

# **A STRANGE STORY**

Ivan Turgenev



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FIFTEEN years ago—began H.—official duties compelled me to spend a few days in the principal town of the province of T——. I stopped at a very fair hotel, which had been established six months before my arrival by a Jewish tailor, who had grown rich. I am told that it did not flourish long, which is often the case with us; but I found it still in its full splendour: the new furniture emitted cracks like pistol-shots at night; the bed-linen, table-cloths, and napkins smelt of soap, and the painted floors reeked of olive oil, which, however, in the opinion of the waiter, an exceedingly elegant but not very clean individual, tended to prevent the spread of insects. This waiter, a former valet of Prince G.'s, was conspicuous for his free-and-easy manners and his self-assurance. He invariably wore a second-hand frockcoat and slippers trodden down at heel, carried a table-napkin under his arm, and had a multitude of pimples on his cheeks. With a free sweeping movement of his moist hands he gave utterance to brief but pregnant observations. He showed a patronising interest in me, as a person capable of appreciating his culture and knowledge of the world; but he regarded his own lot in life with a rather disillusioned eye. "No doubt about it," he said to me one day; "ours is a poor sort of position nowadays. May be sent flying any day!" His name was Ardalion.

I had to make a few visits to official persons in the town. Ardalion procured me a coach and groom, both alike shabby and loose in the joints; but the groom wore livery, the carriage was adorned with an heraldic crest. After making all my official calls, I drove to see a country gentleman, an old friend of my father's, who had been a long time settled in the town. . . . I had not met him for twenty years; he had had time to get married, to bring up a good-sized family, to be left a widower and to make his fortune. His business was with government monopolies, that is to say, he lent contractors for monopolies loans at heavy interest. . . . "There is always honour in risk," they say, though indeed the risk was small.

In the course of our conversation there came into the room with hesitating steps, but as lightly as though on tiptoe, a young girl of about seventeen, delicate-looking and thin. "Here," said my acquaintance, "is my eldest daughter Sophia; let me introduce you. She takes my poor wife's place, looks after the house, and takes care of her brothers and sisters." I bowed a second time to the girl who had come in (she meanwhile dropped into a chair without speaking), and thought to myself that she did not look much like housekeeping or looking after children. Her face was quite childish, round, with small, pleasing, but immobile features; the blue eyes, under high, also immobile and irregular eyebrows, had an intent, almost astonished look, as though they had just observed something unexpected; the full little mouth with the lifted upper lip, not only did not smile, but seemed as though altogether innocent of such a practice; the rosy flush under the tender skin stood in soft, diffused patches on the cheeks, and neither paled nor deepened. The fluffy, fair hair hung in light clusters each side of the little head. Her bosom breathed softly, and her arms were pressed somehow awkwardly and severely against her narrow waist. Her blue gown fell without folds—like a child's—to her little feet. The general impression this girl made upon me was not one of morbidity, but of something enigmatical. I saw before me not simply a shy, provincial miss, but a creature of a special type—that I could not make out. This type neither attracted nor repelled me; I did not fully understand it, and only felt that I had never come across a nature more sincere. Pity . . . yes! pity was the feeling that rose up within me at the sight of this young, serious, keenly alert life—God knows why! "Not of this earth," was my thought, though there was nothing exactly "ideal" in the expression of the face, and though Mademoiselle Sophie had obviously come into the drawing-room in fulfilment of those duties of lady of the house to which her father had referred.

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He began to talk of life in the town of T——, of the social amusements and advantages it offered. "We're very quiet here," he observed; "the governor's a melancholy fellow; the marshal of the province is a bachelor. But there'll be a big ball in the Hall of the Nobility the day after to-morrow. I advise you to go; there are some pretty girls here. And you'll see all our *intelligentsi* too."

My acquaintance, as a man of university education, was fond of using learned expressions. He pronounced them with irony, but also with respect. Besides, we all know that moneylending, together with respectability, develops a certain thoughtfulness in men.

"Allow me to ask, will you be at the ball?" I said, turning to my friend's daughter. I wanted to hear the sound of her voice.

"Papa intends to go," she answered, "and I with him."

Her voice turned out to be soft and deliberate, and she articulated every syllable fully, as though she were puzzled.

"In that case, allow me to ask you for the first quadrille."

She bent her head in token of assent, and even then did not smile.

I soon withdrew, and I remember the expression in her eyes, fixed steadily upon me, struck me as so strange that I involuntarily looked over my shoulder to see whether there were not some one or some thing she was looking at behind my back.

I returned to the hotel, and after dining on the never-varied "soupe-julienne," cutlets, and green peas, and grouse cooked to a dry, black chip, I sat down on the sofa and gave myself up to reflection. The subject of my meditations was Sophia, this enigmatical daughter of my old acquaintance; but Ardalion, who was clearing the table, explained my thoughtfulness in his own way; he set it down to boredom.

"There is very little in the way of entertainment for visitors in our town," he began with his usual easy condescension, while he went on at the same time flapping the backs of the chairs with a dirty dinner-napkin—a practice peculiar, as you're doubtless aware, to servants of superior education. "Very little!" He paused, and the huge clock on the wall, with a lilac rose on its white face, seemed in its monotonous, sleepy tick, to repeat his words: "Ve-ry! ve-ry!" it ticked. "No concerts, nor theatres," pursued Ardalion (he had travelled abroad with his master, and had all but stayed in Paris; he knew much better than to mispronounce this last word, as the peasants do)—"nor dances, for example; nor evening receptions among the nobility and gentry—there is nothing of the kind whatever." (He paused a moment, probably to allow me to observe the choiceness of his diction.) "They positively visit each other but seldom. Every one sits like a pigeon on its perch. And so it comes to pass that visitors have simply nowhere to go."

Ardalion stole a sidelong glance at me.

"But there is one thing," he went on, speaking with a drawl, "in case you should feel that way inclined. . . ."

He glanced at me a second time and positively leered, but I suppose did not observe signs of the requisite inclination in me.

The polished waiter moved towards the door, pondered a moment, came back, and after fidgeting about uneasily a little, bent down to my ear, and with a playful smile said:

"Would you not like to behold the dead?"

I stared at him in perplexity.

"Yes," he went on, speaking in a whisper; "there is a man like that here. He's a simple artisan, and can't even read and write, but he does marvellous things. If you, for example, go to him and desire to see any one of your departed friends, he will be sure to show him you."

"How does he do it?"

"That's his secret. For though he's an uneducated man—to speak bluntly, illiterate—he's very great in godliness! Greatly respected he is among the merchant gentry!"

"And does every one in the town know about this?"

"Those who need to know; but, there, of course—there's danger from the police to be guarded against. Because, say what you will, such doings are forbidden anyway, and for the common people are a temptation; the common people—the mob, we all know, quickly come to blows."

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"Has he shown you the dead?" I asked Ardalion.

Ardalion nodded. "He has; my father he brought before me as if living."

I stared at Ardalion. He laughed and played with his dinner-napkin, and condescendingly, but unflinchingly, looked at me.

"But this is very curious!" I cried at last. "Couldn't I make the acquaintance of this artisan?"

"You can't go straight to him; but one can act through his mother. She's a respectable old woman; she sells pickled apples on the bridge. If you wish it, I will ask her."

"Please do."

Ardalion coughed behind his hand. "And a gratuity, whatever you think fit, nothing much, of course, should also be handed to her—the old lady. And I on my side will make her understand that she has nothing to fear from you, as you are a visitor here, a gentleman—and of course you can understand that this is a secret, and will not in any case get her into any unpleasantness."

Ardalion took the tray in one hand, and with a graceful swing of the tray and his own person, turned towards the door.

"So I may reckon upon you!" I shouted after him.

"You may trust me!" I heard his self-satisfied voice say: "We'll talk to the old woman and transmit you her answer exactly."

I will not enlarge on the train of thought aroused in me by the extraordinary fact Ardalion had related; but I am prepared to admit that I awaited the promised reply with impatience. Late in the evening Ardalion came to me and announced that to his annoyance he could not find the old woman. I handed him, however, by way of encouragement, a three-rouble note. The next morning he appeared again in my room with a beaming countenance; the old woman had consented to see me.

"Hi! boy!" shouted Ardalion in the corridor; "Hi! apprentice! Come here!" A boy of six came up, grimed all over with soot like a kitten, with a shaved head, perfectly bald in places, in a torn, striped smock, and huge goloshes on his bare feet. "You take the gentleman, you know where," said Ardalion, addressing the "apprentice," and pointing to me. "And you, sir, when you arrive, ask for Mastridia Karpovna."

The boy uttered a hoarse grunt, and we set off.

We walked rather a long while about the unpaved streets of the town of T——; at last in one of them, almost the most deserted and desolate of all, my guide stopped before an old two-story wooden house, and wiping his nose all over his smock-sleeve, said "Here; go to the right." I passed through the porch into the outer passage, stumbled towards my right, a low door creaked on rusty hinges, and I saw before me a stout old woman in a brown jacket lined with hare-skin, with a parti-coloured kerchief on her head.

"Mastridia Karpovna?" I inquired.

"The same, at your service," the old woman replied in a piping voice. "Please walk in. Won't you take a chair?"

The room into which the old woman conducted me was so littered up with every sort of rubbish, rags, pillows, feather-beds, sacks, that one could hardly turn round in it. The sunlight barely struggled in through two dusty little windows; in one corner, from behind a heap of boxes piled on one another, there came a feeble whimpering and wailing. . . . I could not tell from what; perhaps a sick baby, or perhaps a puppy. I sat down on a chair, and the old woman stood up directly facing me. Her face was yellow, half-transparent like wax; her lips were so fallen in that they formed a single straight line in the midst of a multitude of wrinkles; a tuft of white hair stuck out from below the kerchief on her head, but the sunken grey eyes peered out alertly and cleverly from under the bony overhanging brow; and the sharp nose fairly stuck out like a spindle, fairly sniffed the air as if it would say: I'm a smart one! "Well, you're no fool!" was my thought. At the same time she smelt of spirits.

I explained to her the object of my visit, of which, however, as I observed, she must be aware. She listened to me, blinked her eyes rapidly, and only lifted her nose till it stuck out still more sharply, as though she were making ready to peck.

"To be sure, to be sure," she said at last; "Ardalion Matveitch did say something, certainly; my son Vassinka's art you were wanting. . . . But we can't be sure, my dear sir. . . ."

"Oh, why so?" I interposed. "As far as I'm concerned, you may feel perfectly easy. I'm not an informer."

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"Oh, mercy on us," the old woman caught me up hurriedly, "what do you mean? Could we dare to suppose such a thing of your honour! And on what ground could one inform against us? Do you suppose it's some sinful contrivance of ours? No, sir, my son's not the one to lend himself to anything wicked . . . or give way to any sort of witchcraft. . . . God forbid indeed, holy Mother of Heaven! (The old woman crossed herself three times.) He's the foremost in prayer and fasting in the whole province; the foremost, your honour, he is! And that's just it: great grace has been vouchsafed to him. Yes, indeed. It's not the work of his hands. It's from on high, my dear; so it is."

"So you agree?" I asked: "when can I see your son?"

The old woman blinked again and shifted her rolled up handkerchief from one sleeve to the other.

"Oh, well, sir—well, sir, I can't say."

"Allow me, Mastridia Karpovna, to hand you this," I interrupted, and I gave her a ten-rouble note.

The old woman clutched it at once in her fat, crooked fingers, which recalled the fleshy claws of an owl, quickly slipped it into her sleeve, pondered a little, and as though she had suddenly reached a decision, slapped her thighs with her open hand.

"Come here this evening a little after seven," she said, not in her previous voice, but in quite a different one, more solemn and subdued; "only not to this room, but kindly go straight up to the floor above, and you'll find a door to your left, and you open that door; and you'll go, your honour, into an empty room, and in that room you'll see a chair. Sit you down on that chair and wait; and whatever you see, don't utter a word and don't do anything; and please don't speak to my son either; for he's but young yet, and he suffers from fits. He's very easily scared; he'll tremble and shake like any chicken . . . a sad thing it is!"

I looked at Mastridia. "You say he's young, but since he's your son . . ."

"In the spirit, sir, in the spirit. Many's the orphan I have under my care!" she added, wagging her head in the direction of the corner, from which came the plaintive whimper. "O—O God Almighty, holy Mother of God! And do you, your honour, before you come here, think well which of your deceased relations or friends—the kingdom of Heaven to them!—you're desirous of seeing. Go over your deceased friends, and whichever you select, keep him in your mind, keep him all the while till my son comes!"

"Why, mustn't I tell your son whom. . . ."

"Nay, nay, sir, not one word. He will find out what he needs in your thoughts himself. You've only to keep your friend thoroughly in mind; and at your dinner drink a drop of wine—just two or three glasses; wine never comes amiss." The old woman laughed, licked her lips, passed her hand over her mouth, and sighed.

"So at half-past seven?" I queried, getting up from my chair.

"At half-past seven, your honour, at half-past seven," Mastridia Karpovna replied reassuringly.

I took leave of the old woman and went back to the hotel. I did not doubt that they were going to make a fool of me, but in what way?—that was what excited my curiosity. With Ardalion I did not exchange more than two or three words. "Did she see you?" he asked me, knitting his brow, and on my affirmative reply, he exclaimed: "The old woman's as good as any statesman!" I set to work, in accordance with the "statesman's" counsel, to run over my deceased friends. After rather prolonged hesitation I fixed, at last, on an old man who had long been dead, a Frenchman, once my tutor. I selected him not because he had any special attraction for me; but his whole figure was so original, so unlike any figure of to-day, that it would be utterly impossible to imitate it. He had an enormous head, fluffy white hair combed straight back, thick black eyebrows, a hawk nose, and two large warts of a pinkish hue in the middle of the forehead; he used to wear a green frockcoat with smooth brass buttons, a striped waistcoat with a stand-up collar, a jabot and lace cuffs. "If he shows me my old Dessaire," I thought, "well, I shall have to admit that he's a sorcerer!"

At dinner I followed the old dame's behest and drank a bottle of Lafitte, of the first quality, so Ardalion averred, though it had a very strong flavour of burnt cork, and a thick sediment at the bottom of each glass.

Exactly at half-past seven I stood in front of the house where I had conversed with the worthy Mastridia Karpovna. All the shutters of the windows were closed, but the door was open. I went into the house, mounted the shaky staircase to the first story, and opening a door on the left, found myself, as the old woman had said, in a perfectly empty, rather large room; a tallow candle set in the window-sill threw a dim light over the room; against the wall opposite the door stood a wicker-bottomed chair. I snuffed the candle, which had already burnt

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down enough to form a long smouldering wick, sat down on the chair and began to wait.

The first ten minutes passed rather quickly; in the room itself there was absolutely nothing which could distract my attention, but I listened intently to every rustle, looked intently at the closed door. . . . My heart was throbbing. After the first ten minutes followed another ten minutes, then half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, and not a stir of any kind around! I coughed several times to make my presence known; I began to feel bored and out of temper; to be made a fool of in just that way had not entered into my calculations. I was on the point of getting up from my seat, taking the candle from the window, and going downstairs. . . . I looked at it; the wick again wanted snuffing; but as I turned my eyes from the window to the door, I could not help starting; with his back leaning against the door stood a man. He had entered so quickly and noiselessly that I had heard nothing.

He wore a simple blue smock; he was of middle height and rather thick-set. With his hands behind his back and his head bent, he was staring at me. In the dim light of the candle I could not distinctly make out his features. I saw nothing but a shaggy mane of matted hair falling on his forehead, and thick, rather drawn lips and whitish eyes. I was nearly speaking to him, but I recollected Mastridia's injunction, and bit my lips. The man, who had come in, continued to gaze at me, and, strange to say, at the same time I felt something like fear, and, as though at the word of command, promptly started thinking of my old tutor. He still stood at the door and breathed heavily, as though he had been climbing a mountain or lifting a weight, while his eyes seemed to expand, seemed to come closer to me—and I felt uncomfortable under their obstinate, heavy, menacing stare; at times those eyes glowed with a malignant inward fire, a fire such as I have seen in the eyes of a pointer dog when it "points" at a hare; and, like a pointer dog, *he* kept his eyes intently following mine when I "tried to double," that is, tried to turn my eyes away.

So passed I do not know how long—perhaps a minute, perhaps a quarter of an hour. He still gazed at me; I still experienced a certain discomfort and alarm and still thought of the Frenchman. Twice I tried to say to myself, "What nonsense! what a farce!" I tried to smile, to shrug my shoulders. . . . It was no use! All initiative had all at once "frozen up" within me—I can find no other word for it. I was overcome by a sort of numbness. Suddenly I noticed that he had left the door, and was standing a step or two nearer to me; then he gave a slight bound, both feet together, and stood closer still. . . . Then again . . . and again; while the menacing eyes were simply fastened on my whole face, and the hands remained behind, and the broad chest heaved painfully. These leaps struck me as ridiculous, but I felt dread too, and what I could not understand at all, a drowsiness began suddenly to come upon me. My eyelids clung together . . . the shaggy figure with the whitish eyes in the blue smock seemed double before me, and suddenly vanished altogether! . . . I shook myself; he was again standing between the door and me, but now much nearer. . . . Then he vanished again—a sort of mist seemed to fall upon him; again he appeared . . . vanished again . . . appeared again, and always closer, closer . . . his hard, almost gasping breathing floated across to me now. . . . Again the mist fell, and all of a sudden out of this mist the head of old Dessaire began to take distinct shape, beginning with the white, brushed-back hair! Yes: there were his warts, his black eyebrows, his hook nose! There too his green coat with the brass buttons, the striped waistcoat and jabot. . . . I shrieked, I got up. . . . The old man vanished, and in his place I saw again the man in the blue smock. He moved staggering to the wall, leaned his head and both arms against it, and heaving like an overloaded horse, in a husky voice said, "Tea!" Mastridia Karpovna—how she came there I can't say—flew to him and saying: "Vassinka! Vassinka!" began anxiously wiping away the sweat, which simply trickled from his face and hair. I was on the point of approaching her, but she, so insistently, in such a heart-rending voice cried: "Your honour! merciful sir! have pity on us, go away, for Christ's sake!" that I obeyed, while she turned again to her son. "Bread-winner, darling," she murmured soothingly: "you shall have tea directly, directly. And you too, sir, had better take a cup of tea at home!" she shouted after me.

When I got home I obeyed Mastridia and ordered some tea; I felt tired—even weak. "Well?" Ardalion questioned me, "have you been? did you see something?"

"He did, certainly, show me something . . . which, I'll own, I had not anticipated," I replied.

"He's a man of marvellous power," observed Ardalion, carrying off the samovar; "he is held in high esteem among the merchant gentry."

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As I went to bed, and reflected on the incident that had occurred to me, I fancied at last that I had reached some explanation of it. The man doubtless possessed a considerable magnetic power; acting by some means, which I did not understand of course, upon my nerves, he had evoked within me so vividly, so definitely, the image of the old man of whom I was thinking, that at last I fancied that I saw him before my eyes. . . . Such "metastases," such transferences of sensation, are recognised by science. It was all very well; but the force capable of producing such effects still remained, something marvellous and mysterious. "Say what you will," I thought, "I've seen, seen with my own eyes, my dead tutor!"

The next day the ball in the Hall of Nobility took place. Sophia's father called on me and reminded me of the engagement I had made with his daughter. At ten o'clock I was standing by her side in the middle of a ballroom lighted up by a number of copper lamps, and was preparing to execute the not very complicated steps of the French quadrille to the resounding blare of the military band. Crowds of people were there; the ladies were especially numerous and very pretty; but the first place among them would certainly have been given to my partner, if it had not been for the rather strange, even rather wild look in her eyes. I noticed that she hardly ever blinked; the unmistakable expression of sincerity in her eyes did not make up for what was extraordinary in them. But she had a charming figure, and moved gracefully, though with constraint. When she waltzed, and, throwing herself a little back, bent her slender neck towards her right shoulder, as though she wanted to get away from her partner, nothing more touchingly youthful and pure could be imagined. She was all in white, with a turquoise cross on a black ribbon.

I asked her for a mazurka, and tried to talk to her. But her answers were few and reluctant, though she listened attentively, with the same expression of dreamy absorption which had struck me when I first met her. Not the slightest trace of desire to please, at her age, with her appearance, and the absence of a smile, and those eyes, continually fixed directly upon the eyes of the person speaking to her, though they seemed at the same time to see something else, to be absorbed with something different. . . . What a strange creature! Not knowing, at last, how to thaw her, I bethought me of telling her of my adventure of the previous day.

She heard me to the end with evident interest, but was not, as I had expected, surprised at what I told her, and merely asked whether *he* was not called Vassily. I recollected that the old woman had called him "Vassinka." "Yes, his name is Vassily," I answered; "do you know him?"

"There is a saintly man living here called Vassily," she observed; "I wondered whether it was he."

"Saintliness has nothing to do with this," I remarked; "it's simply the action of magnetism—a fact of interest for doctors and students of science."

I proceeded to expound my views on the peculiar force called magnetism, on the possibility of one man's will being brought under the influence of another's will, and so on; but my explanations—which were, it is true, somewhat confused—seemed to make no impression on her. Sophie listened, dropping her clasped hands on her knees with a fan lying motionless in them; she did not play with it, she did not move her fingers at all, and I felt that all my words rebounded from her as from a statue of stone. She heard them, but clearly she had her own convictions, which nothing could shake or uproot.

"You can hardly admit miracles!" I cried.

"Of course I admit them," she answered calmly. "And how can one help admitting them? Are not we told in the gospel that who has but a grain of faith as big as a mustard seed, he can remove mountains? One need only have faith—there will be miracles!"

"It seems there is very little faith nowadays," I observed; "anyway, one doesn't hear of miracles."

"But yet there are miracles; you have seen one yourself. No; faith is not dead nowadays; and the beginning of faith. . . ."

"The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," I interrupted.

"The beginning of faith," pursued Sophie, nothing daunted, "is self-abasement . . . humiliation."

"Humiliation even?" I queried.

"Yes. The pride of man, haughtiness, presumption—that is what must be utterly rooted up. You spoke of the will—that's what must be broken."

I scanned the whole figure of the young girl who was uttering such sentences. . . . "My word, the child's in

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earnest, too, was my thought. I glanced at our neighbours in the mazurka; they, too, glanced at me, and I fancied that my astonishment amused them one of them even smiled at me sympathetically, as though he would say: "Well, what do you think of our queer young lady? every one here knows what she's like."

"Have you tried to break your will?" I said, turning to Sophie again.

"Every one is bound to do what he thinks right," she answered in a dogmatic tone.

"Let me ask you," I began, after a brief silence, "do you believe in the possibility of calling up the dead?"

Sophie softly shook her head.

"There are no dead."

"What?"

"There are no dead souls; they are undying and can always appear, when they like. . . . They are always about us."

"What? Do you suppose, for instance, that an immortal soul may be at this moment hovering about that garrison major with the red nose?"

"Why not? The sunlight falls on him and his nose, and is not the sunlight, all light, from God? And what does external appearance matter? To the pure all things are pure! Only to find a teacher, to find a leader!"

"But excuse me, excuse me," I put in, not, I must own, without malicious intent. "You want a leader . . . but what is your priest for?"

Sophie looked coldly at me.

"You mean to laugh at me, I suppose. My priestly father tells me what I ought to do; but what I want is a leader who would show me himself in action how to sacrifice one's self!"

She raised her eyes towards the ceiling. With her childlike face, and that expression of immobile absorption, of secret, continual perplexity, she reminded me of the pre-raphaelite Madonnas. . . .

"I have read somewhere," she went on, not turning to me, and hardly moving her lips, "of a grand person who directed that he should be buried under a church porch so that all the people who came in should tread him under foot and trample on him. . . . That is what one ought to do in life."

Boom! boom! tra-ra-ra! thundered the drums from the band. . . . I must own such a conversation at a ball struck me as eccentric in the extreme; the ideas involuntarily kindled within me were of a nature anything but religious. I took advantage of my partner's being invited to one of the figures of the mazurka to avoid renewing our quasi-theological discussion.

A quarter of an hour later I conducted Mademoiselle Sophie to her father, and two days after I left the town of T——, and the image of the girl with the childlike face and the soul impenetrable as stone slipped quickly out of my memory.

Two years passed, and it chanced that that image was recalled again to me. It was like this: I was talking to a colleague who had just returned from a tour in South Russia. He had spent some time in the town of T——, and told me various items of news about the neighbourhood. "By the way!" he exclaimed, "you knew V. G. B. very well, I fancy, didn't you?"

"Of course I know him."

"And his daughter Sophia, do you know her?"

"I've seen her twice."

"Only fancy, she's run away!"

"How's that?"

"Well, I don't know. Three months ago she disappeared, and nothing's been heard of her. And the astonishing thing is no one can make out whom she's run off with. Fancy, they've not the slightest idea, not the smallest suspicion! She'd refused all the offers made her, and she was most proper in her behaviour. Ah, these quiet, religious girls are the ones! It's made an awful scandal all over the province! B.'s in despair. . . . And whatever need had she to run away? Her father carried out her wishes in everything. And what's so unaccountable, all the Lovelaces of the province are there all right, not one's missing."

"And they've not found her up till now?"

"I tell you she might as well be at the bottom of the sea! It's one rich heiress less in the world, that's the worst of it."

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This piece of news greatly astonished me. It did not seem at all in keeping with the recollection I had of Sophia B. But there! anything may happen.

In the autumn of the same year fate brought me—again on official business—into the S—— province, which is, as every one knows, next to the province of T——. It was cold and rainy weather; the worn-out posting-horses could scarcely drag my light trap through the black slush of the highroad. One day, I remember, was particularly unlucky: three times we got "stuck" in the mud up to the axles of the wheels; my driver was continually giving up one rut and with moans and grunts trudging across to the other, and finding things no better with that. In fact, towards evening I was so exhausted that on reaching the posting-station I decided to spend the night at the inn. I was given a room with a broken-down wooden sofa, a sloping floor, and torn paper on the walls; there was a smell in it of kvas, bast-mats, onions, and even turpentine, and swarms of flies were on everything; but at any rate I could find shelter there from the weather, and the rain had set in, as they say, for the whole day. I ordered a samovar to be brought, and, sitting on the sofa, settled down to those cheerless wayside reflections so familiar to travellers in Russia.

They were broken in upon by a heavy knocking that came from the common room, from which my room was separated by a deal partition. This sound was accompanied by an intermittent metallic jingle, like the clank of chains, and a coarse male voice boomed out suddenly: "The blessing of God on all within this house. The blessing of God! the blessing of God! Amen, amen! Scatter His enemies!" repeated the voice, with a sort of incongruous and savage drawl on the last syllable of each word. . . . A noisy sigh was heard, and a ponderous body sank on to the bench with the same jingling sound. "Akulina! servant of God, come here!" the voice began again: "Behold! Clothed in rags and blessed! . . . Ha-ha-ha! Tfoo! Merciful God, merciful God, merciful God!" the voice droned like a deacon in the choir. "Merciful God, Creator of my body, behold my iniquity. . . . O-ho-ho! Ha-ha! . . . Tfoo! And all abundance be to this house in the seventh hour!"

"Who's that?" I asked the hospitable landlady, who came in with the samovar.

"That, your honour," she answered me in a hurried whisper, is a blessed, holy man. He's not long come into our parts; and here he's graciously pleased to visit us. In such weather! The wet's simply trickling from him, poor dear man, in streams! And you should see the chains on him—such a lot!"

"The blessing of God! the blessing of God!" the voice was heard again. "Akulina! Hey, Akulina! Akulinushka—friend! where is our paradise? Our fair paradise of bliss? In the wilderness is our paradise. . . . para-dise. . . . And to this house, from beginning of time, greathappiness,...o...o...o..." The voice muttered something inarticulate, and again, after a protracted yawn, there came the hoarse laugh. This laugh broke out every time, as it were, involuntarily, and every time it was followed by vigorous spitting.

"Ah, me! Stepanitch isn't here! That's the worst of it!" the landlady said, as it were to herself, as she stood with every sign of the profoundest attention at the door. "He will say some word of salvation, and I, foolish woman, may not catch it!"

She went out quickly.

In the partition there was a chink; I applied my eye to it. The crazy pilgrim was sitting on a bench with his back to me; I saw nothing but his shaggy head, as huge as a beer-can, and a broad bent back in a patched and soaking shirt. Before him, on the earth floor, knelt a frail-looking woman in a jacket, such as are worn by women of the artisan class—old and wet through—and with a dark kerchief pulled down almost over her eyes. She was trying to pull the holy man's boots off; her fingers slid off the greasy, slippery leather. The landlady was standing near her, with her arms folded across her bosom, gazing reverently at the "man of God." He was, as before, mumbling some inarticulate words.

At last the woman succeeded in tugging off the boots. She almost fell backwards, but recovered herself, and began unwinding the strips of rag which were wrapped round the vagrant's legs. On the sole of his foot there was a wound. . . . I turned away.

"A cup of tea wouldn't you bid me get you, my dear?" I heard the hostess saying in an obsequious voice.

"What a notion!" responded the holy man. "To indulge the sinful body. . . . O-ho-ho! Break all the bones in it . . . but she talks of tea! Oh, oh, worthy old woman, Satan is strong within us. . . . Fight him with hunger, fight him with cold, with the sluice-gates of heaven, the pouring, penetrating rain, and he takes no harm—he is alive

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still! Remember the day of the Intercession of the Mother of God! You will receive, you will receive in abundance!"

The landlady could not resist uttering a faint groan of admiration.

"Only listen to me! Give all thou hast, give thy head, give thy shirt! If they ask not of thee, yet give! For God is all-seeing! Is it hard for Him to destroy your roof? He has given thee bread in His mercy, and do thou bake it in the oven! He seeth all! Se. . . e . . . eth! Whose eye is in the triangle? Say, whose?"

The landlady stealthily crossed herself under her neckerchief.

"The old enemy is adamant! A . . . da . . . mant! A...da...mant!," the religious maniac repeated several times, gnashing his teeth. "The old serpent! But God will arise! Yes, God will arise and scatter His enemies! I will call up all the dead! I will go against His enemy. . . . Ha-ha-ha! Tfoo!"

"Have you any oil?" said another voice, hardly audible; "let me put some on the wound. . . . I have got a clean rag."

I peeped through the chink again; the woman in the jacket was still busied with the vagrant's sore foot. . . . "A Magdalen!" I thought.

"I'll get it directly, my dear," said the woman, and, coming into my room, she took a spoonful of oil from the lamp burning before the holy picture.

"Who's that waiting on him?" I asked.

"We don't know, sir, who it is; she too, I suppose, is seeking salvation, atoning for her sins. But what a saintly man he is!"

"Akulinushka, my sweet child, my dear daughter," the crazy pilgrim was repeating meanwhile, and he suddenly burst into tears.

The woman kneeling before him lifted her eyes to him. . . . Heavens! where had I seen those eyes?

The landlady went up to her with the spoonful of oil. She finished her operation, and, getting up from the floor, asked if there were a clean loft and a little hay. . . . "Vassily Nikititch likes to sleep on hay," she added.

"To be sure there is, come this way," answered the woman; "come this way, my dear," she turned to the holy man, "and dry yourself and rest." The man coughed, slowly got up from the bench—his chains clanked again—and turning round with his face to me, looked for the holy pictures, and began crossing himself with a wide movement.

I recognised him instantly: it was the very artisan Vassily, who had once shown me my dead tutor!

His features were little changed; only their expression had become still more unusual, still more terrible. . . . The lower part of his swollen face was overgrown with unkempt beard. Tattered, filthy, wild-looking, he inspired in me more repugnance than horror. He left off crossing himself, but still his eyes wandered senselessly about the corners of the room, about the floor, as though he were waiting for something. . . .

"Vassily Nikititch, please come," said the woman in the jacket with a bow. He suddenly threw up his head and turned round, but stumbled and tottered. . . . His companion flew to him at once, and supported him under the arm. Judging by her voice and figure, she seemed still young; her face it was almost impossible to see.

"Akulinushka, friend!" the vagrant repeated once more in a shaking voice, and opening his mouth wide, and smiting himself on the breast with his fist, he uttered a deep groan, that seemed to come from the bottom of his heart. Both followed the landlady out of the room.

I lay down on my hard sofa and mused a long while on what I had seen. My mesmeriser had become a regular religious maniac. This was what he had been brought to by the power which one could not but recognise in him!

The next morning I was preparing to go on my way. The rain was falling as fast as the day before, but I could not delay any longer. My servant, as he gave me water to wash, wore a special smile on his face, a smile of restrained irony. I knew that smile well; it indicated that my servant had heard something discreditable or even shocking about gentlefolks. He was obviously burning with impatience to communicate it to me.

"Well, what is it?" I asked at last.

"Did your honour see the crazy pilgrim yesterday?" my man began at once.

"Yes; what then?"

"And did you see his companion too?"

"Yes, I saw her."

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"She's a young lady, of noble family."

"What?"

"It's the truth I'm telling you; some merchants arrived here this morning from T—; they recognised her. They did tell me her name, but I've forgotten it."

It was like a flash of enlightenment "Is the pilgrim still here?" I asked.

"I fancy he's not gone yet. He's been ever so long at the gate, and making such a wonderful wise to-do, that there's no getting by. He's amusing himself with this tomfoolery; he finds it pay, no doubt."

My man belonged to the same class of educated servants as Ardalion.

"And is the lady with him?"

"Yes. She's in attendance on him."

I went out on to the steps, and got a view of the crazy pilgrim. He was sitting on a bench at the gate, and, bent down with both his open hands pressed on it, he was shaking his drooping head from right to left, for all the world like a wild beast in a cage. The thick mane of curly hair covered his eyes, and shook from side to side, and so did his pendulous lips. . . . A strange, almost unhuman muttering came from them. His companion had only just finished washing from a pitcher that was hanging on a pole, and without having yet replaced her kerchief on her head, was making her way back to the gate along a narrow plank laid across the dark puddles of the filthy yard. I glanced at her head, which was now entirely uncovered, and positively threw up my hands with astonishment: before me stood Sophie B.!

She turned quickly round and fixed upon me her blue eyes, immovable as ever. She was much thinner, her skin looked coarser and had the yellowish-ruddy tinge of sunburn, her nose was sharper, and her lips were harder in their lines. But she was not less good-looking; only besides her old expression of dreamy amazement there was now a different look—resolute, almost bold, intense and exalted. There was not a trace of childishness left in the face now.

I went up to her. "Sophia Vladimirovna," I cried, "can it be you? In such a dress . . . in such company. . . ."

She started, looked still more intently at me, as though anxious to find out who was speaking to her, and, without saying a word to me, fairly rushed to her companion.

"Akulinushka," he faltered, with a heavy sigh, "our sins, sins . . . ."

"Vassily Nikititch, let us go at once! Do you hear, at once, at once," she said, pulling her kerchief on to her forehead with one hand, while with the other she supported the pilgrim under the elbow; "let us go, Vassily Nikititch: there is danger here."

"I'm coming, my good girl, I'm coming," the crazy pilgrim responded obediently, and, bending his whole body forward, he got up from the seat. "Here's only this chain to fasten. . . ."

I once more approached Sophia, and told her my name. I began beseeching her to listen to me, to say one word to me. I pointed to the rain, which was coming down in bucketsful. I begged her to have some care for her health, the health of her companion. I mentioned her father. . . . But she seemed possessed by a sort of wrathful, a sort of vindictive excitement: without paying the slightest attention to me, setting her teeth and breathing hard, she urged on the distracted vagrant in an undertone, in soft insistent words, girt him up, fastened on his chains, pulled on to his hair a child's cloth cap with a broken peak, stuck his staff in his hand, slung a wallet on her own shoulder, and went with him out at the gate into the street. . . . To stop her actually I had not the right, and it would have been of no use; and at my last despairing call she did not even turn round, Supporting the "man of God" under his arm, she stepped rapidly over the black mud of the street; and in a few moments, across the dim dusk of the foggy morning, through the thick network of falling raindrops, I saw the last glimpse of the two figures, the crazy pilgrim and Sophie. . . . They turned the corner of a projecting hut, and vanished for ever.

I went back to my room. I fell to pondering. I could not understand it; I could not understand how such a girl, well brought up, young, and wealthy, could throw up everything and every one, her own home, her family, her friends, break with all her habits, with all the comforts of life, and for what? To follow a half-insane vagrant, to become his servant! I could not for an instant entertain the idea that the explanation of such a step was to be found in any prompting, however depraved, of the heart, in love or passion. . . . One had but to glance at the repulsive figure of the "man of God" to dismiss such a notion entirely! No, Sophie had remained pure; and to her all things

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were pure. I could not understand what Sophie had done; but I did not blame her, as, later on, I have not blamed other girls who too have sacrificed everything for what they thought the truth, for what they held to be their vocation. I could not help regretting that Sophie had chosen just *that* path; but also I could not refuse her admiration, respect even. In good earnest she had talked of self-sacrifice, of abasement . . . in *her*, words were not opposed to acts. She had sought a leader, a guide, and had found him. . . . and, my God, what a guide!

Yes, she had lain down to be trampled, trodden under foot. . . . In the process of time, a rumour reached me that her family had succeeded at last in finding out the lost sheep, and bringing her home. But at home she did not live long, and died, like a "Sister of Silence," without having spoken a word to any one.

Peace to your heart, poor, enigmatic creature! Vassily Nikititch is probably on his crazy wanderings still; the iron health of such people is truly marvellous. Perhaps, though, his epilepsy may have done for him.

BADEN-BADEN, 1869.