluctuating outlines assume distinctness. The Major and his children at last perceive what it contained. What they see is a body of enormous length stretched out; round it are standing four little children with great black eyes full of anguish and distress. The children weep bitterly, and their tears fall on the corpse which they surround. The Major's children approach them and begin to examine the body whose grey head, with its large nose, the scar on the forehead, and the grey bristling moustaches, leave no doubt in the Major's mind as to its identity. The body is that of Mahmoud Bey. Everything is there—the fresh wound on the shoulder, the clotted blood on the ragged cloak, the stiffened feet wrapped in rags.

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"But who ... who has done that?" asks the Major's little girl, a moment before flushed with sleep, becoming suddenly pale.

"Who has killed him?" asks the little boy of six with the black eye. The youngest of the children is holding him by the shirt-sleeve.

The Turk's children, the black-eyed brats of a tawny tint, turn towards the Major and point at him.

"It is he who has killed our father. Yes, it is he. He has cast us on the street and reduced us to poverty and helplessness."

The Major tries to speak or cry. His heart is nearly bursting with agony; his tongue feels paralysed; his voice is choked in his throat. This father sees his children turn from him with horror. The youngest even lifts her little hand as though to shield herself. He tries to approach her, but she runs away, her features convulsed with terror. She points to his hands and cries, "Blood! Blood!"

The Major looks at his hands; the little girl is right; they are covered with blood. Then he tries to speak, but he cannot articulate a word; he feels as though some one had seized him by the throat, and were trying to choke him. He struggles desperately, makes a final effort and ... awakes. [Pg 83]

Throwing away the cloak which covers him, he rises. The Turk was not asleep; he was sitting at table with the Colonel.

"Well, Major, it seems to me that you have had a good sleep for the New Year."

"Yes ... and I have had a dream."

"You too?" said the Colonel in an embarrassed tone.

"Why do you say, 'You too'?"

"Yes. You can't imagine what absurd dreams I have been having. I had never believed myself so sentimental."

"Had your dream anything to do with the prisoner?"

"Naturally. You remember my Volodia?"

"A curious question, as I am his godfather."

"Indeed you are right. My head is decidedly queer. Well, I have had that rascal at my heels the whole night. He insisted obstinately that I should give the Turk up to him. 'Why?' I asked. And he answered, 'He also has little Volodia's, and I will let him free to go and find them.' Yet, my friend, I don't think we drank more than usual last night." [Pg 84]

"Certainly not." The Major looked fixedly at the Colonel.

"But think what I have dreamt; it is much more serious."

"Not really."

"Yes, indeed."

The Major related his dream.

"We are becoming superstitious," said the Colonel. "Come what will, we must make up our minds. I will send this Turk to the General as quickly as possible. May God look after him! The General must decide his fate. If we keep him here, we shall end by going mad."

"In that case I have a favour to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"I wish to go myself to the General."

"You?"

"Yes; allow me to conduct Mahmoud Bey to him."

The Colonel gave a side-glance in order to preserve a serious expression, and finally said, without looking at the Major:

"There is nothing against it. But you will need a horse."

"It is easy to find one. Have we not taken enough from the Turks?" [Pg 85]

"True. Very well, there is no obstacle. Hand the prisoner over to the General," added the Colonel, in the tone of a superior officer giving an order.

Walking slowly and accompanied by Mahmoud Bey, who looked as melancholy as ever, the Major arrived at the Russian advance-posts.

A Cossack on horseback emerged from the fog. It was a sentinel. Two other Cossacks lay stretched on the ground. Their horses, attached to pickets, munched a bundle of hay. At the sight of the officer, the Cossacks rose quickly.

"Where does this trench lead, my good fellows?" asked the Major, pointing to a very deep one

close to where they stood.

"Straight to the enemy, Major."

"Has any one seen the Turks to-day?"

"Not one has shown himself. They are quieter this morning. Yesterday they raged like madmen, but thank God, they are giving us a respite now."

"They have understood that they were wasting ammunition."

The Major signed to the prisoner to follow him and descended into the trench. A moment after, one of the Cossacks was at his side.

"What do you want?"

"One must take precautions, Major. We never know what may happen. The Turks are not very far away, you know." [Pg 86]

"It is unnecessary."

"But, Major, your prisoner may escape."

"No, he won't; he has even promised to point me out the Turkish positions. Return to your post."

The Cossack went back. The two others rode in silence for half an hour. Finally the Major halted.

"Listen to me, Mahmoud Bey. The Turkish army is not very far from here. Escape, and go to Adrianople to find your children. You understand me? I have children also. Well, what are you waiting for? Go, escape, and be quick. There is no time to lose. I might change my mind," he added, half-smiling.

The Turk seemed absolutely petrified. He blinked his eyes. Evidently he understood nothing.

"I tell you to go and find your family. Do you understand?"

Quickly, and before the Major understood what he was going to do, Mahmoud Bey stooped down, seized his hand and kissed it.

"Listen to me, Russian! I can never requite you this kindness. I do not dare to wish for you that you may find yourself one day in my position and chance upon a Turk as good as yourself. But know well there is only one God. Religions are diverse, but God is One. I promise you that I and my children, as long as we are alive, will pray God to preserve you for your children as you have preserved me for mine. May the sun shine on you for many years! Farewell, Russian, farewell!" [Pg 87]

Then as though fearing that the Major might change his mind, he whipped up his horse and disappeared.

After waiting some minutes to allow him to get to some distance, the Major returned. When he arrived at the Russian outposts, he met the same Cossack who had wished to accompany him and said, "Your prediction is fulfilled. The Turk has escaped."

The Cossack studied the Major's face and said, "I wish him luck. It is not prisoners we are in want of. We shall soon not know where to put them."

When the Major rejoined the Colonel, he found him walking up and down the room in a state of great agitation.

"Well?"

"Arrest me! I have let the prisoner go!"

The Colonel hastened towards him, and embraced him nervously. [Pg 88]

"There! Volodia has his New Year's gift! Let us hope that now he will let me sleep in peace."

"But ought not a report to be made?"

"Why?"

"And the papers dealing with the prisoner's case?"

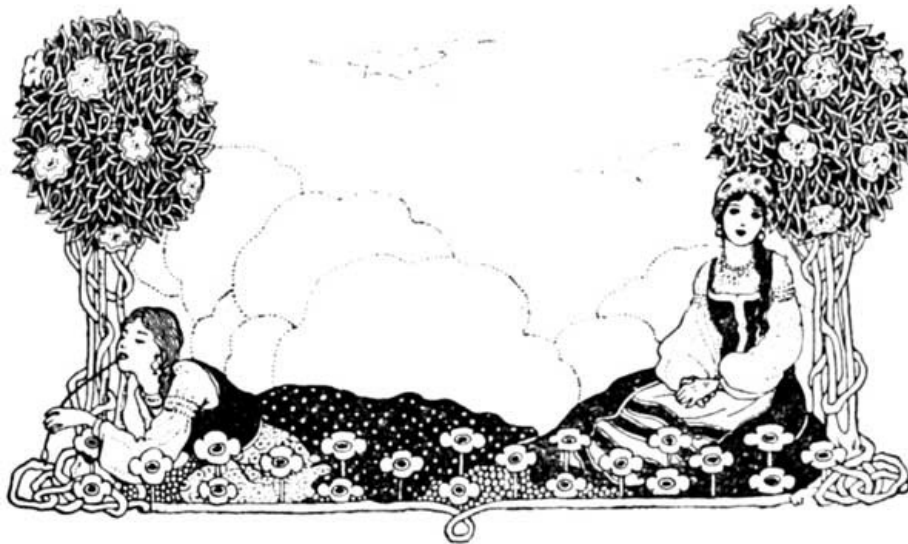
"The papers? There are their ashes in the stove. I have burnt them. Poor wretch! He will have to hurry—he will have to hurry to find his family."



A MISUNDERSTANDING



"From all directions nuns came gliding towards the lighted portal."



A MISUNDERSTANDING

I

Vespers were drawing to a close. A young nun, Sister Helene, who had just finished her novitiate and taken the veil, stood in a dark recess, viewed from whence, the old church, with its round columns, seemed to fade away into the mysterious darkness under the cupola. She watched the black outlines of the "Sisters in Jesus" kneeling in the middle of the nave, the gilded "iconostasis" or church-screen with its blackened pictures set in frames sparkling with precious stones, its wax-tapers and lamps burning softly in the heavy incense-laden air. Each time that the deacon passed, waving his censer, they seemed to burn more brightly. But Sister Helene was lost in

contemplation of a painting which had just been finished by the nun who shared her cell. The figure of the Holy Virgin seemed to stand out from the dark background; her large eyes were sadly fixed on the heads bent in devotion; the flickering flame seemed to cast light and shadow alternately on the divine features. It seemed sometimes to Helene that the sorrowful eyes of the Mother of God glowed with a misty light. Helene was not praying. Rapt in a self-forgetful reverie, her soul soared higher than the arches of the church; she had not heard the broken voice of the old priest, which sounded like a sob, any more than she heard the beatings of her own heart; she took no account of the flight of time till she felt a hand touch her arm.

"Are you going to stay there till morning?" a little misshapen old woman asked her with a discontented air.

"It is a real sin in you younger ones to stay so, absent-minded, without even making the sign of the cross. See! the wax-tapers have burnt out. You have been thinking long enough in your self-conceit, 'Here I am alone, and all the others have gone.'" [Pg 93]

"Pardon, Sister Seraphine," murmured the nun.

"Very well! God will pardon you. Go now, I am closing the church. But make the sign of the cross; that will not break your arm, and then an obeisance. God be with you. All the same, it is a sin in you young ones. Ah, if they would only give us another abbess."

Helene turned once more to look at the church-screen.

The church was now plunged in silence and darkness; the old nun hobbled before the altar, then disappeared behind the columns. Here and there were visible the little flames of the lamps which are never put out. A bunch of keys fell on the flag-stones, sounding like the clash of chains. Sister Seraphine had dropped them.

Once more she watched the young nun's figure as it vanished in the darkness.

"One of the intellectuals!" grumbled the old woman.

"Are we not then all equal before God, those who know as well as those who are ignorant. To speak seven languages, is to multiply one's sins sevenfold. Jesus did not seek for His apostles among the learned, but among fishermen. It is better then to be ignorant. If we had another Superior, Mother Anempodista for instance, she would not have hesitated to give you her blessing and send you to wash the dishes or knead the dough. We are one community; service and trouble, all ought to be shared. It is not French that the Apostle Peter will speak at the gate of Paradise; he will not be afraid to strike you on the forehead with his key and to say, 'Be off, blue-stocking, to the eternal fire; go and talk French to the devils.' No, there is something seriously wrong with these young ones. The Evil One hovers about them trying to entangle them. Certainly it was better under Mother Anempodista; in her time the blue-stockings would not have given themselves airs over the others." [Pg 94]

Still hobbling as she went, the old woman closed the church and went in the darkness to the clock tower where she had lived for about forty years. From the time of her first arrival at the convent and entrance on her novitiate, she had been entrusted with the duty of the portress and remained in that post. There under the bells, in a tiny cell like a niche in a wall, Sister Seraphine grew old and suffered, became bent and looked forward to die the death of the righteous. She lived half-forgotten there, the little old woman, but content. Above her boomed the great bells of the convent, close by her ear tinkled the bell of the main entrance when a visitor called. Sometimes, when gusts of wind roared in the bell-tower, Sister Seraphine would cross herself, murmuring, "Holy saints have mercy! How excited the Evil One is! Whose soul is he coming to seek? Can it be Sister Elizabeth's? To-day a fine aroma of coffee came from her cell. What a temptation!" [Pg 95]

Sister Seraphine's cell was occupied almost entirely by a bed of rough planks; a mattress, a white pillow, a sheepskin coverlet constituted all her luxuries. On the narrow sill of the little window—almost a loop-hole—were placed a piece of bread, some black radishes, salt and kvass; high up in a corner a lamp burned before the icon.

On entering she made the sign of the cross and lay down on her pallet, but suddenly the gate-bell rang wildly. In a moment she was on her feet.

"I am coming! I hear! I hear! The lunatics to ring like that!" she grumbled, taking down the great key from the wall; "here is fine music."

She descended, shivering, and opened with difficulty the large gate which grated on its hinges. [Pg 96]

"Well, what makes you ring like that? We are not deaf," she said to a huge footman wrapped in his fur-lined livery. "Where have you come from and from whom?" she asked, seeing a closed carriage standing a little way off.

"Let me pass first, little old woman; I shall find my way quite well."

"Answer first; to whom are you going?"

"To the Lady Abbess, old crow of a portress! It is Madame the wife of General Khlobestovsky who sends me; don't you recognize me? Take your eyes out of your pocket."

"Yes, if one had time to study your face! You have all the same faces, as like each other as the

curbstones of pavements. It is a sin to have to do with you. Wait till I call Sister Anastasia; she will go to our Mother. Have you a letter? Give it me. A pretty word—'crow of a portress.' You think yourself somebody because you are covered with clothes belonging to your master. Wait! Wait! when the hour of your death strikes, you will remember that 'crow of a portress,' and you will repent. But God is good; He will pardon you; because you lack brains. Consider at any rate, great booby, where you are. 'A crow' ... the idiot!"

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II

Sister Helene, after having left the empty church, turned to the left to reach her cell. A row of little windows, constructed at different heights, illuminated the darkness here and there, and were reflected in the pools of water formed by the last rain-fall. A pavement formed of planks ran along the length of these little dwellings; there was no uniformity in their design, but some of them were picturesque; by daylight the convent presented an original aspect. None of these dwellings resembled each other; some were two stories, others a story and a half high. In these lived the sisters who were well-to-do. They were painted different colours—grey, rose, white, etc. In summer lime trees and birches sheltered them from the sun. To-day the wind whistled through the naked branches.

Helene had not yet reached her door, when she saw approaching her, like a red point in the darkness, some one carrying a lantern.

"Who comes there?" she asked.

"Is it you, Sister?" answered a youthful voice whose musical tones sounded strange in the blackness of the night.

"What! Is it you? You come to meet me?"

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"Yes, I have prepared the samovar (tea-urn). As you did not come, I feared something had happened, and here I am."

"I had forgotten in the church how time passed, and Sister Seraphine made me come out."

"It was time; it has struck seven."

"And you—what have you been doing? I have not seen you the whole day."

"I have been painting; then I tried to read, but my head felt heavy. I think my John the Baptist is not a success."

"Why?"

"I cannot give him the aspect of an ascetic; his eyes, his smile are too sweet; the desert sun had bronzed him, his features must have been harsher."

"Paint him as God inspires you. This evening, during vespers, I looked at your Holy Virgin the whole time."

"You think it good."

"It is perfect. Her sad eyes, her inspired face seem to say that she knows her divine Son will suffer for humanity."

"Well, but Sister Seraphine is not pleased with it."

"What does she say?" asked Helene with a smile.

"That it is hardly befitting to have beautiful pictures in convents, that the eyes of nuns ought not to dwell on the works of sinners."

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"God bless her! She grumbles, but she is good at bottom. When I was ill, before you came, she hardly ever left me. Here we are at my door."

Helene and the novice Olia rapidly ascended the steps of the staircase, shaking the water from their cloaks. When they reached her well-warmed room, Helene took off her short black pelisse and the cap which concealed her hair. Her dwelling had two stages; Olia, her guest, lodged and worked on the ground floor; Helene occupied the upper one. The furniture was very simple—a table of white wood, a small very hard sofa covered with brown holland, two old arm-chairs and straw-bottomed chairs ranged along the wall. Above the sofa hung the portrait of some unknown nun with dark eyes shadowed by a black veil and pale wrinkled lips. In one corner, a lamp burned before an icon in a gold frame.

Helene was not yet thirty years old; her face, pale and thin, had already assumed the monastic expression, but her refined features were still beautiful; her large proud eyes recalled by their sadness and their passionate expression Carlo Dolce's martyrs. One could guess that in this soul which had already long suffered, the sacrifice was not yet consummated, and the struggle still continued. In those dark eyes there often came also the poignant look of physical suffering; her face showed signs of sleepless nights, suppressed tears and sobs choked down.

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Olia, with her sharp ear, heard her sometimes leap from her bed, run to the window, open it and fall on her knees in prayer. It was not the conventual life which weighed on Helene, but that

which she had left outside the walls. Her life in the convent was pleasant and easy; the inmates had for her the regard which a sister deserves who brings a considerable fortune, and who was, moreover, highly cultured, a fact which lent peculiar distinction to the community. When illustrious benefactresses visited the convent, Sister Helene was immediately sent for in order to talk French; these ladies departed delighted, and in aristocratic circles talked of "our convent," in order to distinguish it from the other at the opposite end of the town, which was humble and poverty-stricken, without cultured nuns and unvisited by grand ladies.

This time also, scarcely had Helene sat down to her tea than she was sent for by the abbess.

"May I come in?" said a voice behind the door.

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"Certainly," answered Helene. "Ah, it is you, Sister Athanasia."

"Peace be with you, and God bless you; will you come to our Mother Varlaama."

"What is it?"

"Nothing; only a note for you, and they are waiting."

The abbess was a stout, heavy woman, with a plain but honest face such as is often seen in tradesmen's widows who have lived a quiet life with a sober and affectionate husband. She received Helene with a tender kiss:

"General Khlobestovsky's lady asks me to let you go to her this evening; she is particularly anxious about it and has sent the carriage."

"But it was just this evening that I did not want to go out."

"And why, may I ask? She is one of your old school-fellows, and what is more, rich and a fine lady. Go then for our sakes. Yesterday again her husband has sent us from the country two carts full of meal, flour and oil. We cannot refuse anything to such benefactors; he would regard it as a want of respect and would become indifferent to us. Make this sacrifice, Sister Helene, for the great advantage of us all. Finally I exact it as an act of obedience, as part of your conventual service. Go! Go!"

So saying, she embraced and dismissed her.

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III

Helene felt ill at ease every time that she entered the Khlobestovsky's drawing-room, not exactly because she disliked the mistress of the house; they had been school-fellows and had remained friends. The general was always absent; he preferred country life and the superintendence of his estate, in the first place because his affairs got on the better for it, and secondly he was thus out of reach of the sentimental and romantic claims of his wife, claims which his personal appearance did little to justify.

Each time that the general's wife saw Helene again, she applied a fine cambric handkerchief to her eyes to wipe away some tears, her flabby cheeks quivered, and innumerable wrinkles appeared round her chin and mouth.

"What self-sacrifice!" she invariably exclaimed, pressing her friend's hands. "How happy you are, my darling! while we are—how does one say it?—drowned in sin."

"Plunged," corrected her children's governess.

"Yes, plunged. Exactly so! You, on the other, are saving your soul, and are quite absorbed in God."

Then she took Helene's hand and said, "You are tired; take my arm."

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"No, I am not, I assure you."

"Still, do it, dear Sister."

It was one of the general's wife's principles on commencing the conversation to speak with deference to her friend, though she was the younger of the two.

"These matins, these vespers, these masses! ... It will indeed be well with you up there." And she lifted her large green eyes to the ceiling.

This time also she did not omit the inevitable comedy, and taking Helene's arm, she drew her to her boudoir, where the sound of several voices was audible.

"Come, dear, I have absolute confidence in you."

The "lady bountiful," a friend of General Khlobestovsky, was already seated in the boudoir. Her goggle eyes and projecting jaws well adapted to frighten poor people, opened wide at Helene's arrival, and in a high-pitched voice, imitating a famous actress, she exclaimed with a sigh, "How happy I am! How delighted! Holy woman!" and then turning towards a young girl very simply dressed who was also smiling at the nun, said, "Ah, Sacha, how long have you been here?"

Sacha was a niece of the general, and had been taking a course of music lessons at Petrograd.

When she saw her, Helene's face lighted up.

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"My course was over a fortnight ago, and I took advantage of it to come home again."

"You would do much better," said the "benefactress," looking at Helene, "to follow her example than to follow your course; I tell her so in your presence, Sister, because I tell her so when you are not there to hear. To think that at your age, with your beauty, you have been able to go through such severe tests in order to overcome sin!"

"Why did you send for me?" Helene asked.

"Because, dear, we have decided to make a blue altar-cloth embroidered with gold and silk for your convent. Without your advice we do not know how to set about it; it is impossible for us to choose the design and the colours."

The table was already covered with the velvet cloth in question which reached down to the ground; on it were lying skeins of silk, fringes and gold thread. As soon as Helene had taken her seat the ladies began an earnest discussion on the question whether they should embroider the flowers flame-colour, the stalks white, the leaves red, and at the top in gold a border of moss-roses.

"But would it look natural?" said the nun.

"Then what are we to do?" answered the "benefactress" in an agitated way. "Enlighten us, dear Sister; without you we are in darkness."

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When the consultation was over, Sacha, who had waited impatiently, approached Helene, took her arm, and led her to the drawing-room.

"I have been to your church to-day," she said. "I have looked for you everywhere without seeing you."

"I generally stand on the right in a corner."

"In the shadow?"

"Yes; one feels more comfortable out of observation."

"It is a pity; I was looking forward so much to meeting you again, and did not succeed."

"Why regret it?"

"Ah well! As a devotee you are simply superb; one would say you had stepped out of the frame of a holy picture. And how they sing at your convent! You have a magnificent voice."

"Who says so?"

"My aunt in the first place. At school it seems that you already held every one under a spell."

"Your aunt is too kind."

"Not at all; she is only just. But tell me why do you not take part in the convent choirs?"

"I do not wish to," said Helene, and a shadow passed over her face.

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"Pardon me," murmured Sacha, taking her hand. "I have perhaps vexed you; I am so foolish."

"Not at all," answered Helene. "It is not that. But you see, I ought not to sing. Doubtless, you do not understand me. Anna Petrovna declares in her kindness that I have overcome all sins, but it is not so. A nun ought to seek before all things to forget the world where she has lived. It ought not to attract her any more. No one knows anything of our struggles and our mental distresses. If I recommenced to sing, the past would rise again at once. Ah! I have experienced it already; one day I was singing a church chant in my room; all the past came up in my heart, and I nearly choked. That which I had fled from, that which I believed dead and buried, returned. You see a spiritual victory is not won so easily. Till one is 'dead to the world' one has many trials to pass through. It is only outsiders who imagine that peace reigns in a convent. If people could glance into our souls, they would see troubles and storms at the bottom of each. But these are only words! Come and see me, won't you?"

"Yes, certainly!" answered Sacha, stretching out her hand.

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"I love you much, Sacha; you are honest. Au revoir. God be with you."

"Where are you going?" exclaimed the general's wife. "What! Without taking tea. I won't let you go. After tea they will put up for you a basket of preserves to take to the abbess, that good soul. She prefers quince-preserve. As for you, I don't offer you any; you have renounced all these luxuries; you no longer belong to this world!"

And once more her cheeks began to quiver and her green eyes grew moist.

"How charming you were at school! Tall, well-shaped, like a figure in Dresden china. Do you ever remember the school, Sister Helene?"

"Yes, of course," said Helene, with an abstracted air, only half-attending to her.

"I remember they had brought you from far away—the Caucasus, wasn't it? They had written to me, I remember."

The nun bent her head in order to hide her disturbance of mind. When she raised it again, she had grown still paler, and her sad eyes showed physical pain controlled with difficulty. But the general's wife, who never paused to notice anything, did not guess at her trouble. She had risen, and stuttering very fast, said, "This evening we will give you a musical treat. I know you love music, Helene, and that is not a sin. I think there was a saint—what was her name?" [Pg 108]

"Saint Cecilia," said the governess.

"Yes, precisely. She was a musician, and yet she has been canonized; you will find it in books."

Helene remained. She felt an irresistible desire to hear music—something besides the human voice or the voice of her heart.

"Is it you who will play?" she said, approaching Sacha.

"Yes; tell me what you prefer; I only warn you that I don't play anything very serious."

"Play something that I have not yet heard; all that calls up associations of the past makes me feel poorly. During the four years that I have been at the convent you must have learnt many things which I don't know. You know, perhaps, Beethoven's Sonata 'Quasi una fantasia.'"

"Certainly. Would you like to hear it? 'It is an old piece that is always new,' our musical professor used to say."

"Yes. To-day I feel drawn to it, though I know it will make me suffer."

"Do you know that it is a little alarming to see you as a nun? Why should it be? Our family has been always given to religion; my grandmother entered a convent at the close of her days; and my mother spent her days in visiting the Holy Places." [Pg 109]

Sacha went to the piano and the general's wife came and sat by Helene. She took her hands and said to her in a sentimental tone, "Do you remember how often we used to play duets at school?"

"We must confess that we played very badly," answered Helene with a smile.

"Yes, but the recollection is a delightful one. Do you remember the venerable Father who used to come to listen to us? Do you know I was quite in love with him! But pardon me; I forgot that before you.... Ah, you are quite removed from all that to-day, happy woman!"

"But are not you happy?"

"Non. Life is not what it appeared to us through the rose-coloured curtains of the school. I do not complain of my husband, but he is quite incapable of letting himself go or of becoming enthusiastic."

For a moment or two she shed tears, which she wiped away as Sacha struck her first notes.

Helene listened as though in a trance. God only knew how much the music recalled to her of that past which she thought had been blotted out. She saw once more her country, whose soil she would never tread again; she heard the murmurs of the plane-trees, the low warbling of the brooks; a more brilliant sun glowed in a deeper sky; she closed her eyes and would have liked to withdraw into herself, and see no more of her surroundings. The unutterable yearning and burning passion of the sonata struck painfully and without cessation on her suffering heart. For a long time she had believed that a day would come when the old story which she had confided to no one would be finally forgotten, when she would be able to look at her past with the same indifference with which one contemplates the mists of autumn or the snows of winter; then she would return to her own people content and serene; they would receive her with joy, not guessing what she had sacrificed for them. To-day, alas! she understood that it would be vain to seek to bury that past; it would always rise again as vivid and sad as ever. No, she would never be able to see her country again. Moreover time, solitude and mental sufferings would not be long in putting an end to her physical life. A few more years, and she would rest in her coffin with a visage as immovable as that of the Sister dead yesterday in the convent, who also had known suffering. But those happy people down there, happy in the country she loved so well, did they still remember her? Perhaps they had forgotten her or thought her already dead. [Pg 110]

Under the stress of these thoughts her heavy black garb became insupportable, and her head-dress weighed upon her like lead. She rose suddenly, before the sonata was finished.

"I will see you to-morrow," said the general's wife without attempting to detain her; "the carriage is there. This large packet is for the abbess, and the one wrapped up in a newspaper is for you."

"For me?" asked Helene in a reproachful tone. "You know that I do not like...." [Pg 111]

"Well, give it from me to poor Olia."

"Thanks. God be with you!"

After warmly embracing Sacha, Helene took her leave. When she had settled herself in a corner of the carriage, she felt an inexpressible depression overwhelm her. She would have liked to open the carriage-door, to plunge into the cold fog, and to run into the infinite darkness, far away for

ever.

IV

Despite the cold of an autumn night, scarcely had Helene entered her room than she opened her window and inhaled deep breaths of the damp frosty air which poured into her chamber. She was afraid of the coming night. She felt that she would not sleep and be sleepless till the morning. She took a strong dose of a composing draught, but her nerves were too much disturbed to feel the effect of it.

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Just then Olia ran into her room. "How cold it is here," she said.

"For my part I am stifling and feel the want of air," said Helene, attempting to smile.

"Take care; you will make yourself ill."

"What does that matter," answered Helene with indifference.

"Stop, Olia, see what the general's wife has sent you."

"I am glad to have it," said the novice joyfully, "although they say it is a sin; I do not hear with that ear." Smiling she opened the packet. "Bonbons and sweetmeats—hurrah!"

"Take them all away; I do not like sweets; and now, my child, go down and go to sleep; I want to be alone; I have not prayed to-day."

Helene closed the door and entered her tiny bedroom, a great space in which was occupied by a screen with sacred pictures. The whitewashed walls were bare, and so was the floor. The general's wife had sent her a carpet, but Helene had at once given it to the church. In one corner was a narrow bed, on a little table a Gospel richly bound, the *Life of Jesus Christ* by Ferrara, and some devotional books. Under the table was a box containing all her property, old letters and portraits. This she called her "cemetery." She lit the wax candles before the sacred images and amid the surrounding darkness, the gold frames, and bright haloes cast their reflections on the austere faces of the saints who could scarcely be distinguished against their black background. Helene remembered the nights of prayer which her mother and grandmother had passed, prostrate at the foot of these same icons, and her sad heart was penetrated by a warm feeling of devotion. When she left her home these relics were the only things she had taken with her as they constituted a link with her past; they afforded her a refuge from her sad thoughts. But to-day, how could she get rid of them? She was incapable of praying; her lips murmured the familiar words, her hands made the sign of the cross, but there was no peace nor humility in her heart. She knelt down and closed her eyes, but prayer did not come. In spite of years and of distance, familiar faces surrounded her, and loved voices whispered in her ear, "How pale you are!" "Why did you leave us to go so far?"

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As though she feared insulting the sanctity of the icons she put out the candles and went into the next room. She tried to tire herself out by walking up and down her cell, but in vain; the vision followed her. She did not struggle any more; like a swimmer at the end of his strength, she yielded to the rising waves which were carrying her far away to the land of memories.

The five years of struggles through which she had passed, those years of prayers and struggles, all disappeared; she no longer saw her black garments; even the walls of her cell had fallen; a whole world lay open before her. Yes, it was the past which transported her to its magic circle; she saw her youth again. Her sister Nina, with gentle trusting eyes, came to her and embraced her with her tender arms in order to tell her in broken tones a young girl's secrets. There was five years' difference between the two sisters; the younger one was eighteen. She, the elder, seemed somewhat too serious for her age; that perhaps was owing to the influence of her mother, to her continual visits to convents, and to that atmosphere of incense, prayer and meditation which had surrounded her from her earliest infancy. The younger sister grew up quite different; she was a butterfly who needed the sun, blue sky and flower-beds; her laughter rang clear, contagious and musical. Helene herself who had received the nickname "the nun," yielded to the charm of this child-like gaiety. What she loved best in the world was to sit at her window in the evening, listening to her sister telling her in her gentle voice her great joys and her little sorrows. Why then one day had she suddenly risen and pushed her away? Why had some words of her favourite made her treat harshly, were it only for a moment, this dear little bird who came to seek protection with her? What had the child said that its memory should still burn in her heart to-day?

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Nina, with blushing and tears, had confessed to her that for two years she had been in love. When she uttered the name of the man she loved Helene had pushed her away so abruptly that the poor little thing had fallen against a piece of furniture. The "nun" remembered her mad fit of anger; without being touched by her sister's sobs, she shut herself in her room, refusing to open the door each time that Nina came and knocked at it.

On the morrow her anger had cooled and been succeeded by a sad tenderness, a profound remorse for her harshness. She went to her sister's room and found her asleep without having undressed, her cheeks still showing the traces of tears. She bent over her to embrace her. Nina flung her arms around her, whispering in her ear, with tears of joy this time:

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"I knew that you would not long be vexed with me; there was no reason why you should be, I am

no longer a child; I am eighteen; I could not hide it from you any longer."

"But he—how does he feel towards you?" interrupted Helene.

As she put this fateful question, she pressed her hand to her heart as though she feared it would betray her by its beating.

"I think ... he also loves me; he is so attentive, so affectionate in his manner."

Helene did not ask any more; she forced herself to smile, and till the hour of her departure, she was constantly with her sister; at the bottom of her heart she wished her to be happy, but in this same heart an icy despair was daily growing more intense.

"He has been affectionate and attentive to me also," she said to herself. Had she not seen his gaze constantly following her? Did not the very tone of his voice change when he spoke to her? She had deceived herself then! And indeed how could she, the taciturn "nun," hope to rival her graceful little sister? She had been blind, and worse than that—ridiculous. He loved Nina, and naturally had more smiles for her elder sister than for others.

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Shortly after her sister's avowal, Helene went to pay a visit to some relatives, where she remained several days, considering what she should do. One moment she believed that he hesitated between her and Nina. But Nina had been entrusted to her care by her dying mother; could she ever come between her and her happiness? Never! Should she bring tears to those clear eyes? Should she ruin by her egotism "her child's" future? *He* might hesitate, but she must not! Only what should she do?

She had not to reflect long. Her mother had taught her to forget herself and accustomed her to the thought of self-sacrifice. Happiness bought at the cost of another's suffering could not be endurable, she said to herself. Even if he did not yet love Nina, she would entrust her to his care, at the moment of her departure, and love would soon follow. Her sister would not miss her; those who are in love do not need a third person. Her life, as far as she was concerned, was finished; she would never love again; natures like hers neither change nor forget. As for being present to witness the spectacle of this youthful happiness, that was beyond her power. Perhaps in course of time, when everything had settled down, she might return. At present she must go where they could not discover her, or even if they did so, not be able to bring her back into the world.

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It was then that she recollected the peace that she thought she had seen pervading the convents which she had visited with her mother, and that devotional atmosphere which soothes those whom life has cheated. She recalled to memory the face of Sister Melanie, of whom it was said that she had lived through all the trials that can come upon a woman. How serene her face was and how grand and noble that once passionate heart!

After her absence, Helene, returning one evening to her house, found her sister and him in the garden. A nightingale was singing, and the flowers were exhaling their scents. She thought she saw on the faces of the two young people an expression of happiness. The next day she told her sister that she was leaving for Petrograd, and that their aunt would stay with her during her absence. She took leave of both for "a certain time" as she said, and ignored his melancholy air when she entrusted her little girl to his care. She wrote seldom from Petrograd; Nina's letters showed signs of ennui; Helene explained it to herself by the fact that the younger one had never been without her before. Later on, she left for a foreign country, and it was from thence that she announced to her family the unexpected news of her entering the convent; she was happy, she said, and wished them the same happiness; she would only write seldom, and perhaps would never return to Russia.

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She did return, however, chose at random a small provincial town, entered a convent there as a novice, and disappeared from the world. She never knew if her family had looked for her; it was as though a curtain had dropped between her and her former life.

Since then five long sad years had passed. She hoped she had secured the happiness of those she loved, but she had not gained that sweet quietude, that healing forgetfulness which she had expected. On the contrary, her sadness increased with the lapse of time; memory became more active; through the most of her tears she no longer even saw the great ideal which was to safeguard her from herself. One single thought possessed her: she would never be able to return again to those she loved so well.

Sometimes, as she lay on her bed, her lean arms crossed over her breast, she said to herself, that one day she would be so stretched in her coffin, but then her sufferings would be ended, and death did not alarm her; she smiled at him as a prisoner smiles at the radiant hour of deliverance. But that hour came very slowly.

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It was still dark when the bells rang for matins. Helene dressed herself quickly and went out. From all sides black figures were gliding in the shadow towards the lighted portal of the church. Some saluted her, others did not notice her. Silence reigned everywhere.

She went to efface herself in her favourite corner, in the shadow where she loved to stand, leaning her head against the cold wall. She did not succeed in attaining to forgetfulness; on the contrary her memories oppressed her, though she tried to lose herself in the contemplation of the gentle Virgin who seemed to regard her with pity. It would have been a relief if at least she could have shared her sorrow with some sister soul, but Sister Seraphine was the only one who passed and re-passed her, grumbling to herself as she went.

"Why do you stand there, like a statue? Make at any rate on your forehead the penitent's sign of the cross! They are a real sorrow, these young ones! You all have your eyes fixed on the holy pictures, but your hearts are elsewhere. Think of it, Sister Helene! At the hour of death you will be glad to pray, but then your hand will not have the power to make the sign of the holy cross." And the old woman disappeared behind the columns.

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Helene went back to her room. It was still dark, and the gloom had invaded her soul also. Why was it that she was suffering to-day more than usual? Was it a presentiment which oppressed her heart? What was going to happen?

V

Six o'clock had just struck. The grey light of morning broke into the cell in which Helene walked up and down with a nervous step, casting from time to time a sad glance out of the window; she felt that to-day neither sleep nor calm would come to her. Olia, woken by the sound of her footsteps, had come several times to her door; but Helene had always sent her away, begging her not to be anxious about her.

There was nothing in her past with which she had to reproach herself. She had given all that she had. Why then did the consciousness of having acted rightly not bring her the peace for which she longed? Then, catching herself murmuring, she began to pray, but the prayer did not come from her heart. Her exhaustion caused her to feel giddy; she even rejoiced in this, seeing in it a sign of the torpor for which she craved. Passing into her inner room, she lay down on her bed, with her eyes closed, but sleep did not come. Dawn broadened into day, and the austere countenances of the icons seemed to be bent fixedly on poor Helene as she lay, deprived of strength. She made a movement and her hand touched the old newspapers in which the preserves sent by the general's wife had been wrapped. Hardly knowing what she did, she unfolded one of them, and glanced at it carelessly; the paper glided with a light rustle behind her bed; a vague desire to know what was going on in the world seized her; she took another sheet; her eye fell on the not very edifying details of a divorce case; she turned the page and found there, by a strange chance, a correspondent's letter from her native town of which she had heard nothing for so long. She saw that the date of this letter was that of the year in which she had left her country.

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Scarcely had she glanced through some lines than her blood turned to ice in her veins and a chill pierced her heart. She uttered such a groan that Olia awoke with a start. As though she could not trust her eyes, poor Helene read the article a second time. Yes, they were there, those cursed lines! a thing more horrible than murder. She had not yet taken in the awfulness of it. A fit of frenzy seized her brain. She seized the newspaper and brandished it at the sacred pictures, saying, "There! There!"

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What she had read was as follows:

"A tragedy has just disturbed our quiet provincial town. Two young girls of good society fell in love with the same young man; one was twenty-five, the other nineteen. There was an explanation between the two sisters: the elder did not wish to stand in the way of the happiness of the younger; she went away for good, telling her friends that she intended to enter a convent, and would never return. This is where the affair took a dramatic turn. The young man loved the girl who had gone away; he only waited for her return to declare himself. When he heard of the step she had taken, he applied to the authorities to be exchanged into another regiment, and went off without informing any one. This morning the younger of the two sisters was found dead in her room, killed by a pistol-shot. On the table was a short note:

"DEAR SISTER,—

"Where are you? Forgive me! I could not, I ought not, I dared not live any longer.

"NINA."

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"No! It is impossible! It is false! I am delirious!" exclaimed poor Helene, crushing the paper in her clenched hand. She went near the window in order to read again the fatal lines. They were indeed there; they did not disappear! Nothing took their place. They turned from black to red; they blazed like fire; they burned her heart!

"DEAR SISTER,—

"Where are you? Forgive me! I could not, I ought not, I dared not live any longer.

"NINA."

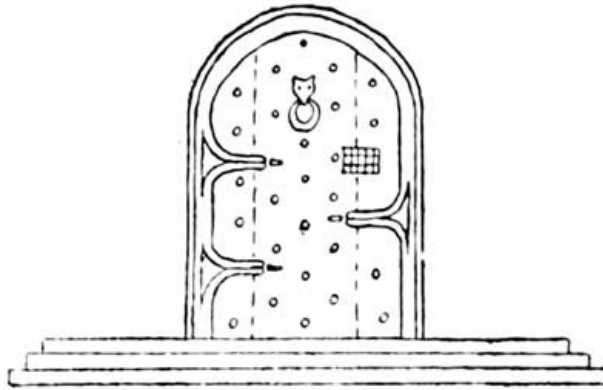
Helene seized her black head-dress and bursting into wild laughter rushed towards the door. She herself had fastened it, but she imagined that some one was holding it from without, and shook it, sobbing and laughing at the same time. Then without hesitation she turned the key, went out, passed Olia who, pale as a sheet, gazed at her without comprehension and ran down the stairs uttering unintelligible sounds.

A moment after she was hammering at the closed door of the church and uttering maledictions to the great alarm of Sister Seraphine, who ran to tell the abbess, making the sign of the cross and crying, "Saints preserve us! It was not for nothing that the wind last night blew so fiercely against the windows. It is a real sin of these young ones."

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At the sound of Helene's wild cries the other nuns, frightened and half-dressed, left their cells and ran in the raw cold of the morning to help their unhappy sister.

Alas! she had misunderstood!



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THE LUCK OF IVAN THE FORGETFUL

[Pg 128]



"A strange sight brought her to a standstill."

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THE LUCK OF IVAN THE FORGETFUL

I

The old convict spent the whole day walking up and down the prison courtyard, wearing a gloomy expression and sunk in deep meditation like a man trying to recollect something which he had long forgotten. He was entered on the roll of prisoners as Ivan the Forgetful, but his fellow-prisoners nicknamed him "Ivan the Runaway," because of his numerous attempts to escape. No one spoke to him, for all knew that nothing could be got from him but words of abuse and gloomy looks. On this particular day Ivan the Runaway was in a specially bad humour.

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The spring had arrived in the previous night, and the mounds of snow at the corners of the grey towers, which in winter were so hard that the prisoners could amuse themselves by climbing on them, were now as full of holes as a sponge and discharged dirty-looking rivulets into the pools near them.

The sky was so warm and bright, and the wind blew so softly that a strange giddiness seized the old man, and the thick walls with the iron-barred windows seemed to him more hateful than ever. He was taken back to his cell; the key turned creaking in the door; he felt as though something in his heart were turned round with it, and his expression became more gloomy and morose than ever; he looked at the door like a hunted wolf. Ah, if he could only grip the warder's throat!—one squeeze would finish the business! The convict went to the window, and laid his hot face against the cold rusty iron bars. He could not gaze long enough at the deep blue sky behind them, and dreamt of dark forests, wide fields and majestic rivers rolling freely along. Just then a little cloud rose and hung motionless in space; rosy lights passed over it and its edges glowed like fiery gold. "The sun is setting," thought the prisoner, and lingered by the window till the little wandering cloud turned pale and was lost in the darkness, and the first star began to tremble in the sky. Ivan the Runaway went to sleep, but in dreams he heard the tops of the pines whispering, and the fir-cones dropping on the soft soil of the forest; he heard invisible wings beating and the stream fretting against the gnarled roots which barred its way to liberty.

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II

The first thunderstorm, the harbinger of spring, has aroused the earth from her light slumber. At day-break, the convicts were mustered outside the prison walls. "Ivan the Forgetful," called out the warder, with the list in his hand. The old convict sulkily took his place in the row. He scanned with a searching glance the weak-looking undergrown soldiers of the escort, who in their ill-fitting grey cloaks looked almost deformed. Their bayonets gleamed in the sun, their musket-barrels were stopped with wads of cloth. "Loaded," said the old man to himself and smiled significantly. It was on just such a spring morning in the previous year that blindly-fired shots had rung out behind him. He remembered the warm scent of the earth on which he had then flung himself, as though he wished to be one with it, and then the deep weird silence during which he seemed to hear incessantly soft creeping footsteps behind him ... and finally, for a time, freedom. But now? Would he really have to recommence the hated hard labour with which he had already been so familiar? The dark mine-shaft yawned plainly enough at his feet; like mole-holes the galleries wound through rocks and earth; here and there in the darkness glimmered the miners' lamps, and he heard the melancholy sound of monotonous, ceaseless hammering. The convicts were driven down into the subterranean darkness before sunrise, and only when the sun had sunk behind the blue mountains could they come up again, so that they never saw the cheerful daylight.

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Ivan jogged his neighbour with his elbow. "Where do you come from?"

"From a long way off;—farther than you can see."

"I expect you have already run away once?" asked the old man with a peculiar intonation of voice.

"Certainly I did not fly."

"Did you confess it or deny it?"

"You can confess if you choose to."

"What is your name?"

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"Ivan the Distant. If you like you can also call me 'The Near'; it's all the same to me."

"Ah well, you suit us." Ivan's good humour increased perceptibly. "And what are you thinking of doing now?"

"That will be seen soon enough. I have got twenty years."

"What? Hard labour?"

"Did you think I meant sentinel duty?"

"Well, that is another point in which we are similar."

Two days had passed. The weary convicts and the no less weary warders had not been long asleep in the prison which stood in the midst of an impenetrable wood, when the sentinel suddenly heard a strange noise. There was the sound of a human body falling on the ground once—twice, and then the clanking of a chain. A dark mass rolled towards the wood. The soldier aimed hastily, a flash cut through the darkness, and the echoes of the shot woke the forest; a cry died away in the distance.

"Ivan the Distant is hit," said Ivan the Forgetful, and darted blindly forwards at random into the mysterious realm of the aged giant trees which towered like shadows in the darkness of the night. Shots and cries echoed behind him. The wood seemed to grow alive; it clutched at him with hard horny hands, it seized the skirts of his coat and dug sharp claws into his trembling body, it threw obstacles in his way so that he stumbled, it drew the ground from under his feet so that he fell into a depth; wet grass sprinkled his face with dew, and he found that he had fallen down a steep declivity. He recovered from the shock and saw that his fall had been arrested by the projecting stump of a tree. He raised his head and listened. There was deep darkness and silence above him and beneath him; only from time to time he saw the faint reflection of a flash and heard the rolling echo of distant shots. Ivan climbed carefully lower down and crawled farther on, looking round him on all sides like a beast of prey and disregarding the pain of his torn hands and knees. "It is all up with Ivan the Distant," he said to himself. "He had no luck." And he crept on farther and farther, without knowing whither, into the impenetrable darkness of the warm spring night.

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III

O Liberty! With a thousand tongues she spoke to him, with a thousand tones and colours she greeted the fugitive everywhere. For two weeks he saw nothing overhead but the immense expanse of blue sky, against which the branches with their reddish opening blossoms showed in delicate relief. It seemed as if there were no such things in the world as gloomy walls and rusty prison bars. Only in his dreams at times the fugitive still heard the clanking of chains and the rattling of locks; then he awoke in terror to see above him the starry sky of night and the waving pine-tops. He would lie for hours without moving, listening to the solemn sound of the wind roaring through the forest. O Liberty!

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He did not know how many versts he was from the great high road, along which he had been driven together with the whole herd of prisoners. At first he had come across clearings and settlements in the forest, seen the smoke of chimneys from a distance, and made a wide detour. It was only at night that he ventured into the neighbourhood of human dwellings, and looked about, like a wild animal, to see where he could clamber in, and get some bread without awaking the dogs. On one occasion hunger drove him into a cottage in the window of which he had seen a candle burning. An old woman who was cowering down by the hearth was paralysed by fear and began to tremble all over. What wonder? Who did not know the yellow sign on the convict's back? He tried to speak gently. "Don't fear, mother! Have you any bread?" But the old woman's tongue could not move. So he looked for and found a crust of bread and drank some water. He saw her desperate poverty and asked, "Have you got no more bread?"

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Then the old woman recovered herself a little. "Go!" she stammered; "to-morrow I will get some more."

"Shall I take your last piece?" he said, left the crust lying on the table and departed.

Another day he met a hunter in the forest and would probably have passed him with an ordinary greeting, had not the latter pointed his gun at him.

Then a cloud came before Ivan's eyes; he rushed at the stranger and tore him down. His breath was soon choked out of him, and no one knew how long his body lay in the forest before the wolves devoured it. He had brought his death on himself. The fugitive was glad to get rid of his convict's garb and now wore a coat of sheepskin. He also had a gun to protect himself from wild beasts. If his hair had only been longer, he had no need to go out of people's way.

O Liberty! His conscience was silent; no recollection of the blood which he had shed stirred in him, or if it did occur to his mind, it troubled him as little as it troubles a beast of prey. Men had always been the old vagabond's worst enemies. He had grown up like a hungry, young dog, a mark for missiles and kicks. He received little to eat and many blows, and when hunger drove him to steal, he received more blows. In the house of correction the priest spoke to him of the sufferings of Christ, of repentance and reform. He listened gloomily and returned to his cell. "Christ is gracious to sinners," he thought, "but who has ever been gracious to me?"

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After he had shed blood once, his soul seemed to become covered with a hard crust. He became like an animal, escaped from prison when he could, and no longer had a home. Since then his eyebrows were closely contracted over his gloomy eyes, and he was filled with bitter hatred against the whole world. He only longed for one thing, the solitude of field and forest, for liberty and loneliness, where he felt no one near him.

Still farther and farther he roamed between the grey scarred tree-trunks. Through the carpet of pine-needles over which his foot passed, there were springing here and there pointed little leaves and the first grass-blades. The squirrels had already ventured out of their warm nests into the sunshine and sprang briskly and blithely from branch to branch, as though they would make fun of the old vagabond. The sky sent down soft spring showers, or brief thunder-storms, or expanded itself in blue serenity as though it would warm the earth on its bosom. Ivan wandered through dark ravines, where noisy rivulets streamed down on all sides, and in the perpetual shadow the snow still lay white and untouched.

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The farther he went, the louder and merrier foamed and bubbled the tides of spring. O Liberty!

When the fugitive was tired, he could find a shelter anywhere. He would fling himself down where he liked, cross his hands under his head, and look up at the sky till his eyes closed of themselves. The wounds on his legs caused by the iron fetters began to heal; no one who met him would have guessed who he was. But the primeval forest seemed quite deserted; no tree bore the mark of an axe, and none had been felled. Here a black scorched pine-tree had been blasted by the lightning; there a half-decayed one, whose top was entangled in its neighbour's branches, had collapsed from sheer old age. This solitude had been profaned by no one's foot; here was real freedom.

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Only now and then he encountered wild animals. Once a bear came within gun-shot, but the old man spared his life. "You have nothing to give me now," he thought. "Your skin is no use in summer. Come again in winter." And he shouted at the animal in such a terrible voice, that it trotted off with its tail drawn in.

Sometimes he heard the howling of the wolves in the distance; in the deep silence it sounded weird and terrifying. It filled the old man with a strange feeling, not fear, but in his innermost being something seemed to howl and moan in sympathy with the beasts of prey. Was he not indeed like a wolf among men? Cowering by the fires he made, he would gaze for hours into the red glowing embers. The flames roared and strained towards the dark sky as though they would make themselves free; the fresh brushwood crackled and emitted clouds of blue whirling smoke; the birch-trunk over which the sparks danced, contracted itself as though in a spasm, till it finally flared up in a sheet of fire, and the solitary man felt ever more painfully conscious that he too was every one's enemy, and was only tolerated in this wilderness like those creatures whose howling so strangely thrilled his heart. The darkness which seemed to press from all sides on the fire looked between the grey pine-trunks on the gloomy face of the convict, and listened to his moody murmuring.

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IV

Ivan the Runaway wandered farther through dark forests over waste silent stretches of land and wide moors where his step left behind it little cold pools in the spongy ground, and where the wildfowl gathered on the mossy hillocks and chattered cheerfully in the sunshine. At last he came across traces of human existence. It was true that from the pine-tree which he climbed up he could perceive in the grey plain enclosed by woods neither cottage roofs nor smoke, though it was such a clear day that the streamlets which ran between the hillocks shone brightly and dazzled his eyes which were accustomed to the darkness of the forest. But yet the district seemed to be inhabited. A firm yellow road wound in a broad semicircle round the moor. The ruts left by the cart-wheels of the previous year crossed each other distinctly, but no new wheels had ground the dry clods of earth into dust. Probably the road was seldom used; at any rate the fugitive sat for hours in his tree, without hearing in the distance the creaking of the ungreased axle of a peasant's cart.

From the road there branched off a path which seemed to lead to a distant village. Ivan was heartily tired of his diet of wood-game, and began to consider whether he could venture into a village to buy bread. In the pocket of the murdered huntsman he had found a rouble-note and some silver coins. It was true that his hair had not grown again the normal length, but he could tie a piece of cloth round his half-shorn skull; and need not take it off when he entered a shop. "One buys what one wants, and goes one's way, that is all," he said to re-assure himself, for he felt a nervous antipathy to meeting any one, just as a wolf fears every yelping cur as soon as he wanders by mistake into a village.

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At last he determined to go on quite slowly so as to reach the village under cover of the

approaching darkness. With this idea he turned into the path which wound in an eccentric fashion through the moor, sometimes diving into ravines, and sometimes emerging into clear sunshine. Here and there stumps of trees bearing the fresh marks of an axe, and black abandoned fire-places whose ashes had not yet been quite blown away, showed that men had worked and rested here. The wanderer also thought he often heard human voices, but when he held his breath to listen, he always found it had been the deceptive cry of a bird.

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The day came to an end, the golden radiance of the sun setting behind the distant hills grew pale, and the first stars glimmered in the dusky sky. Ivan strode valiantly forwards through the white rising mists out of which single branches of trees projecting, beckoned to him like long lean arms, till he reached a copse with dry mossy ground which seemed admirably adapted to furnish him with a sleeping-place for the night. He collected a bundle of twigs together and struck a light.

But in the act of raising his hand he stopped. What was that? Was there not a sound from the wood like a child's crying? For a moment a cold thrill passed through him; half-forgotten ghost-stories occurred to him, but he was too intimately familiar with the life of the forest to be seriously alarmed. After a short pause the crying began again.

"Hullo! Who is there? Is there any one?" Ivan shouted as loud as he could. His voice aroused the sleeping wood; squirrels rustled among the branches, and startled birds flapped their wings. Then everything was again perfectly silent, nor could the sound of crying be heard any more. Ivan again turned into the path.

"It must be a woman or a child," he thought, "and quite close too."

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He peered with keen eyes through the darkness and moved noiselessly forward, in order not to frighten the weeper. Now he heard the sound of sobbing more distinctly; it was a child. But how had a child got here? The moon had risen and threw an uncertain light on the path; in a ditch by the side of it lay something white—it was the skeleton of a horse which had been devoured by wolves. Near it was rustling some creature which moved off at the convict's approach, first crawling and then at full speed.

Ivan went on and asked in a lower voice, "Who is there?"

A low sob was the only answer, "Oh, I am frightened. Mother! Mother!"

The moon now showed distinctly a little clearing in the wood. At the edge of it lay a woman's figure stretched out at full length. The wide-open eyes stared fixedly at the sky; no breath moved the rags which covered her breast; from under her wretched dress projected the lean way-worn feet. Near her lay a wallet. A little living creature clung to the motionless body and tried to raise it.

"What are you doing there?" asked the old man in a hoarse voice.

"Oh, I am so frightened, so frightened!" sobbed the child. A little ragged girl lifted her pale face to the convict, and then, seized with alarm, tried to hide herself again in her mother's clothing. Ivan touched the woman's ice-cold forehead.

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"What is your name?" he asked.

"Anjuta," whispered the child without letting go of the body.

"Have you been here long?"

"I do not know. Oh, I am so frightened!"

"Was the sun still high when your mother fell down?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

Ivan stepped to one side, and piled up a heap of dry twigs which he set on fire. The merry flames licked with red tongues at the branches.

"Go and warm yourself," said the old man, speaking as abruptly as before to the child. "Do it quickly."

"And mother?"

"Let mother rest. She is asleep."

The fire-light played on the face of the dead woman and lent it a ghostly semblance of life. The convict sat by the fire, buried in his thoughts. Perhaps he also would soon be somewhere in the forest or by the road-side like this woman. The thought was not a new one to him. How cold-bloodedly he had himself often engaged in a deadly affray with knives and turned his back on his fallen opponent without compunction. And yet he felt moved at the sight of this stranger woman, who lay there in such a pitiable way like an animal which has breathed its last. "It's a pity, a pity!" he growled to himself.

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"At the edge of the wood lay a dead woman, with a little living creature sobbing over her."

Anjuta approached the fire timidly and stared straight at him. Perhaps the rapidly increasing darkness alarmed her, for she came nearer, without his observing it; suddenly with her little hand she seized his finger and held it fast.

"Well, little thing, what do you want?" he growled, involuntarily laying his free hand on her head.

"What are we to do?"

Anjuta raised her clear little eyes. For the first time a human being looked at him, the thief and murderer, trustfully.

"It is all right, all right; don't worry!" he said half-embarrassed. And for the first time something strange came into his eyes and rolled in warm drops into his grey bristly beard.

V

Ivan the Runaway could not bury Anjuta's mother, for he had no spade. He contented himself with collecting twigs, pine-branches, and stones in order to cover the body of the poor tramp. The little girl at first wanted to hold his hands, but at his sharp rebuke she crept into a ditch and remained there crying bitterly, while he finished his work. [Pg 148]

"Well, why are you crying?" he asked at last to comfort her.

"I am sad about mother."

"Your mother is dead; she won't come back."

"How can she be dead?"

"Have you never seen any one die?"

"Oh yes, Uncle Andron, whom God took to Himself."

"Well, God has taken your mother to Himself. Perhaps He wanted her."

"There was also the grey horse," said the child. "God took him too. When will He take me?"

The old man looked long at the child, and something like pity stirred him.

"For you it is still too early," he said gloomily.

"But what shall I do without mother?" She again held his finger with her little hand.

"Don't be afraid. I will stay with you. No one will touch you; I have a gun."

The old man picked up two slender sticks and tied them together with a strip of birch-bark, so as to make a rude cross. "Now your mother's grave is finished. Make a prayer, Anjuta; then we will go." [Pg 149]

"I don't know how to pray; mother never taught me. I can only say, 'Give me a piece of bread for Jesus' sake.'"

"Have you never been in church?"

"No; mother and I—we always stood before the church door when people came out and cried, 'Good people, give us bread for Jesus' sake; we have eaten nothing for two days.'"

"Well then, God can ask nothing more of you, poor thing," said Ivan in a more friendly tone and stroked her. "He will be tolerant. Cross yourself and kiss this cross. That's right. And now say, 'Lord, have mercy on her poor soul.'"

"Lord, have mercy on her poor soul," the child repeated.

"Now let us go on. We have no time to loiter."

It was not till evening that Ivan, carrying the tired child on his arm, reached a little village. He waited till it was dark and lights showed in the windows. As though they scented a thief in him, the dogs raised an ear-splitting noise. Anjuta, who had been asleep, nestling against his cheek, started with fright, and began to cry; he told her harshly to be quiet and approached the last cottage in the village which stood near the wood.

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"Who is knocking? Is it a Christian?" asked a woman's voice.

"Will you give me a bed for the night? I am tired with carrying her." He pointed to the child, whose little head had again sunk on his shoulder. The woman would hardly have admitted him alone.

"Come in, but don't take it ill that there is nothing to eat; we have nothing ourselves."

"I have money, if there is any chance of buying anything."

"Is the child yours? How tired it is, poor little thing!"

"No, she is not mine. What should a hunter do with children? She came in my way, that is all. Her mother died in the forest and I found her before the wolves ate her. Perhaps some one will adopt her. She is quite healthy and her name is Anjuta."

"Who can adopt her? We ourselves have barely enough to live upon. You must report your finding her at the police office in the nearest town, or go with her to the bailiff of the village."

But Ivan was not at all disposed to go either to the town or to the village bailiff. "Since God has sent me the poor orphan, she can remain with me," he said. "We will not come to grief, we two, in the forest. Will you promise not to be afraid when you hear howlings and moanings in the wood?"

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"If you are with me, Grandfather, I won't be afraid. You have a gun and can shoot all the wolves dead."

As the child chattered, the old man's sulky face assumed a brighter expression.

VI

The forest was silent. An atmosphere of church-like stillness brooded round every branch and leaf. It seemed as if in the azure heights of the sky a solemn mystery was being performed, and the earth lay silent in solemn awe. The birds were hidden in the bushes and not a squirrel could be seen. The heat had penetrated even the shady parts of the wood; it was cool only in the ravines where scanty rivulets trickled over the sandy ground and conjured forth a green cloud of fine perfumed grass. A profusion of flowers—red, yellow, white and blue—grew on the slopes. They arranged themselves in most fantastic patterns, crowded together in gay groups, or climbed the hills singly. Some seemed to stretch themselves as though with curiosity on swaying stems, others hung their heads languidly. The wild rose-bush opened its first blossoms like thirsty red lips which could not breathe in air enough. From a thousand altars rose incense in this majestic temple; the mysterious Celebration continued in the heights above and the sun glowed and glittered like a golden chalice in the hands of the invisible high-priest.

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Only from one corner came the sound of suppressed laughter. It was difficult to recognize Anjuta again. Her pale face had become sunburnt, her eyes glowed, and her mouth smiled continually. Just now the smile would have turned into loud laughter, had not the child feared to awaken Grandfather. The latter had found for himself a cool spot by the edge of the stream and was sleeping with his cap under his head, like an old wolf, after a full meal. Anjuta had just been throwing flowers at him. A tiny beetle had crawled out of one, and the child held her breath as she watched its movements. The beetle balanced itself skilfully on one of the longer hairs of Ivan's beard, then fell among the grey stubble, worked its way laboriously out with its slender wings, and finally settled on the old man's nose. Then the little girl could no longer contain herself; she laughed outright and clapped her hands.

"Good-for-nothing brat!" growled Ivan, awaking. "Can't you be quiet?" He shook off the flowers and tried to seize her.

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Anjuta sprang with a joyous shriek among the reeds, rustled about among them, and presently her voice was heard calling from the opposite bank of the stream, "Catch me, Grandfather! Catch

me!"

"That beats everything. Go and play with the squirrels! They are just such wind-bags as you are!"

"But I want to play with you."

"Well, you will have to wait long for that," and he crept quietly nearer to her.

"Grandfather, where are you?" she cried in an anxious tone. "Grandfather, I am frightened."

"There, I have caught you," he exclaimed suddenly and held the struggling child fast. "How wet you are, a regular frog!"

The child flung her puny arms round his brown sinewy neck and coaxed him. "Grandfather, listen, Grandfather! Now you be the wolf!"

"You are always wanting something," he grumbled discontentedly.

"Please! Please! You can do it so beautifully. I will be the little hare. Little hare with the long ears."

"Then I must eat you, stupid!" And the old man took the trouble to roll his eyes and growl fiercely.

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But it was very difficult to satisfy Anjuta. "But you don't do it properly. Please, please come!" She stooped down and looked pleadingly into his eyes overhung by their shaggy brows.

"Very well, little one! Here goes!"

He placed the child carefully on the ground and crept among the reeds and bushes. The thorns scratched his face and hands, but he had something more important to think about. He lay flat and kept a sharp look-out. Were it not for his eyes, his grey shaggy head might frighten one. In order to heighten the illusion, he gnashed with his teeth. Anjuta played the part of the hare, sprang hither and thither, pulled at the grasses, and waved her hands to and fro above her head, to represent long ears. She pretended not to notice the old man.

"I don't see you. Grandfather, really I don't!"

Then the wolf sprang out of his hiding-place; the hare fled to the stream, crossed over, and climbed the opposite bank. But the wicked wolf came creeping nearer and nearer and seized the poor little animal by the throat with his great jaws.

"Were you very frightened?" the old wolf asked good-humouredly.

"Not a little bit. Grandfather, why does the wolf eat hares?"

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"He can't eat grass. He wants flesh—hares, dogs, fowls, little children like you—it is all the same to him. He seizes them so, you see, and tears them in pieces."

"Does it hurt them?" asked Anjuta.

"Oh, you stupid, stupid thing! Of course it hurts them. Death is never pleasant."

Anjuta became very thoughtful. "Do you know, Grandfather," she said after a pause, "we won't play that game any more. You must not be a wolf. Wolves are wicked and you are good." "I—good? Ah, you...." Ivan made a long pause; something seemed to stick in his throat. "For you perhaps I may be good"—he cleared his throat violently—"You see, Anjuta, when I was little like you, no one said a kind word to me. I was thrashed nearly to a jelly, and always black and blue. Otherwise I would have been good; why should I be wicked without a reason? Oh, you stupid little thing, what do you know about it?"

"Take me on your arm," asked Anjuta, standing on tiptoe.

He awoke as out of a dream. "What do you want?"

"Take me on your arm, Grandfather. I am tired."

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"First you jump about like a hare; then you want to be carried. No, stay down there."

"Yes, yes, you will take me," she coaxed him. "When I ask, you never say no."

"Look at the little rogue! Shall I break off a switch and whip you? Well, come along then!"

He lifted her up and walked with her deeper into the solemn stillness of the forest. The old man felt his heart grow warmer as the tired child's eyelids gradually drooped, and she began to breathe regularly in his arms. With a kind of pity he looked at the little open mouth and the helpless dusty little legs as they hung down.

"And that, too, is one of God's creatures! Why does such a useless thing come into the world?" he philosophized to himself and took the greatest pains to tread gently and not to move his outstretched arm in order not to wake the child.

VII

In the middle of the forest was a green meadow traversed by a path along which Ivan was now

proceeding. It ended before what looked like a pile of earth and dry sticks projecting like those of a raven's nest in all directions. At first sight it was hard to recognize what the object of the structure was; it seemed too large for a mere wood-pile, and too shapeless for a human shelter.

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Close by stood a stake with a long rope attached to it, and at the end of the rope, all day long, there ran about a young bear growling and shaking its head. Just then it stood on its hindlegs and sniffed with its snout in the air. Between the trees appeared a dark form, and dry branches lying on the ground cracked under a heavy foot-tread. The animal, out of sheer impatience, ran so rapidly round the stake that it completely entangled itself and could not take another step. Forced to stand still, it watched Ivan's approach with its head on one side and an absurdly serious air.

Ivan came across the meadow with his burden on his arm. He untied the rope; the liberated baby bear threw itself between his legs, embraced him with its paws and signified its intention of climbing up him.

"Ah, you want bread, you hungry rascal," said Ivan. "I know you; as soon as you are satisfied, off you go."

Anjuta awoke and rubbed her eyes with her little fist.

"That is a fine family," growled the grandfather. "Brother and sister both grown on one tree. The right children for a vagabond. Yes, yes, when a man has no cares, he must make himself some."

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He had caught the little bear, when he killed its mother, whose skin served Anjuta for a bed. The young animal continued to regard the skin as something alive and related to itself; it always lay close to Anjuta, sucked at the long tufts of hair which it held between its paws, and growled sleepily.

The huge raven's-nest which the little girl now entered discovered itself to be a dwelling. Ivan had burnt off the grass, fixed on the levelled ground a rough platform of thick poles and covered it with twigs, moss and fresh earth out of which already some green shoots, and, to Anjuta's delight, some stunted flowers were springing. Ivan was very proud of the hut which began to display even some traces of luxury. The floor was covered with skins of wolves and bears; on the walls there hung whole rows of squirrel-skins. Every fortnight these were sold to a peasant from the village who did not trouble his head about Ivan's past.

The housekeeping also was on a satisfactory basis. Under the roof hung dried mushrooms from long strings and in a corner stood a sack full of potatoes. In the hollow of an old gnarled tree which threw its shade far over the forest-clearing, some round loaves of black-bread as hard as stones were stored up. In the wood they always had traps and snares ready set which caught abundance of game.

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When Anjuta, who had again gone to sleep, put her head out of the hut, the water bubbled merrily in the pot from which the feet of a plucked fowl projected. Ivan was busily engaged in slicing potatoes into the broth.

"It smells good," said the little girl, pursing her mouth in eager expectation.

"But you won't get any," said the old man teasingly.

"Oh yes I will. You will always give me something, even when you remain hungry yourself."

"What a princess you have become! Yesterday you ate your fill, and now there is no more."

"Listen, Grandfather," said the child after a few moments of reflection. "Have you always lived in the forest?"

Ivan wrinkled his brow and was silent.

"It is jolly in the forest," continued she. "There is no one to beat one. But mother was afraid in it. She said there were wicked and cursed men in the forest. Grandfather, what kind of men are they?"

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Ivan's face became still gloomier.

"Who has cursed them, Grandfather? Has God done it? Will they burn in hell?"

The old man laid his hand on the child's ruffled hair.

"May God protect you from them. They are worse than wild animals. An animal, when it is satisfied, can be merciful, but they——" He broke off and stared into the fire.

"Well, what do they do?" the child urged him in her keen curiosity. "Grandfather, what do they do? Are they villains?"

"Be off," cried the convict suddenly. "Get away, or I shall beat you. What nonsense are you talking?"

He pushed the child violently to one side. Before her stood all at once a completely altered "grandfather." In his sunken eyes there glowed a lurid spark, his grey hairs bristled, and his face twitched convulsively. His breast heaved with a rattling sound, and his hand was clenched as though to strike. Anjuta started back in wild terror; even the baby bear was alarmed and slunk

into the hut with its tail between its legs.

Ivan stood for a long while motionless, then he sat down silently by the fire and stirred it up.

"Cursed—cursed," he murmured to himself. "Who has cursed them. God pardons sinners, they say. Come!" he said gloomily to the little one. "Sit down here. It is all right." [Pg 161]

"I am frightened."

Ivan bent lower over the fire. "The past will not let itself be buried," he thought. "Why must I frighten an innocent creature too?" Then again his memories stung him and he cried in a new outburst of rage, "Who dares curse us. You hard-hearted—Yes, it is all right," he added, trying to quiet the child who was still trembling. "You say you love Grandfather; so come nearer."

But Anjuta stared hard at him and did not move.

"Look at the nice soup," he said to tempt her and recovered his self-control. "We will take the fowl out by its legs. It shall have a special privilege and lie on the grass till it is cool, else you will burn your mouth." Anjuta approached with visible mistrust.

"Why are you afraid, you simpleton? Bring our spoons. Oh, you stupid thing! Have I ever hurt you?"

"You looked so dreadful—quite like another man."

"Oh, that was only a joke. I wanted to show you what wicked men look like. You always ask me to play 'wolf'; just now I played 'bad man.'" [Pg 162]

"I am not so frightened at the wolf as at the bad man."

"Ah, child, one must sympathize with them. Do you think it is so easy to be bad? The Lord has made it hard enough for them; they must suffer much. It is not really of their own accord that they seize every one by the throat. They say that God hears children's prayers. Pray then, Anjuta: 'O God, have mercy on the wicked men.' The good need no one to pray for them; they are safe anyhow."

VIII

Such fits of excitement grew ever rarer with Ivan. As the summer advanced, the convict became quieter. Whenever he watched Anjuta playing with her mischievous playfellow, or listened to the melancholy call of the birds, or sat by the blazing fire, the furrows on his brow became smoother and a comfortable drowsiness lulled his wild instincts to rest. He had become quite a different man from what he was when he first escaped. But his dreams at night often transported him back to the damp prison-cell, or he saw himself again walking in the file of the prisoners on the apparently endless high road, heard the familiar calls of the warders through the cold winter air, and felt the heavy butt end of the musket fall on his bowed back. On such occasions when he awoke, it was a long time before the quiet breathing of Anjuta and the bear's peaceful snoring restored him to a sense of reality. He generally spent the remainder of such a night on his bear-skin outside the narrow hut, enjoying the consciousness of freedom that came with the balmy coolness of the forest and the distant murmur of the stream. The next day he was generally in a specially good humour, played with Anjuta, and listened to the thousand voices in which the primeval forest revealed to him its secrets. [Pg 163]

He never thought of the morrow; his adventurous and uncertain gipsy life had taught him to prize to-day. So long as the sun shone, the pot boiled merrily on the fire, and his child laughed and clapped her hands—what more did he need? And what could the obscure future bring him, but at the best a succession of similar days, and at the worst the dungeon and the knout.

But in August there came a bad time. The clouds almost touched the tops of the forest-giants, from whose bark the rain trickled down in large cold drops; the birds were silent and the beasts crept into their lairs. The little bear rolled himself up in his skin and growled discontentedly. The old man and the child sat, huddling close together in the dry hut and whispered to the accompaniment of the howling of the wind and the pouring of the rain. [Pg 164]

"When the black-berries are ripe, the thrushes will come from everywhere, and I will catch you a pair," he promised the delighted child. "But what will you do with them?"

"I will have fine games with them—but then I will let them fly; thrushes do not like cages, do they, Grandfather?"

"Who would like a cage? Listen, Anjuta; you are a good child. Will you come to Grandfather, if he is ever put in a cage?"

The child laughed aloud and clapped her hands. "But, Grandfather, you are not a bird."

"There is another kind of cage which is not for birds—Ah, what do you understand about it?"

Presently the sun shone again and it was cheerful in the forest. The days passed monotonously but happily. Gradually the nights began to grow cold. In the evenings the sun no longer sank in a golden mist, but glowed with an angry red, and descended constantly more often surrounded by thick clouds, through which it looked out like a blood-stained eye. Ivan enlarged the hut; in the [Pg 165]

evening he lit the fire in it, and closed the door carefully that the warmth should not be too quickly dissipated. But in spite of all, the three—the old man, the child and the bear—had, towards morning, to nestle close together in order not to be frozen.

Anjuta was much alone and became tired of solitude, when Ivan spent whole days hunting. "Mischka, do you hear Grandfather shooting?" she would ask the bear when the dull sound of a distant shot came to their ears.

A great change had taken place in Mischka. His fur had become thicker and shaggier, he had grown considerably and often disappeared in the forest in order to hunt on his own account. When he came home, gorged and unwieldy, he showed no inclination to play, but lay down to sleep. Once the little girl wished to rouse him from his slumber, and seized him somewhat roughly by the ears. The creature uttered a loud roar, reared on his hind-legs, showing his teeth, and when the unsuspecting child stretched out her hand, laughing to her refractory playfellow, she was suddenly struck down by a blow from one of its paws.

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In the evening Ivan found his pet with a scratched and much-swollen cheek. He chastised the snapping bear severely in spite of Anjuta's supplications and tears, and tied it up for the night. The next morning the rope was found broken and the bear had vanished. It was not till two days afterwards that Mischka appeared again between the pine-trunks and approached the hut hesitatingly; but when he saw his master standing on the threshold, he sat down and sucked his paw in an embarrassed manner.

"Come along, you tramp!" Ivan called to him. "Has hunger driven you home at last, you rascal!" Mischka, feeling deeply injured, turned round and trotted away without heeding the cajoling calls of his little companion.

"One who is born a tramp, remains a tramp," said Ivan.

"Let him run! Don't cry, Anjuta; you will get a better playfellow."

The leaves of the birch turned yellow and the maples looked as if splashed with blood. Their leaves trembled as though with cold. Light as feathers and quite dry, they eddied long in the air before they sank to their funeral in the colourless grass.

"How cold it is, Grandfather! Will it never be warm again?"

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"Wait a little; soon there will come St. Martin's summer which will bring us warmth. Before it is really winter, I will dig for us both a hole deep in the ground, so that we can pass it there."

"Just like moles! But it will be pitch-dark, Grandfather."

"Well, we will light some pine-chips. Don't worry about that. All you have to do is to grow and get strong, so as to look after me, if I am not first—"

"What, Grandfather? If you are not first—"

But instead of answering, Ivan shook his head, and went to one side.

IX

St. Martin's summer came and went. In the forest it became so cold, that Ivan thought of giving Anjuta into the charge of one of the villagers for the winter. But none of them could afford to take care of her. They were already beginning to mix the meal, which was their food during the winter, with pieces of pine-bark and chaff. Moreover, the old man would have sorely missed the clear, eager childish eyes, which looked so confidently into his, and the merry laughter which relieved the monotony of his dark life. The forest became more and more silent in preparation for its winter sleep; and winter came stealing on with muffled footsteps.

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"It is time, Anjuta, to dig our hole for the winter. To-morrow, with Gods help, I will begin. There the frost cannot pinch us, when we sit together and gossip."

"Do you know how to sing, too, Grandfather?"

"Never mind that. The songs which I sing are not for you. But I will tell you many things, for you are still stupid, and must learn how things go in life, so that you may get on well, and not be a burden to others. The world, Anjuta, is like a bottomless pit. It is easy to go down, but one never finds the way up again, and nobody helps one. The Pope^[2] told me once that there used to be good people who loved all men alike and did good alike to all. Even for lepers they did something."

"What does that mean—'lepers'?"

"Lepers?" He hesitated. "It is a pity I never thought of asking the Pope what it meant. Every one had a horror of them. They were not allowed to go about as they liked." He thought for a moment. "Yes, Anjuta, I remember now. Lepers are those who sit behind iron bars. Men fasten fetters on them and march them up the streets with soldiers on both sides. You see, good people in their great kindness have helped the lepers, that is the convicts. They have done no end of good to all men, but wicked men and scoundrels who ought to have honoured and loved them, like fathers, have tortured and crucified them."

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"What does 'crucified' mean?"

"They drove nails through their hands and feet. So.... Do you see?"

"Just like you nailed the raven to the tree with nails in its wings and feet."

"Yes. But the raven does harm, but those men were good and kind to people like us. That is all I know about the good folk. To-morrow we will begin our work."

But the hole was not destined to be dug. The night was bitterly cold. The howling of the wolves sounded so wild and terrible that Anjuta awoke suddenly out of her sleep, crying loudly, and still lay awake listening long after the old man by her side was comfortably snoring. The wind had risen and drove the dry leaves round the hut. Suddenly the child thought she heard a distant growling, and soon she was sure of it; heavy footsteps were stamping outside the hut.

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"Grandfather, Grandfather, listen!" cried Anjuta, and shook him by the arm. "Wake up! I am so frightened!"

An enormous bear, whom the huntsmen had probably roused from his winter lair, was coming straight towards Ivan's hut. He went round the shapeless edifice on all sides, sniffing cautiously, as though he meant to choose it as a new dwelling. Under his heavy tread the pine-needles crackled, and dry branches snapped. At last he stood still, rubbing his mighty back against a tree. His every movement was distinctly audible in the hut.

"Of course it's a bear!" exclaimed Ivan, who had held his breath to listen. "Well, the fellow shall give us his fur for winter wear. Meanwhile light the pine-chips, Anjuta."

The old man seized his gun, which was always loaded, and pushed open the rude door, which was made fast with a stone. Through the mist which hung thickly round the trees he saw a dark shape retreating slowly into the forest. That did not suit Ivan's plans; he aimed hastily and fired. The bear was only grazed, for he attacked the old man, and enveloped him with his hot evil-smelling breath, hardly giving him time to reload his gun. The old man started back; the bear rose on its hind-legs and towered over him like an indistinct, gigantic shadow.

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"Where are you going, you blockhead? Stop, I have an account to settle with you," cried Ivan, and fired right under the beast's jaw. The shot missed, and suddenly the convict found himself crushed under the terrible weight of his enraged enemy. He tried to raise himself on his elbow, but the bear understood his business, pushed his paw under his body, and pressed him in his close embrace till all his bones cracked.

"Jesus and all the saints," gasped the old man. "Help my Anjuta." And his eyes closed.

Then something quite unexpected happened. The beast was already preparing to flay his victim in the most approved bear-fashion from the skull downwards, when a bright light flared in his eyes. Master Bruin's mind became suddenly confused. He did not pause to investigate, but rose at once and trotted away as fast as his feet could carry him.

"Grandfather! O Grandfather!" cried the child, lamenting as she threw herself on his prostrate body. Driven by fear for him, she had appeared with the burning pine-torch just in time to save her benefactor.

Ivan awoke from his swoon. "Water! Water!" he gasped hoarsely. Before his eyes there danced fiery sparks: his breast felt terribly constricted. He eagerly drained the cup which the child reached to him; then he rose painfully and limped, leaning on his gun, to the hut, where, covered up warmly by Anjuta, he fell into a death-like slumber. He awoke, feeling tired and sick. There was a buzzing in his head; one leg was badly injured, and the bear's claw had left deep marks on his back.

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"We can't do anything to-day with the hole, Anjuta! If I remain quiet to-day, perhaps we can to-morrow."

But the next day came, and a second, and a third, and there was no possibility of thinking of work. Not till a week had passed could he rise from his bed. When he came out of the hurt, he uttered a cry of surprise. The red and yellow leaves still hung on the trees, but a thin coverlet of snow lay over the whole face of the clearing. In the air the snow-flakes crossed and whirled in white confusion. Winter had brought out its corpse-cloth overnight.

X

All that remained to the convict of his brief summer happiness was Anjuta. As he lay on his bed of soft skins his burning eyes never left the child. The unfortunate man suffered severely. In the first shock he had not been able to judge distinctly how seriously the bear had injured him. The deep wound in his shoulder would not heal, although Anjuta had learnt how to wash and bandage it daily. It was soon accompanied by a fever. Meanwhile, time went on remorselessly; the winter regularly settled in, and the rude hut no longer afforded sufficient shelter. One day Ivan dragged himself on all fours into the open, and with endless trouble began to plaster the hut outside with earth. Within, he dug a hollow in the ground, and with the help of a pole made a hole in the roof, which could be closed with a small board. The fire-place was then ready.

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"Listen, little girl." In his illness the old man had become especially gentle towards the orphan.

"Now you must look after me. Be my little housekeeper. Light the fire and boil the water. Thank God we have enough bread and wood and meal. Put a couple of handfuls into the soup with sliced potatoes; it will be quite tasty. Later on we will catch hares. Peasants are not allowed to eat hares, but we are foresters, and that has nothing to do with us."

So Anjuta lit the fire, cooked the soup, brought fresh wood from the wood-pile. When the fire had burnt out, she clambered on the roof and closed the opening—the "chimney," as Ivan called it—so that it remained comfortably warm in the hut.

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"Is that right, Grandfather?" she laughed.

"You are my treasure, my little dove," the old man said as he lay on his skins. "Without you it would be all over with me."

Ivan was glad that he had taken care in the summer that the little girl should know the way to the village thoroughly well. If his sickness lasted, she would have to go many errands for him. But he did not like sending the little creature out when all the paths were covered with snow.

"Anjuta," he asked by way of precaution, "how will you recognize the way to the village?"

"By the axe-cuts on the trunks as far as the pine which was struck by lightning."

"You are a sharp little girl."

"And then by the ravine to the birch-tree where you have made the sign of the cross. Then following the notches to the river, and from there one can see the village."

Ivan became easier in mind. His protégée would not be lost, but in case of need could fetch help by herself. But he continued in a weak state. One day, when he felt he could no longer bear doing nothing, he dragged himself, gun in hand, as far as the edge of the clearing, only to sink down exhausted. Shaking with fever, after some time he returned home. Anjuta, who ran to help him, was frightened and saw that all was not right with him. He threw off his fur coat and talked to her excitedly, with delirious eyes. "I will not go back behind the iron bars, do you hear? I will not. I am innocent, your honour. Why do you torment the old man? You might sentence a younger man to be knouted, but it will be the death of me. Have pity, kind sirs, I must look after Anjuta." His voice sank to a hardly intelligible whisper. "You have made a bad beginning, comrade. When the hour comes, everything must be ready. Take out the plank and lower it. Do you see the sentry. Spring on his shoulder and throttle him so that he does not stir ... it serves him right. Don't sentence me, kind sirs; I have not killed Anjuta. Ask her herself."

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At last he fell into a light slumber, and when he awoke he was calmer. "Have I frightened you, my dovelet? Ah, I am very ill, Anjuta; you have much trouble. But wait; when I am well again we will have a jolly life."

But weeks passed, and Ivan did not get up. He was quite emaciated, and his dark eyes were sunken still more deeply in their sockets, under his bushy white eye-brows. Fortunately the winter was mild, and there was not much snow.

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"Anjuta, have we still bread and meal?"

"There is only a hard crust left for you to-morrow, and the meal too is nearly finished."

"I will go to-morrow to the village," said the old man. "I will send Andryushka Lasaref for the skins which are lying ready; the sledge can go all the way."

The next day he took a tender adieu of the child and started; but half an hour afterwards he knocked at the door and threw himself on the bed in a state of complete exhaustion.

"I can't do it, Anjuta, really I can't," he said as though in apology. "There is no more marrow in my bones. If I can't stand up to-morrow, you must go. You are not afraid?"

"No, Grandfather ... only a little of the bears."

"The bears are now asleep in their holes, you little stupid, and suck their paws. And there are no wolves to be heard just now. There is nothing more for them here; therefore they are gone near the villages; otherwise we would hear them howling every night."

The old man had tears in his eyes when Anjuta got herself ready next morning for the journey.

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"Such a tiny thing, quite alone in the deep forest!" he murmured to himself.

"Tell Lasaref to bring a sack of meal, two large loaves of bread, and some barley, and say that Grandfather has all kinds of fine things ready for him. But mind you don't try to come home by night, Anjuta. Stay with Andryushka for the night, and he will bring you in the sledge in the morning. Tell him I am ill—the bear has badly mauled Ivan the Runaway. Do you understand?"

"Yes; but why do you cry, Grandfather?"

"It is only foolishness.... I have grown quite weak. Now go, and God preserve you! And listen, Anjuta; whenever you feel frightened, you must sing."

The child started and the old man, creeping out of the hut, followed her with his eyes. She soon reached the edge of the clearing. How nimbly her young feet moved! Under the gigantic trees

she moved like a little beetle. Now she turned and laughed at him, and his eyes, misty with tears, could see nothing more.

XI

The forest was brilliant in white apparel. Under the wintry veil its creative forces slumbered. Not a tree-top swayed, nor a branch stirred. The sky was covered with grey clouds and the earth with snow, which in the stillness gave out a light crackling sound under Anjuta's feet. She tried once or twice to sing, but the grim silence of the primeval pines sobered her with a sense of weird mystery. She tried to tread as lightly as possible in order not to awake the gloomy trees on the right and left out of their slumbers. [Pg 178]

What might not be hidden under these snow-laden branches which almost touched the ground? How terrible it would be if "it" suddenly crept out without a sound. The fact that she could not define to herself what the "it" was, made it all the more formidable.

And now she heard a low moaning at the bottom of the ravine. Perhaps it was the brook, but if...? She did not think the thought out, but hastened forward, stumbling and gliding. She looked attentively for the axe-notches in the tree-trunks in order not to lose her way. She also saw the sign of the cross on the birch half obliterated with snow.

The child sat on a snow-heap, and looked at the cross for the first time attentively. Round about were visible what looked like footprints in the snow. Were they caused by the wind, or—? An icy shudder ran through her; fortunately it occurred to her that "they" had no power by day, and only went about in the darkness. Yes, of course it was "they." [Pg 179]

How often had her mother, whom her Grandfather had buried in the forest, told her that the souls of unbaptized children roamed about by night. When such a child dies, the Lord does not take it to Himself. "You do not belong to Me," He says. Woe betide the unlucky person who meets one of "them." It weeps and sobs pitifully, but if one takes it up, it seizes one's throat with its teeth.

Anjuta sprang up and went quickly on. Again the enchanted silence surrounded her, again the lofty motionless trees looked at her as though they were astonished at the little intruder who disturbed their icy winter sleep. Anjuta became hungry and gnawed at a dry crust of bread as she went along; at the same time she was so absorbed in her thoughts that she stumbled. She looked around; there before her spread a white plain with the chimneys of the poverty-stricken little village in the background. Behind her rose the dark stiff wall of the wood. The main road ran close up to it and then, as though in sudden alarm, turned sharply to one side.

Anjuta felt that for nothing in the world would she go back alone. The wood from which she had happily emerged inspired her afterwards with such fear, that she began to run, and sped over the snowy plain like an arrow. A strange sight brought her to a standstill. Four riders with long lances in their hands and guns slung across their backs rode by the side of a sledge, in which sat a stout man. He looked very grand, with his high turned-up fur collar and a cap with a red band round it. She had only once seen such a fine gentleman before, when she was begging with her mother in the town. The joyful consciousness of having the wood happily behind her so braced her up, that she felt no embarrassment before the stranger. [Pg 180]

"Listen, child!" the stout gentleman said to her. "Where have you come from?"

"From the wood, Uncle."

"How is that possible? Do people live there?"

"Only Grandfather and I."

"Do you belong to the village?"

"No. Grandfather has come from far away, and he found me in the wood, when my mother had died."

"Wait, wait," exclaimed the man in the sledge, who seemed struck with a new idea. "They said there," he pointed to the village, "that he had not been seen in this neighbourhood. Of course, you don't know your grandfather's name; how should you?" [Pg 181]

"Yes, I know it quite well," she laughed. "It is Ivan."

"Ah, but he did not tell you what other name he had. That ought to have occurred to him."

"Yes, but he did," said the child merrily. "And I remember it well."

"You are joking."

"He is called Ivan the Runaway. That's it. And my name is Anjuta."

"That's just the man we want," laughed the official with great satisfaction. "Look out, you rascals"—he made a threatening gesture towards the village—"you shelter escaped convicts. Where is your grandfather?"

"He is in bed."

"What? Out there in the wood?"

"Yes; he is ill since the bear attacked him. He can hardly crawl round our hut."

"Ah! then he can't run away."

"Why should he run away?" laughed Anjuta. "He is waiting for me. I am going to the village," she added with an air of importance, "to buy bread and meal."

"Well, listen now. Sit here by my side. Would you like to help your grandfather? We will make him well and give him bread and money, so that he can live without anxiety."

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"Yes, but Grandfather wanted to make a hole under the earth for us both, because it is so terribly cold in the forest."

"Very well; we will build him a strong hut."

"With a real fire-place like Lasaref has?"

"Yes, just like that."

The little girl clapped her hands in glee. "And I will always cook him good broth. That is just what Grandfather has always told me, that one should help the other, and then God helps all."

"Yes, certainly. We will help him too."

Anjuta clambered up on the box-seat. The peasant who held the reins gave her a violent dig in the side and angrily hissed between his teeth, "Stupid goose!"

"Stephan," said the stout official, "can the sledge go through the wood?"

"No," was the sulky reply.

"Ah, but when you get something on your obstinate neck it can. Turn round, rascal! In winter one can go everywhere."

Anjuta had become quite silent. Why was the kind gentleman so angry all of a sudden? The sledge had already reached the wood.

"How pleased Grandfather will be!" she thought, and smiled again her happy childish smile.

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XII

Ivan the Runaway's heart sank when Anjuta had gone. "Not even can I pray for her, sinner that I am!" he thought. "I would only bring down misfortune on her."

Suppose a stray wolf attacked her, or she lost her way? There would be no one to help her. His imagination continued to conjure up ever darker and darker images. He saw her little body writhing under the claws of a hungry wild beast, or sinking in the treacherous snow of a deep ravine; he saw her wandering blindly in the thickets of the forest and heard her childish voice crying, "Grandfather, Grandfather, I am frightened!"

Hour after hour passed. The hut seemed too narrow for him. He knew that she would spend the night in the village, and yet he ventured out in the cold, drawn by the hope that he would see her suddenly standing before him laughing and happy with radiant eyes.

Over the white-clothed forest there brooded a foreboding silence; the sky was overcast by dark clouds and the pine-trees towered gaunt and forbidding. A feeling of terror slowly stole over him. Formerly he had never known it in his solitude, but Anjuta had accustomed him to human companionship. Was not somebody creeping near, just as he himself had often crept when on a thievish expedition? His heart beat violently as though it would burst; he stuffed a handful of snow in his mouth in order to quench the burning sensations within him.

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There! Were those not voices? Did Andryushka Lasaref wish to take the skins at once, and had he brought the child with him? But there seemed to be several people, and he heard distinctly the beat of the horses' hoofs.

He ought to have been glad perhaps, but his heart felt painfully contracted. What a wolf's life his was, spent in perpetual mistrust and fear! Now he could distinguish Anjuta's merry tones ... and now something came forward from between the trees.

"You come to fetch my soul," cried Ivan with his hair bristling.

The four Cossacks halted on the clearing before the hut.

"Good evening, Grandfather! Grandfather! here I am!"

But what was the matter? Her Grandfather rushed into the hut and re-appeared with his gun in his hand. And he was hardly recognizable with his threatening eyes in his distorted face.

"Come now! No jokes, Ivan the Runaway," exclaimed the kind stout gentleman. "You know you only make matters worse. Throw away your gun, or I will have you knouted."

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"Your honour has taken the trouble to come here for the sake of my poor soul," said the old man

with a grim smile. His eye fell on Anjuta.

"You have betrayed me, you vermin!" he snarled.

The convict had awoken in him.

"Surrender yourself, Ivan," said the official in the red-bordered cap.

"Let him take me who is tired of life," laughed the old man wildly, turning his gun-muzzle from one Cossack to another!

"Shoot him down!" cried the excited official. One of the riders raised his musket. A shot rang out. Ivan had fired and missed. The Cossack remained motionless and coolly fired in reply. "Hit!" he said in a low voice and turned away.

Ivan fell sideways on the snow, which at once took a red tinge under him. He lifted himself once more on his elbow and sank back again. Then he stretched himself at full length with his face turned upwards.

"Anjuta, my little dove!" his pale lips whispered. But she stood as though petrified; her old familiar expression, "I am afraid," died on her tongue.

The Cossacks approached the convict.

"How is he?" asked the official.

"It is all over with him, your honour."

The official took off his cap piously and crossed himself; the Cossacks followed his example.

Ivan lay quite still, gazing motionless up at the sky. Then the little girl awoke out of her stupor, threw herself on her knees beside him, and tried despairingly to lift him; her poor little body quivered like a bird in the death-struggle. "Grandfather! Wake up! It is I! Listen, Grandfather!"

But he did not answer. Then the child fell on the body, and wept as if her heart would break.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Saint's picture.

[2] Village priest.

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