

A Woman

By

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The wind is scudding over the steppe, and beating upon the rampart of the Caucasian heights until their backbone seems to be bellying like a huge sail, and the earth to be whirling and whizzing through unfathomable depths of blue, and leaving behind it a rack of wind-torn clouds which, as their shadows glide over the surface of the land, seem ever to be striving to keep in touch with the onrush of the gale, and, failing to maintain the effort, dissolving in tears and despondency.

The trees too are bending in the attitude of flight—their boughs are brandishing their foliage as a dog worries a fleece, and littering the black soil with leaves among which runs a constant querulous hissing and rustling. Also, storks are uttering their snapping cry, sleek rooks cawing, steppe grasshoppers maintaining their tireless chirp, sturdy, well-grown husbandmen uttering shouts like words of command, the threshing-floors of the rolling steppe diffusing a rain of golden chaff, and eddying whirlwinds catching up stray poultry feathers, dried-onion strips, and leaves yellowed with the heat, to send them dancing again over the trim square of the little Cossack hamlet.

Similarly does the sun keep appearing and disappearing as though he were pursuing the fugitive earth, and ever and anon halting through weariness before his decline into the dark, shadowy vista where the snowclad peaks of the western mountains are rearing their heads, and fast-reddening clouds are reminding one of the surface of a ploughed field.

At times those clouds part their bulk to reveal in blinding splendour the silvery saddle of Mount Elburz, and the crystal fangs of other peaks—all, apparently, striving to catch and detain the scudding vapours. And to such a point does one come to realise the earth's flight through space that one can scarcely draw one's breath for the tension, the rapture, of the thought that with the rush of that dear and beautiful earth oneself is keeping pace towards, and ever tending towards, the region where, behind the eternal, snow-clad peaks, there lies a boundless ocean of blue—an ocean beside which there may lie stretched yet other proud

and marvellous lands, a void of azure amid which one may come to descry far-distant, many-tinted spheres of planets as yet unknown, but sisters, all, to this earth of ours.

Meanwhile from the steppe slow, ponderous grey oxen with sharp horns are drawing an endless succession of wagon-loads of threshed grain through rich, black, sootlike dust. Patiently the beasts' round eyes regard the earth, while on the top of each load there lolls a Cossack who, with face sunburnt to the last pitch of swarthinness, and eyes reddened with exposure to the wind, and beard matted, seemingly solidified, with dust and sweat, is clad in a shirt drab with grime, and has a shaggy Persian cap thrust to the back of his head. Occasionally, also, he may be seen riding on the pole in front of his team, and being buffeted from behind by the wind which inflates his shirt. And as sleek and comfortable as the carcasses of the bullocks are these Cossacks' frames in proportion their eyes are sluggishly intelligent, and in their every movement is the deliberate air of men who know precisely what they have to do.

“Tsob, tsobe!” such fellows shout to their teams. This year they are reaping a splendid harvest.

Yet though these folk, one and all, look fat and prosperous, their mien is dour, and they speak reluctantly, and through their teeth. Possibly this is because they are over-weary with toil. However that may be, the full-fed country people of the region laugh but little, and seldom sing.

In the centre of the hamlet soars the red brick church of the place—an edifice which, with its five pinnacles, its belfry over its porch, and its yellow plaster window-mouldings, looks like an edifice that has been fashioned of meat, and cemented with grease. Nay, its very shadow seems so richly heavy as to be the shadow of a fane erected by men endowed with a plethora of this world's goods to a god otiose in his grandeur. Ranged around the building in ring fashion, the hamlet's squat white huts stand girdled with belts of plaited wattle, shawled in the gorgeous silken scarves of gardens, and crowned with a flowered brocadework of reed-thatched roofs. In fact, they resemble a bevy of buxom babi, [Peasant women] as over and about them wave silver poplar trees, with quivering, lacelike leaves of acacias, and dark-leaved chestnuts (the leaves of the latter like the palms of human hands) which rock to and fro as though they would fain seize, and detain the driving clouds. Also, from court to court scurry Cossack women who, with skirt-tails tucked up to reveal

muscular legs bare to the knee, are preparing to array themselves for the morrow's festival, and, meanwhile, chattering to one another, or shouting to plump infants which may be seen bathing in the dust like sparrows, or picking up handfuls of sand, and tossing them into the air.

Sheltered from the wind by the churchyard wall, there may be seen also, as they sprawl on the dry, faded herbage, a score of "strollers for work" "that is to say, of folk who, a community apart, consist of "nowhere people," of dreamers who live constantly in expectation of some stroke of luck, some kindly smile from fortune, and of wastrels who, intoxicated with the abundant bounty of the opulent region, have fallen passive victims to the Russian craze for vagrancy. These folk tramp from hamlet to hamlet in parties of two or three, and, while purporting to seek employment, merely contemplate that employment lethargically, express astonishment at the plenitude which it produces, and then decline to put their hands to toil save when dire necessity renders it no longer possible to satisfy hunger's pangs through the expedients of mendicancy and theft. Dull, or cowed, or timid, or furtive of eye, these folk have lost all sense of the difference between that which constitutes honesty and that which does not.

The morrow being the Feast of the Assumption, these people have, in the present instance, gathered from every quarter of the country, for the reason that they hope to be provided with food and drink without first being made to earn their entertainment.

For the most part they are Russians from the central provinces, vagabonds whose faces are blackened, and heads blanched with the unaccustomed sunshine of the South, but whose bodies are clad merely in rags tossed and tumbled by the wind. True, the wearers of those rags declare themselves to be peaceful, respectable citizens whom toil and life's buffetings have exhausted, and compelled to seek temporary rest and prayer; yet never does a creaking, groaning, ponderous grain wagon, with its Cossack driver, pass them by without their according the latter a humble, obsequious salute as, with straw in mouth, and omitting, always, to raise his cap, the man glances at them askance and with contempt, or, more frequently, does not even descry these tattered, grimy hulks between whom and himself there is absolutely nothing in common.

Lower even, and more noticeably, more pretentiously, than the rest does a certain "needy" native of Tula named Konev salute each Cossack. A hardbitten muzhik as sunburnt as a

stick of ergot, he has a black beard distributed irregularly over a lean face, a fawning smile, and eyes deep-sunken in their sockets.

Most of these persons I have met for the first time today; but Konev is an old acquaintance of mine, for he and I have more than once encountered one another on the road between Kursk and the province of Ter. An “artelni,” that is to say, a member of a workman’s union, he cultivates his fellows’ good graces for the reason that he is also an arrant coward, and accustomed, everywhere save in his own village (which lies buried among the sands of Alexin), to assert that:

“Certainly, this countryside is rich, yet I cannot hit things off with its inhabitants. In my own part of the country folk are more spiritual, more truly Russian, by far than here—they are folk with whom the natives of this region are not to be compared, since in the one locality the population has a human soul, whereas in the other locality it is a flint-stone.”

And with a certain quiet reflectiveness, he loves also to recount a marvellous example of unlooked-for enrichment. He will say to you:

“Maybe you do not believe in the virtue of horseshoes? Yet I tell YOU that once, when a certain peasant of Efremov found a horseshoe, the next three weeks saw it befall that that peasant’s uncle, a tradesman of Efremov, was burnt to death with all his family, and the property devolved to the peasant. Did you ever hear of such a thing? What is going to happen CANNOT be foretold, for at any moment fortune may pity a man, and send him a windfall.”

As Konev says this his dark, pointed eyebrows will go shooting up his forehead, and his eyes come protruding out of their sockets, as though he himself cannot believe what he has just related.

Again, should a Cossack pass him without returning his salute, he will mutter as he follows the man with his eyes:

“An overfed fellow, that—a fellow who can’t even look at a human being! The souls of these folk, I tell you, are withered.”

On the present occasion he has arrived on the scene in company with two women. One of them, aged about twenty, is gentle-looking, plump, and glassy of eye, with a mouth perpetually half-open, so that the face looks like that of an imbecile, and though the exposed teeth of its lower portion may seem to be set in a smile, you will perceive, should you peer into the motionless eyes under the overhanging brows, that she has recently been weeping in the terrified, hysterical fashion of a person of weak intellect.

I have come here with that man and other strangers thus I heard her narrate in low, querulous tones as with a stumpy finger she rearranged the faded hair under her yellow and green scarf.

A fat-faced youth with high cheek-bones and the small eyes of a Mongol here nudged her, and said carelessly:

“You mean, rather, that your own man has cast you off. Probably he was the only man you ever saw.”

“Aye,” Konev drawled thoughtfully as he felt in his wallet. Nowadays folk need think little of deserting a woman, since in this year of grace women are no good at all.”

Upon this the woman frowned—then blinked her eyes timidly, and would have opened her lips to reply, but that her companion interrupted her by saying in a brisk, incisive tone:

“Do not listen to those rascals!”

The woman’s companion, some five or six years her senior, has a face exceptional in the constant change and movement of its great dark eyes as at one moment they withdraw

themselves from the street of the Cossack hamlet, to gaze fixedly and gravely towards the steppe where it lies scoured with the scudding breeze, and at another moment fall to scanning the faces of the persons around her, and, at another, frown anxiously, or send a smile flitting across her comely lips as she bends her head, until her features are concealed. Next, the head is raised again, for the eyes have taken on another phase, and become dilated with interest, while a sharp furrow is forming between the slender eyebrows, and the finely moulded lips and trim mouth have compressed themselves together, and the thin nostrils of the straight nose are snuffing the air like those of a horse.

In fact, in the woman there is something non-peasant in its origin. For instance, let one but watch her sharply clicking feet as, in walking, they peep from under her blue skirt, and one will perceive that they are not the splayed feet of a villager, but, rather, feet arched of instep, and at one time accustomed to the wearing of boots. Or, as the woman sits engaged in embroidering a blue bodice with a pattern of white peas, one will perceive that she has long been accustomed to plying the needle so dexterously; swiftly do the small, sunburnt hands fly in and out under the tumbled material, eagerly though the wind may strive to wrest it from her. Again, as she sits bending over her work, one will descry through a rent in her bodice a small, firm bosom which might almost have been that of a virgin, were it not for the fact that a projecting teat proclaims that she is a woman preparing to suckle an infant. In short, as she sits among her companions she looks like a fragment of copper flung into the midst of some rusty old scrap-iron.

Most of the people in whose society I wander neither rise to great heights nor sink to great depths, but are as colourless as dust, and wearisomely insignificant. Hence is it that whenever I chance upon a person whose soul I can probe and explore for thoughts unfamiliar to me and words not hitherto heard I congratulate myself, seeing that though it is my desire to see life grow more fair and exalted, and I yearn to bring about that end, there constantly reveals itself to me merely a vista of sharp angles and dark spaces and poor crushed, defrauded people. Yes, never do I seek to project a spark of my own fire into the darkness of my neighbour's soul but I see that spark disappear, become lost, in a chaos of dumb vacuity.

Hence the woman of whom I have just spoken particularly excites my fancy, and leads me to attempt divinations of her past, until I find myself evolving a story which is not only of vast complexity, but has got painted into it merely the colours of my own hopes and aspirations. It is a story necessarily illusory, necessarily bound to make life seem even

worse than before. Yet it is a grievous thing NEVER to distort actuality, NEVER to envelop actuality in the wrappings of one's imagination

Closing his eyes, and picking his words with difficulty, a tall, fair peasant drawls in thick, gluelike tones:

“Very well,’ I said: and off we set. On the way I said again: ‘Gubin, though you may not like to be told so, you are no better than a thief.’”

The o's uttered by this peasant are uniformly round and firm—they roll forward as a cartwheel trundles along a hot, dusty country road.

The youth with the high cheek-bones fixes the whites of his porcine eyes (eyes the pupils of which are as indeterminate as the eyes of a blind man) upon the woman in the green scarf. Then, having, like a calf, plucked and chewed some stalks of the withered grass, he rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, bends one fist into the crook of the elbow, and says to Konev with a glance at the well-developed muscle:

“Should you care to hit me?”

“No, you can hit yourself. Hit yourself over the head. Then, perhaps, you'll grow wiser.”

Stolidly the young fellow looks at Konev, and inquires:

“How do you know me to be a fool? ”

“Because your personality tells me so.”

“Eh?” cries the young fellow truculently as he raises himself to a kneeling posture. “How know you what I am?”

“I have been told what you are by the Governor of your province.”

The young fellow opens his mouth, and stares at Konev. Then he asks:

“To what province do I belong?”

“If you yourself have forgotten to what province you belong, you had better try and loosen your wits.”

“Look here. If I were to hit you, I—”

The woman who has been sewing drops her work to shrug one rounded shoulder as though she were cold, and ask conciliatorily:

“Well, WHAT province do you belong to?”

“I? “ the young fellow re-echoes as he subsides on to his heels. “I belong to Penza. Why do you ask?”

“Oh never mind why.”

Presently, with a strangely youthful laugh, the woman adds in a murmur:

“I ask because I too belong to that province.”

“And to which canton?”

“To that of Penza.” In the woman’s tone is a touch of pride.

The young fellow squats down before her, as before a wood fire, stretches out his hands, and says in an ingratiating voice:

“What a fine place is our cantonal town! What churches and shops and stone houses there are in it! In fact, one shop sells a machine on which you can play anything you like, any sort of a tune!”

“As well as, probably, the fool,” comments Konev in an undertone, though the young fellow is too enthralled with the memory of the amenities of his cantonal capital to notice the remark. Next, smacking his lips, and chewing his words, he continues in a murmur:

“In those stone houses.”

Here the woman drops her sewing a second time to inquire: “Is there a convent there?”

“A convent?”

And the young fellow pauses uncouthly to scratch his neck. Only after a while does he answer:

“A convent? Well, I do not know, for only once, to tell the truth, have I been in the town, and that was when some of us famine folk were set to a job of roadmaking.”

“Well, well!” gasps Konev, as he rises and takes his departure.

The vagabonds, huddled against the churchyard wall, look like litter driven thither by the steppe wind, and as liable to be whirled away again whenever the wind shall choose. Three of the party are sleeping, and the remainder either mending their clothing, or killing fleas, or lethargically munching bread collected at the windows of the Cossacks’ huts. I find the sight of them weary me as much as does the young fellows’ fatuous babble. Also, I find that whenever the elder of the two women lifts her eyes from her work, and half smiles, the faint half-smile in question vexes me intensely. Consequently, I end by departing in Konev’s wake.

Guarding the entrance of the churchyard, four poplar trees stand erect, save when, as the wind harries them, they bow alternately to the arid, dusty earth and towards the dim vista of tow-coloured steppe and snowcapped mountain peaks. Yet, oh how that steppe, bathed in golden sunshine, draws one to itself and its smooth desolation of sweet, dry grasses as the parched, fragrant expanse rustles under the souging wind!

“You ask about that woman, eh?” queries Konev, whom I find leaning against one of the poplar trunks, and embracing it with an arm.

“Yes. From where does she hail?”

“From Riazan, she says. Another story of hers is that her name is Tatiana.”

“Has she been with you long?”

“No. In fact, it was only this morning, some thirty versts from here, that I overtook her and her companion. However, I have seen her before, at Maikop-on-Laba, during the season of hay harvest, when she had with her an elderly, smoothfaced muzhik who might have been a soldier, and certainly was either her lover or an uncle, as well as a bully and a drunkard of the type which, before it has been two days in a place, starts about as many brawls. At present, however, she is tramping with none but this female companion, for, after that the

‘uncle’ had drunk away his very belly-band and reins, he was clapped in gaol. The Cossack, you know, is an awkward person to deal with.”

Although Konev speaks without constraint, his eyes are fixed upon the ground in a manner suggestive of some disturbing thought. And as the breeze ruffles his dishevelled beard and ragged pea-jacket it ends by robbing his head of his cap— of the tattered, peakless clout which, with rents in its lining, so closely resembles a tchepchik [Woman’s mob-cap], as to communicate to the picturesque features of its wearer an appearance comically feminine.

“Ye-es,” expectorating, and drawling the words between his teeth, he continues: “She is a remarkable woman, a regular, so to speak, highstepper. Yet it must have been the Devil himself that blew this young oaf with the bloated jowl on to the scene. Otherwise I should soon have fixed up matters with her. The cur that he is!”

“But once you told me that you had a wife already?”

Darting at me an angry glance, he turns away with a mutter of:

“AM I to carry my wife about with me in my wallet? ”

Here there comes limping across the square a moustachioed Cossack. In one hand he is holding a bunch of keys, and in the other hand a battered Cossack cap, peak in front. Behind him, sobbing and applying his knuckles to his eyes, there is creeping a curly-headed urchin of eight, while the rear is brought up by a shaggy dog whose dejected countenance and lowered tail would seem to show that he too is in disgrace. Each time that the boy whimpers more loudly than usual the Cossack halts, awaits the lad’s coming in silence, cuffs him over the head with the peak of the cap, and, resuming his way with the gait of a drunken man, leaves the boy and the dog standing where they are—the boy lamenting, and the dog wagging its tail as its old black muzzle sniffs the air. Somehow I discern in the dog’s mien of holding itself prepared for anything that may turn up, a certain resemblance to Konev’s bearing, save that the dog is older in appearance than is the vagabond.

“You mentioned my wife, I think?” presently he resumes with a sigh. “Yes, I know, but not EVERY malady proves mortal, and I have been married nineteen years! ”

The rest is well-known to me, for all too frequently have I heard it and similar tales. Unfortunately, I cannot now take the trouble to stop him; so once more I am forced to let his complaints come oozing tediously into my ears.

“The wench was plump,” says Konev, “and panting for love; so we just got married, and brats began to come tumbling from her like bugs from a bunk.”

Subsiding a little, the breeze takes, as it were, to whispering.

“In fact, I could scarcely turn round for them. Even now seven of them are alive, though originally the stud numbered thirteen. And what was the use of such a gang? For, consider: my wife is forty-two, and I am forty-three. She is elderly, and I am what you behold. True, hitherto I have contrived to keep up my spirits; yet poverty is wearing me down, and when, last winter, my old woman went to pieces I set forth (for what else could I do?) to tour the towns. In fact, folk like you and myself have only one job available—the job of licking one’s chops, and keeping one’s eyes open. Yet, to tell you the truth, I no sooner perceive myself to be growing superfluous in a place than I spit upon that place, and clear out of it.”

Never to this sturdy, inveterate rascal does it seem to occur to insinuate that he has been doing work of any kind, or that he in the least cares to do any; while at the same time all self-pity is eschewed in his narrative, and he relates his experiences much as though they are the experiences of another man, and not of himself.

Presently, as the Cossack and the boy draw level with us, the former, fingering his moustache, inquires thickly:

“Whence are you come?”

“From Russia.”

“All such folk come from there.”

Thereafter, with a gesture of disdain, this man of the abnormally broad nose, eyes floating in fat, and flaxen head shaped like a flounder’s, resumes his way towards the porch of the church. As for the boy, he wipes his nose and follows him while the dog sniffs at our legs, yawns, and stretches itself by the churchyard wall.

“Did you see?” mutters Konev. “Oh yes, I tell you that the folk here are far less amiable than our own folk in Russia. . . But hark! What is that?”

To our ears there have come from behind the corner of the churchyard wall a woman’s scream and the sound of dull blows. Rushing thither, we behold the fair-headed peasant seated on the prostrate form of the young fellow from Penza, and methodically, gruntingly delivering blow after blow upon the young fellow’s ears with his ponderous fists, while counting the blows as he does so. Vainly, at the same time, the woman from Riazan is prodding the assailant in the back, whilst her female companion is shrieking, and the crowd at large has leapt to its feet, and, collected into a knot, is shouting gleefully, “THAT’S the way! THAT’S the way!”

“Five!” the fair-headed peasant counts.

“Why are you doing this?” the prostrate man protests.

“Six!”

“Oh dear!” ejaculates Konev, dancing with nervousness. “Oh dear, oh dear!”

The smacking, smashing blows fall in regular cadence as, prone on his face, the young fellow kicks, struggles and puffs up the dust. Meanwhile a tall, dour man in a straw hat is rolling up a shirt-sleeve, and alternately bending and stretching a long arm, whilst a lithe, white-headed young stripling is hopping, sparrow-like, from one onlooker to another, and exclaiming in suppressed, cautious tones:

“Stop it, pray stop it, or we shall be arrested for creating a disturbance!”

Presently the tall man strides towards the fair-headed peasant, deals him a single blow which knocks him from the back of the young fellow, and, turning to the crowd, says with an informing air:

“THAT’S how we do it in Tambov!”

“Brutes! Villains!” screams the woman from Riazan, as she bends over the young fellow. Her cheeks are livid, and as she wipes the flushed face of the beaten youth with the hem of her gown, her dark eyes are flashing with dry wrath, and her lips quivering so painfully as to disclose a set of fine, level teeth.

Koney, pecking up to her, says with an air of advice:

“You had better take him away, and give him some water.”

Upon this the fair-headed muzhik, rising to his knees, stretches a fist towards the man from Tambov, and exclaims:

“Why should he have gone and bragged of his strength, pray?”

“Was that a good reason for thrashing him?”

“And who are you?”

“Who am I?”

“Yes, who are YOU?”

“Never mind. See that I don’t give you another swipe!”

Upon this the onlookers plunge into a heated debate as to who was actually the beginner of the disturbance, while the lithe young fellow continues to wring his hands, and cry imploringly:

“DON’T make so much noise about it! Remember that we are in a strange land, and that the folk hereabouts are strict.”

So queerly do his ears project from his head that he would seem to be able, if he pleased, to fold them right over his eyes.

Suddenly from the roseate heavens comes the vibrant note of a bell; whereupon, the hubbub ceases and at the same moment a young Cossack with a face studded with freckles, and, in his hands, a cudgel, makes his appearance among the crowd.

“What does all this mean?” he inquires not uncivilly.

“They have been beating a man,” the woman from Riazan replies. As she does so she looks comely in spite of her wrath.

The Cossack glances at her—then smiles.

“And where is the party going to sleep?” he inquires of the crowd.

“Here,” someone ventures.

“Then you must not—someone might break into the church. Go, rather, to the Ataman [Cossack headman or mayor], and you will be billeted among the huts.”

“It is a matter of no consequence,” Konev remarks as he paces beside me. “Yet—”

“They seem to be taking us for robbers,” is my interruption.

“As is everywhere the way,” he comments. “It is but one thing more laid to our charge. Caution decides always that a stranger is a thief.”

In front of us walks the woman from Riazan, in company with the young fellow of the bloated features. He is downcast of mien, and at length mutters something which I cannot catch, but in answer to which she tosses her head, and says in a distinct, maternal tone:

“You are too young to associate with such brutes.”

The bell of the church is slowly beating, and from the huts there keep coming neat old men and women who make the hitherto deserted street assume a brisk appearance, and the squat huts take on a welcoming air.

In a resonant, girlish voice there meets our ears:

“Ma-am! Ma-amka! Where is the key of the green box? I want my ribands!”

While in answer to the bell’s summons, the oxen low a deep echo.

The wind has fallen, but reddish clouds still are gliding over the hamlet, and the mountain peaks blushing until they seem, thawing, to be sending streams of golden, liquid fire on to the steppes, where, as though cast in stone, a stork, standing on one leg, is listening, seemingly, to the rustling of the heat- exhausted herbage.

In the forecourt of the Ataman’s hut we are deprived of our passports, while two of our number, found to be without such documents, are led away to a night’s lodging in a dark storehouse in a corner of the premises. Everything is executed quietly enough, and without the least fuss, purely as a matter of routine; yet Konev mutters, as dejectedly he contemplates the darkening sky:

“What a surprising thing, to be sure!”

“What is?”

“A passport. Surely a decent, peaceable man ought to be able to travel WITHOUT a passport? So long as he be harmless, let him—”

“You are not harmless,” with angry emphasis the woman from Riazan interposes.

Konev closes his eyes with a smile, and says nothing more.

Almost until the vigil service is over are we kept kicking our heels about that forecourt, like sheep in a slaughter-house. Then Konev, myself, the two women, and the fat-faced young fellow are led away towards the outskirts of the village, and allotted an empty hut with broken-down walls and a cracked window.

“No going out will be permitted,” says the Cossack who has conducted us thither. “Else you will be arrested.”

“Then give us a morsel of bread,” Konev says with a stammer. “Have you done any work here?” the Cossack inquires.

“Yes—a little.”

“For me?”

“No. It did not so happen.”

“When it does so happen I will give you some bread.”

And like a water-butt the fat kindly-looking man goes rolling out of the yard.

“What else was to be expected?” grumbles Konev with his eyebrows elevated to the middle of his forehead. “The folk hereabouts are knaves. Ah, well!”

As for the women, they withdraw to the darkest corner of the hut, and lie down, while the young fellow disappears after probing the walls and floor, and returns with an armful of straw which he strews upon the hard, beaten clay. Then he stretches himself thereon with hands clasped behind his battered head.

“See the resourcefulness of that fellow from Penza!” comments Konev enviously. “Hi, you women! There is, it would seem, some straw about.”

To this comes from the women’s corner the acid reply:

“Then go and fetch some.”

“For you?”

“Yes, for us.”

“Then I must, I suppose.”

Nevertheless Konev merely remains sitting on the windowsill, and discoursing on the subject of certain needy folk who do but desire to go and say their prayers in church, yet are banded into barns.

“Yes, and though you may say that folk, the world over, have a soul in common, I tell you that this is not so—that, on the contrary, we Russian strangers find it a hard matter here to get looked upon as respectable.”

With which he slips out quietly into the street, and disappears from view.

The young fellow’s sleep is restless—he keeps tossing about, with his fat arms and legs sprawling over the floor, and grunting, and snoring. Under him the straw makes a crackling sound, while the two women whisper together in the darkness, and the reeds of

the dry thatch on the roof rustle (the wind is still drawing an occasional breath), and ever and anon a twig brushes against an outside wall. The scene is like a scene in a dream.

Out of doors the myriad tongues of the pitch-black, starless night seem to be debating something in soft, sad, pitiful tones which ever keep growing fainter; until, when the hour of ten has been struck on the watchman's gong, and the metal ceases to vibrate, the world grows quieter still, much as though all living things, alarmed by the clang in the night, have concealed themselves in the invisible earth or the equally invisible heavens.

I seat myself by the window, and watch how the earth keeps exhaling darkness, and the darkness enveloping, drowning the grey, blurred huts in black, tepid vapour, though the church remains invisible—evidently something stands interposed between it and my viewpoint. And it seems to me that the wind, the seraph of many pinions which has spent three days in harrying the land, must now have whirled the earth into a blackness, a denseness, in which, exhausted, and panting, and scarcely moving, it is helplessly striving to remain within the encompassing, all-pervading obscurity where, helpless and weary in like degree, the wind has sloughed its thousands of wing-feathers—feathers white and blue and golden of tint, but also broken, and smeared with dust and blood.

And as I think of our petty, grievous human life, as of a drunkard's tune on a sorry musical instrument, or as of a beautiful song spoiled by a witless, voiceless singer, there begins to wail in my soul an insatiable longing to breathe forth words of sympathy with all mankind, words of burning love for all the world, words of appreciation of, for example, the sun's beauty as, enfolding the earth in his beams, and caressing and fertilising her, he bears her through the expanses of blue. Yes, I yearn to recite to my fellow-men words which shall raise their heads. And at length I find myself compounding the following jejune lines:

To our land we all are born
In happiness to dwell.
The sun has bred us to this land
Its fairness to excel.
In the temple of the sun
We high priests are, divine.
Then each of us
Should claim his life,
And cry, "This life is mine!"

Meanwhile from the women's corner there comes a soft, intermittent whispering; and as it continues to filter through the darkness, I strain my ears until I succeed in catching a few of the words uttered, and can distinguish at least the voices of the whisperers.

The woman from Riazan mutters firmly, and with assurance:

“Never ought you to show that it hurts you.”

And with a sniff, in a tone of dubious acquiescence, her companion replies:

“Ye-es-so long as one can bear it.”

“Ah, but never mind. PRETEND. That is to say, when he beats you, make light of it, and treat it as a joke.”

“But what if he beats me very much indeed?”

“Continue still to make light of it, still to smile at him kindly.”

“Well, YOU can never have been beaten, for you do not seem to know what it is like.”

“Oh, but I have, my dear—I do know what it is like, for my experience of it has been large. Do not be afraid, however. HE won’t beat you.”

A dog yelps, pauses a moment to listen, and then barks more angrily than ever. Upon that other dogs reply, and for a moment or two I am annoyed to find that I cannot overhear the women’s conversation. In time, however, the dogs cease their uproar, for want of breath, and the suppressed dialogue filters once more to my ears.

“Never forget, my dear, that a muzhik’s life is a hard one. Yes, for us plain folk life is hard. Hence, one ought to make nothing of things, and let them come easy to one.”

“Mother of God!”

“And particularly should a woman so face things; for upon her everything depends. For one thing, let her take to herself, in place of her mother, a husband or a sweetheart. Yes, try that, and see. And though, at first, your husband may find fault with you, he will afterwards take to boasting to other muzhiks that he has a wife who can do everything, and remain ever as bright and loving as the month of May. Never does she give in; never WOULD she give in—no, not if you were to cut off her head!”

“Indeed? ”

“Yes. And see if that will not come to be your opinion as much as mine.”

Again, to my annoyance, the dialogue is interrupted—this time by the sound of uncertain footsteps in the street without. Thus the next words of the women’s conversation escape me. Then I hear:

“Have you ever read ‘The Vision of the Mother of God’?”

“N-no, I have not.”

“Then you had better ask some older woman than myself to tell you about it, for it is a good book to become acquainted with. Can you read?”

“No, I cannot. But tell me, yourself, what the vision was?”

“Listen, and I will do so.”

From outside the window Konev’s voice softly inquires:

“Is that our lot in there? Yes? Thank God, then, for I had nearly lost my way after stirring up a lot of dogs, and being forced to use my fists upon them. Here, you! Catch hold!”

With which, handing me a large watermelon, he clammers through the window with a great clattering and disturbance.

“I have managed also to gee a good supply of bread,” he continues. “Perhaps you believe that I stole it? But no. Indeed, why should one steal when one can beg-a game at which I am particularly an old hand, seeing that always, on any occasion, I can make up to people? It happened like this. When I went out I saw a fire glowing in a hut, and folk seated at supper. And since, wherever many people are present, one of them at least has a kind heart, I ate and drank my fill, and then managed to make off with provender for you as well. Hi, you women!”

There follows no answer.

“I believe those daughters of whores must be asleep,” he comments. “Hi, women!”

“What is it?” drily inquires the woman from Riazan.

“Should you like a taste of water-melon?”

“I should, thank you.”

Thereupon, Konev begins to make his way towards the voice.

“Yes, bread, soft wheaten bread such as you—”

Here the, other woman whines in beggar fashion:

“And give ME a taste, too.”

“Oh, yes, I will. But where the devil are you?”

“And a taste of melon as well?”

“Yes, certainly. Hullo! Who is this?”

From the woman from Riazan comes a cry of pain.

“Mind how you step, wretch!” she exclaims.

“All right, but you needn’t make so much noise about it. You see how dark it is, and I—”

“You ought to have struck a match, then.”

“I possess but a quarter of a match, for matches are not over- plentiful, and even if I did catch hold of you no great harm can have been done. For instance, when your husband used to beat you he must have hurt you far worse than I. By the way, DID he beat you?”

“What business is that of yours?”

“None; only, I am curious to know. Surely a woman like you—”

“See here. Do not dare to touch me, or I—”

“Or you what?”

There ensues a prolonged altercation amid which I can hear epithets of increasing acerbity and opprobrium being applied; until the woman from Riazan exclaims hoarsely:

“Oh, you coward of a man, take that!”

Whereupon follows a scrimmage amid which I can distinguish slappings, gross chuckles from Konev, and a muffled cry from the younger woman of:

“Oh, do not so behave, you wretch!”

Striking a match, I approach the spot, and pull Konev away. He is in no way abashed, but merely cooled in his ardour as, seated on the floor at my feet, and panting and expectorating, he says reprovingly to the woman:

“When folk wish merely to have a game with you, you ought not to let yourself lose your temper. Fie, fie!”

“Are you hurt?” the woman inquires quietly.

“What do you suppose? You have cut my lip, but that is the worst damage.”

“Then if you come here again I will lay the whole of your face open.”

“Vixen! What bumpkinish stupidity!”

Konev turns to myself.

“And as for you, you go catching at the first thing you find, and have torn my coat.”

“Then do not insult people.”

“INSULT people, fool? The idea of anyone insulting a woman like THAT!”

Whereafter, with a mean chuckle, the fellow goes on to discourse upon the ease with which peasant women err, and upon their love of deceiving their husbands.

“The impudent rascal!” comments the woman from Penza sleepily.

After a while the young fellow springs to his feet, and grates his teeth. Then, reseating himself, and clutching at his head, he says gloomily:

“I intend to leave here tomorrow, and go home. I do not care WHAT becomes of me.”

With which he subsides on to the floor as though exhausted.

“The blockhead!” is Konev’s remark.

Amid the darkness a black shape rises. It does so as soundlessly as a fish in a pond, glides to the door, and disappears.

“That was she,” remarks Konev. “What a strong woman! However, if you had not pulled me away, I should have got the better of her. By God I should!”

“Then follow her, and make another attempt.”

“No,” after a moment’s reflection he rejoins. “Out there she might get hold of a stick, or a brick, or some such thing. However, I’LL get even with her. As a matter of fact, you wasted your time in stopping me, for she detests me like the very devil.”

And he renews his wearisome boastings of his conquests; until suddenly, he stops as though he has swallowed his tongue.

All becomes quiet; everything seems to have come to a halt, and to be pressing close in sleep to the motionless earth. I too grow drowsy, and have a vision amid which my mind returns to the donations which I have received that day, and sees them swell and multiply and increase in weight until I feel their bulk pressing upon me like a tumulus of the steppes. Next, the coppery notes of a bell jar in my ears, and, struck at random intervals, go floating away into the darkness.

It is the hour of midnight.

Soon, scattered drops of rain begin to patter down upon the dry thatch of the hut and the dust in the street outside, while a cricket continues chirping as though it were hurriedly

relating a tale. Also, I hear filtering forth into the darkness a softly gulped, eager whispering.

“Think,” says one of the voices, “ what it must mean to have to go tramping about without work, or only with work for another to do!”

The young fellow who has been so soundly thrashed replies in a dull voice:

“I know nothing of you.”

“More softly, more softly!” urges the woman.

“What is it you want?”

“I want NOTHING. It is merely that I am sorry for you as a man yet young and strong. You see—well, I have not lived with my eyes shut. That is why I say, come with me.”

“But come whither?”

“To the coast, where I know there to be beautiful plots of land for the asking. You yourself can see how good the land hereabout is. Well, there land better still is to be obtained.”

“Liar!”

“More softly, more softly!” again urges the woman. “Moreover, I am not bad-looking, and can manage things well, and do any sort of work. Hence you and I might live quite peacefully and happily, and come, eventually, to have a place of our own. Yes, and I could bear and rear you a child. Only see how fit I am. Only feel this breast of mine.”

The young fellow snorts, and I begin to find the situation oppressive, and to long to let the couple know that I am not asleep. Curiosity, however, prevents me, and I continue listening to the strange, arresting dialogue.

“Wait a little,” whispers the woman with a gasp. “Do not play with me, for I am not that sort of woman. Yes, I mean what I say. Let be!”

Rudely, roughly the young fellow replies:

“Then don’t run after me. A woman who runs after a man, and plays the whore with him, is—”

“Less noise, please—less noise, I beg of you, or we shall be heard, and I shall be put to shame!”

“Doesn’t it put you to shame to be offering yourself to me like this?”

A silence ensues, save that the young fellow goes on snorting and fidgeting, and the raindrops continue to fall with the same reluctance, the same indolence, as ever. Then once more the woman’s voice is heard through the pattering.

“Perhaps,” says the voice, “you have guessed that I am seeking a husband? Yes, I AM seeking one—a good, steady muzhik.”

“But I am NOT a good, steady muzhik.”

“Fie, fie!”

“What?” he sniggers. “A husband for you? The impudence of you! A ‘husband’! Go along!”

“Listen to me. I am tired of tramping.”

“Then go home.”

This time there ensues a long pause. Then the woman says very softly:

“I have neither home nor kindred.”

“A lie!” ejaculates the young fellow.

“No, by God it is not a lie! The Mother of God forget me if it is.”

In these last words I can detect the note of tears. By this time the situation has become intolerable, for I am yearning to rise and kick the young fellow out of the hut, and then to have a long and earnest talk with his companion. “Oh that I could take her to my arms,” I reflect, “and cherish her as I would a poor lost child!”

After a while the sounds of a new struggle between the pair are heard.

“Don’t put me off like that!” growls the young fellow.

“And don’t you make any attempt upon me! I am not the sort of woman to be forced.”

The next moment there arises a cry of pain and astonishment.

“What was that for? What was that for?” the woman wails.

With an answering exclamation I spring to my feet, for my feelings have become those of a wild beast.

At once everything grows quiet again, save that someone, crawls over the floor and, in leaving the hut, jars the latch of the crazy, single-hinged portal.

“It was not my fault,” grumbles the young fellow. “It all came of that stinking woman offering herself to me. Besides, the place is full of bugs, and I cannot sleep.”

“Beast!” pants someone in the vicinity.

“Hold your tongue, bitch!” is the fellow’s retort.

By now the rain has ceased, and such air as filters through the window seems increasingly stifling. Momentarily the hush grows deeper, until the breast feels filled with a sense of oppression, and the face and eyes as though they were glued over with a web. Even when I step into the yard I find the place to be like a cellar on a summer’s day, when the very ice has melted in the dark retreat, and the latter’s black cavity is charged with hot, viscous humidity.

Somewhere near me a woman is gulping out sobs. For a moment or two I listen; then I approach her, and come upon her seated in a corner with her head in her hands, and her body rocking to and fro as though she were doing me obeisance.

Yet I feel angry, somehow, and remain standing before her without speaking— until at length I ask:

“Are you mad?”

“Go away,” is, after a pause, her only reply.

“I heard all that you said to that young fellow.”

“Oh, did you? Then what business is it of yours? Are you my brother?”

Yet she speaks the words absent-mindedly rather than angrily. Around us the dim, blurred walls are peering in our direction with sightless eyes, while in the vicinity a bullock is drawing deep breaths.

I seat myself by her side.

“Should you remain much longer in that position,” I remark, “you will have a headache.”

There follows no reply.

“Am I disturbing you? “ I continue.

“Oh no; not at all.” And, lowering her hands, she looks at me. “Whence do you come?”

“From Nizhni Novgorod.”

“Oh, from a long way off!”

“Do you care for that young fellow?”

Not for a moment or two does she answer; and when she does so she answers as though the words have been rehearsed.

“Not particularly. It is that he is a strong young fellow who has lost his way, and is too much of a fool (as you too must have seen) to find it again. So I am very sorry for him. A good muzhik ought to be well placed.”

On the bell of the church there strikes the hour of two. Without interrupting herself, the woman crosses her breast at each stroke.

“Always,” she continues, “I feel sorry when I see a fine young fellow going to the dogs. If I were able, I would take all such young men, and restore them to the right road.”

“Then you are not sorry FOR YOURSELF? ”

“Not for myself? Oh yes, for myself as well.”

“Then why flaunt yourself before this booby, as you have been doing?”

“Because I might reform him. Do you not think so? Ah, you do not know me.”

A sigh escapes her.

“He hit you, I think?” I venture.

“No, he did not. And in any case you are not to touch him.”

“Yet you cried out?”

Suddenly she leans towards me, and says:

“Yes, he did strike me—he struck me on the breast, and would have overpowered me had it not been that I cannot, I will not, do things heartlessly, like a cat. Oh, the brutes that men can be!”

Here the conversation undergoes an interruption through the fact that someone has come out to the hut door, and is whistling softly, as for a dog.

“There he is!” whispers the woman.

“Then had I not best send him about his business?”

“No, no!” she exclaims, catching at my knees. “No need is there for that, no need is there for that!”

Then with a low moan she adds:

“Oh Lord, how I pity our folk and their lives! Oh God our Father!”

Her shoulders heave, and presently she bursts into tears, with a whisper, between the pitiful sobs, of:

“How, on such a night as this, one remembers all that one has ever seen, and the folk that ever one has known! And oh, how wearisome, wearisome it all is! And how I should like to cry throughout the world—But to cry what? I know not—I have no message to deliver.”

That feeling I can understand as well as she, for all too often has it seemed to crush my soul with voiceless longing.

Then, as I stroke her bowed head and quivering shoulder, I ask her who she is; and presently, on growing a little calmer, she tells me the history of her life.

She is, it appears, the daughter of a carpenter and bee-keeper. On her mother’s death, this man married a young woman, and allowed her, as stepmother, to persuade him to place the narrator, Tatiana, in a convent, where she (Tatiana) lived from the age of nine till adolescence, and, meanwhile, was taught her letters, and also a certain amount of manual labour; until, later, her father married her off to a friend of his, a well-to-do ex-soldier, who was acting as forester on the convent’s estate.

As the woman relates this, I feel vexed that I cannot see her face—only a dim, round blur amid which there looms what appears to be a pair of closed eyes. Also, so complete is the stillness, that she can narrate her story in a barely audible whisper; and I gain the impression that the pair of us are sitting plunged in a void of darkness where life does not exist, yet where we are destined to begin life.

“However, the man was a libertine and a drunkard, and many a riotous night did he spend with his cronies in the porter’s lodge of the convent. Also, he tried to arouse a similar taste in myself; and though for a time I resisted the tendency, I at length, on his taking to beating me, yielded. Only for one man, however, had I really a liking; and with him it was, and not with my husband, that I first learnt the meaning of spousehood. . . . Unfortunately, my lover himself was married; and in time his wife came to hear of me, and procured my husband’s dismissal. The chief reason was that the lady, a person of great wealth, was

herself handsome, albeit stout, and did not care to see her place assumed by a nobody. Next, my husband died of drink; and as my father had long been dead, and I found myself alone, I went to see and consult my stepmother. All that she said, however, was: ‘Why come to me? Go and think things out for yourself.’ And I too then reflected: ‘Yes, why should I have gone to her?’ and repaired to the convent. Yet even there there seemed to be no place left for me, and eventually old Mother Taisia, who had once been my governess, said: ‘Tatiana, do you return to the world, for there, and only there, will you have a chance of happiness. So to the world I returned —and still am roaming it.’”

“Your quest of happiness is not following an easy road!”

“It is following the road that it best can.”

By now the darkness has ceased to keep spread over us, as it were, the stretched web of a heavy curtain, but has grown thinner and more transparent with the tension, save that, in places (for instance, in the window of the hut), it still lies in thick folds or clots as it peers at us with its sightless eyes.

Over the hummock-like roofs of the huts rise the church’s steeple and the poplar trees; while hither and thither on the wall of the hut, the cracks and holes in the crumbling plaster have caused the wall to resemble the map of an unknown country.

Glancing at the woman’s dark eyes, I perceive them to be shining as pensively, innocently as the eyes of a young maiden.

“You are indeed a curious woman!” I remark.

“Perhaps I am,” she replies as she moistens her lips with a slender, almost feline tongue.

“What are you really seeking?”

“I have considered the matter, and know, at last, my mind. It is this: I hope some day to fall in with a good muzhik with whom to go in search of land. Probably land of the kind, I mean, is to be found in the neighbourhood of New Athos, [A monastery in the Caucasus, built on the reputed site of a cave tenanted by Simeon the Canaanite] for I have been there already, and know of a likely spot for the purpose. And there we shall set our place in order, and lay out a garden and an orchard, and prepare as much plough land as we may need for our working.”

Her words are now firmer, more assured.

“And when we have put everything in order, other folk may join us; and then, as the oldest settlers in the place, we shall hold the position of honour. And thus things will continue until a new village, really a fine settlement, will have become formed—a settlement of which my husband will be selected the warden until such time as I shall have made of him a barin [Gentleman or squire] outright. Also, children may one day play in that garden, and a summer-house be built there. Ah, how delightful such a life appears!”

In fact, she has planned out the future so thoroughly that already she can describe the new establishment in as much detail as though she has long been a resident in it.

“Yes, I yearn indeed for a nice home!” she continues. “Oh that such a home could fall to my lot! But the first requisite, of course, is a muzhik.”

Her gentle face and eyes peer into the waning night as though they aspire to caress everything upon which they may light.

And all the while I am feeling sorry for her—sorry almost to tears. To conceal the fact I murmur:

“Should I myself suit you?”

She gives a faint laugh.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because the ideas in your mind are different from mine.”

“How do you know what my ideas are?”

She edges away from me a little, then says drily:

“Because I can see them in your eyes. To be plain, I could never consent.”

With a finger tapping upon the mouldy, gnarled old oaken stump on which we are sitting, she adds:

“The Cossacks, for instance, live comfortably enough; yet I do not like them.”

“What in them is it that displeases you?”

“Somehow they repel me. True, much of everything is theirs; yet also they have ways which alienate me.”

Unable any longer to conceal from her my pity, I say gently:

“Never, I fear, will you discover what you are seeking.”

She shakes her head protestingly.

“And never ought a woman to be discouraged,” she retorts. “Woman’s proper round is to wish for a child, and to nurse it, and, when it has been weaned, to get herself ready to have another one. That is how woman should live. She should live as pass spring and summer, autumn and winter.”

I find it a pleasure to watch the play of the woman’s intellectual features; and though, also, I long to take her in my arms, I feel that my better plan will be to seek once more the quiet, empty steppe, and, bearing in me the recollection of this woman, to resume my lonely journey towards the region where the silver wall of the mountains merges with the sky, and the dark ravines gape at the steppe with their chilly jaws. At the moment, however, I cannot so do, for the Cossacks have temporarily deprived me of my passport.

“What are you yourself seeking?” she asks suddenly as again she edges towards me.

“Simply nothing. My one desire is to observe how folk live.”

“And are you travelling alone?”

“I am.”

“Even as am I. Oh God, how many lonely people there are in the world!”

By this time the cattle are awakening from slumber, and, with their soft lowings, reminding one of a pipe which I used to hear played by a certain blind old man. Next, four times, with unsteady touch, the drowsy watchman strikes his gong—twice softly, once with a vigour that clangs the metal again, and a fourth time with a mere tap of the iron hammer against the copper plate.

“What sort of lives do the majority of folk lead?”

“Sorry lives.”

“Yes, that is what I too have found.”

A pause follows. Then the woman says quietly:

“See, dawn is breaking, yet never this night have my eyes closed. Often I am like that; often I keep thinking and thinking until I seem to be the only human being in the world, and the only human being destined to re-order it.”

“Many folk live unworthy lives. They live them amid discord, abasement, and wrongs innumerable, wrongs born of want and stupidity.”

And as the words leave my lips my mind loses itself in recollections of all the dark and harrowing and shameful scenes that I have beheld.

“Listen,” I say. “You may approach a man with nothing but good in your heart, and be prepared to surrender both your freedom and your strength; yet still he may fail to understand you aright. And how shall he be blamed for this, seeing that never may he have been shown what is good?”

She lays a hand upon my shoulder, and looks straight into my eyes as she parts her comely lips.

“True,” she rejoins—“But, dear friend, it is also true that goodness never bargains.”

Together she and I seem to be drifting towards a vista which is coming to look, as it sloughs the shadow of night, ever clearer and clearer. It is a vista of white huts, silvery trees, a red church, and dew-bespangled earth. And as the sun rises he reveals to us clustered, transparent clouds which, like thousands of snow-white birds, go gliding over our heads.

“Yes,” she whispers again as gently she gives me a nudge. “As one pursues one’s lonely way one thinks and thinks—but of what? Dear friend, you have said that no one really cares what is the matter. Ah, HOW true that is!”

Here she springs to her feet, and, pulling me up with her, glues herself to my breast with a vehemence which causes me momentarily to push her away. Upon this, bursting into tears, she tends towards me again, and kisses me with lips so dry as almost to cut me—she kisses me in a way which penetrates to my very soul.

“You have been oh, so good!” she whispers softly. As she speaks, the earth seems to be sinking under my feet.

Then she tears herself away, glances around the courtyard, and darts to a corner where, under a fence, a clump of herbage is sprouting.

“Go now,” she adds in a whisper. “Yes, go.”

Then, with a confused smile, as, crouching among the herbage as though it had been a small cave, she rearranges her hair, she adds:

“It has befallen so. Ah, me! May God grant unto me His pardon!”

Astonished, feeling that I must be dreaming, I gaze at her with gratitude, for I sense an extraordinary lightness to be present in my breast, a radiant void through which joyous, intangible words and thoughts keep flying as swallows wheel across the firmament.

“Amid a great sorrow,” she adds, “even a small joy becomes a great felicity.”

Yet as I glance at the woman’s bosom, whereon moist beads are standing like dewdrops on the outer earth; as I glance at that bosom, whereon the sun’s rays are finding a roseate reflection, as though the blood were oozing through the skin, my rapture dies away, and turns to sorrow, heartache, and tears. For in me there is a presentiment that before the living juice within that bosom shall have borne fruit, it will have become dried up.

Presently, in a tone almost of self-excuse, and one wherein the words sound a little sadly, she continues:

“Times there are when something comes pouring into my soul which makes my breasts ache with the pain of it. What is there for me to do at such moments save reveal my thoughts to the moon, or, in the daytime, to a river? Oh God in Heaven! And afterwards I feel as ashamed of myself! . . . Do not look at me like that. Why stare at me with those eyes, eyes so like the eyes of a child?”

“YOUR face, rather, is like a child’s,” I remark.

“What? Is it so stupid?”

“Something like that.”

As she fastens up her bodice she continues:

“Soon the time will be five o’clock, when the bell will ring for Mass. To Mass I must go today, for I have a prayer to offer to the Mother of God. . . Shall you be leaving here soon?”

“Yes—as soon, that is to say, as I have received back my passport.”

“And for what destination?”

“For Alaty. And you?”

She straightens her attire, and rises. As she does so I perceive that her hips are narrower than her shoulders, and that throughout she is well-proportioned and symmetrical.

“I? As yet I do not know. True, I had thought of proceeding to Naltchik, but now, perhaps, I shall not do so, for all my future is uncertain.”

Upon that she extends to me a pair of strong, capable arms, and proposes with a blush:

“Shall we kiss once more before we part?”

She clasps me with the one arm, and with the other makes the sign of the cross, adding:

“Good-bye, dear friend, and may Christ requite you for all your words, for all your sympathy!”

“Then shall we travel together?”

At the words she frees herself, and says firmly, nay, sternly:

“Not so. Never would I consent to such a plan. Of course, had you been a muzhik—but no. Even then what would have been the use of it, seeing that life is to be measured, not by a single hour, but by years?”

And, quietly smiling me a farewell, she moves away towards the hut, whilst I, remaining seated, lose myself in thoughts of her. Will she ever overtake her quest in life? Shall I ever behold her again?

The bell for early Mass begins, though for some time past the hamlet has been astir, and humming in a sedate and non-festive fashion.

I enter the hut to fetch my wallet, and find the place empty. Evidently the whole party has left by the gap in the broken-down wall.

I repair, next, to the Ataman’s office, where I receive back my passport before setting out to look for my companions in the square.

In similar fashion to yesterday those “folk from Russia “ are lolling alongside the churchyard wall, and also have seated among them, leaning his back against a log, the fat-jowled youth from Penza, with his bruised face looking even larger and uglier than before, for the reason that his eyes are sunken amid purple protuberances.

Presently there arrives a newcomer in the shape of an old man with a grey head adorned with a faded velvet skull-cap, a pointed beard, a lean, withered frame, prominent cheekbones, a red, porous-looking, cunningly hooked nose, and the eyes of a thief.

Him a flaxen-haired youth from Orel joins with a similar youth in accosting.

“Why are YOU tramping?” inquires the former.

“And why are YOU? “ the old man retorts in nasal tones as, looking at no one, he proceeds to mend the handle of a battered metal teapot with a piece of wire.

“We are travelling in search of work, and therefore living as we have been commanded to live.”

“By WHOM commanded?”

“By God. Have you forgotten?”

Carelessly, but succinctly, the old man retorts:

“Take heed lest upon you, some day, God vomit all the dust and litter which you are raising by tramping His earth!”

“How?” cries one of the youths, a long-eared stripling.

“Were not Christ and His Apostles also tramps?”

“Yes, CHRIST,” is the old man’s meaning reply as he raises his sharp eyes to those of his opponent. “But what are you talking of, you fools? With whom are you daring to compare yourselves? Take care lest I report you to the Cossacks!”

I have listened to many such arguments, and always found them distasteful, even as I have done discussions regarding the soul. Hence I feel inclined to depart.

At this moment, however, Konev makes his appearance. His mien is dejected, and his body perspiring, while his eyes keep blinking rapidly.

“Has any one seen Tanka—that woman from Riazan?” he inquires. “No? Then the bitch must have bolted during the night. The fact is that, overnight, someone gave me a drop or two to drink, a mere dram, but enough to lay me as fast asleep as a bear in winter- time. And in the meantime, she must have run away with that Penza fellow.”

“No, HE is here,” I remark.

“Oh, he is, is he? Well, as what has the company registered itself? As a set of ikon-painters, I should think!”

Again he begins to look anxiously about him.

“Where can she have got to? “ he queries.

“To Mass, maybe.”

“OF course! Well, I am greatly smitten with her. Yes, my word I am!”

Nevertheless, when Mass comes to an end, and, to the sound of a merry peal of bells, the well-dressed local Cossacks file out of church, and distribute themselves in gaudy streams about the hamlet, no Tatiana makes her appearance.

“Then she IS gone,” says Konev ruefully. “But I’ll find her yet! I’LL come up with her!”

That this will happen I do not feel confident. Nor do I desire that it should.

Five years later I am pacing the courtyard of the Metechski Prison in Tiflis, and, as I do so, trying to imagine for what particular offence I have been incarcerated in that place of confinement.

Picturesquely grim without, the institution is, inwardly, peopled with a set of cheerful, but clumsy, humourists. That is to say, it would seem as though, “by order of the authorities,” the inmates are presenting a stage spectacle in which they are playing, willingly and zealously, but with a complete lack of experience, imperfectly comprehended roles as prisoners, warders, and gendarmes.

For instance, today, when a warder and a gendarme came to my cell to escort me to exercise, and I said to them, “May I be excused exercise today? I am not very well, and do not feel like, etcetera, etcetera,” the gendarme, a tall, handsome man with a red beard, held up to me a warning finger.

“NO ONE,” he said, “has given you permission to feel, or not to feel, like doing things.”

To which the warder, a man as dark as a chimney-sweep, with large blue “whites” to his eyes, added stutteringly:

“To no one here has permission been given to feel, or not to feel, like doing things. You hear that?”

So to exercise I went.

In this stone-paved yard the air is as hot as in an oven, for overhead there lours only a small, flat patch of dull, drab- tinted sky, and on three sides of the yard rise high grey walls, with, on the fourth, the entrance-gates, topped by a sort of look-out post.

Over the roof of the building there comes floating the dull roar of the turbulent river Kura, mingled with shouts from the hucksters of the Avlabar Bazaar (the town's Asiatic quarter) and as a cross motif thrown into these sounds, the sighing of the wind and the cooing of doves. In fact, to be here is like being in a drum which a myriad drumsticks are beating.

Through the bars of the double line of windows on the second and the third stories peer the murky faces and trowsled heads of some of the inmates. One of the latter spits his furthest into the yard—evidently with the intention of hitting myself: but all his efforts prove vain. Another one shouts with a mordant expletive:

“Hi, you! Why do you keep tramping up and down like an old hen? Hold up your head!”

Meanwhile the inmates continue to intone in concert a strange chant which is as tangled as a skein of wool after serving as a plaything for a kitten's prolonged game of sport. Sadly the chant meanders, wavers, to a high, wailing note. Then, as it were, it soars yet higher towards the dull, murky sky, breaks suddenly into a snarl, and, growling like a wild beast in terror, dies away to give place to a refrain which coils, trickles forth from between the bars of the windows until it has permeated the free, torrid air.

As I listen to that refrain, long familiar to me, it seems to voice something intelligible, and agitates my soul almost to a sense of agony. . . .

Presently, while pacing up and down in the shadow of the building, I happen to glance towards the line of windows. Glued to the framework of one of the iron window-squares, I can discern a blue-eyed face. Overgrown with an untidy sable beard it is, as well as stamped with a look of perpetually grieved surprise.

“That must be Konev,” I say to myself aloud.

Konev it is—Konev of the well-remembered eyes. Even at this moment they are regarding me with puckered attention.

I throw around me a hasty glance. My own warder is dozing on a shady bench near the entrance. Two more warders are engaged in throwing dice. A fourth is superintending the pumping of water by two convicts, and superciliously marking time for their lever with the formula, “Mashkam, dashkam! Dashkam, mashkam!”

I move towards the wall.

“Is that you, Konev?” is my inquiry.

“It is,” he mutters as he thrusts his head a little further through the grating. “Yes, Konev I am, but who you are I have not a notion.”

“What are you here for?”

“For a matter of base coin, though, to be truthful, I am here accidentally, without genuine cause.”

The warder rouses himself, and, with his keys jingling like a set of fetters, utters drowsily the command:

“Do not stand still. Also, move further from the wall. To approach it is forbidden.”

“But it is so hot in the middle of the yard, sir!”

“Everywhere it is hot,” retorts the man reprovingly, and his head subsides again. From above comes the whispered query:

“Who ARE you?”

“Well, do you remember Tatiana, the woman from Riazan?”

“DO I remember her?” Konev’s voice has in it a touch of subdued resentment. “DO I remember her? Why, I was tried in court together with her!”

“Together with HER? Was she too sentenced for the passing of base coin?”

“Yes. Why should she not have been? She was merely the victim of an accident, even as I was.”

As I resume my walk in the stifling shade I detect that, from the windows of the basement there is issuing a smell of, in equal parts, rotten leather, mouldy grain, and dampness. To my mind there recur Tatiana’s words: “Amid a great sorrow even a small joy becomes a great felicity,” and, “I should like to build a village on some land of my own, and create for myself a new and better life.”

And to my recollection there recur also Tatiana’s face and yearning, hungry breast. As I stand thinking of these things, there come dropping on to my head from above the low-spoken, ashen-grey words:

“The chief conspirator in the matter was her lover, the son of a priest. He it was who engineered the plot. He has been sentenced to ten years penal servitude.”

“And she? ”

“Tatiana Vasilievna? To the same, and I also. I leave for Siberia the day after tomorrow. The trial was held at Kutair. In Russia I should have got off with a lighter sentence than here, for the folk in these parts are, one and all, evil, barbaric scoundrels.”

“And Tatiana, has she any children?”

“How could she have while living such a rough life as this? Of course not! Besides, the priest’s son is a consumptive.”

“Indeed sorry for her am I!”

“So I expect.” And in Konev’s tone there would seem to be a touch of meaning. “The woman was a fool—of that there can be no doubt; but also she was comely, as well as a person out of the common in her pity for folk.”

“Was it then that you found her again?”

“When?”

“On that Feast of the Assumption?”

“Oh no. It was only during the following winter that I came up with her. At the time she was serving as governess to the children of an old officer in Batum whose wife had left him.”

Something snaps behind me—something sounding like the hammer of a revolver. However, it is only the warder closing the lid of his huge watch before restoring the watch to his pocket, giving himself a stretch, and yawning to the utmost extent of his jaws.

“You see, she had money, and, but for her restlessness, might have lived a comfortable life enough. As it was, her restlessness—”

“Time for exercise is up!” shouts the warder.

“Who are you?” adds Konev hastily. “Somehow I seem to remember your face; but I cannot place it.”

Yet so stung am I with what I have heard that I move away in silence: save that just as I reach the top of the steps I turn to cry:

“Goodbye, mate, and give her my greeting.”

“What are you bawling for?” blusters the warder. . . .

The corridor is dim, and filled with an oppressive odour. The warder swings his keys with a dry, thin clash, and I, to dull the pain in my heart, strive to imitate him. But the attempt proves futile; and as the warder opens the door of my cell he says severely:

“In with you, ten-years man!”

Entering, I move towards the window. Between some grey spikes on a wall I can just discern the boisterous current of the Kura, with sakli [warehouses] and houses glued to the opposite bank, and the figures of some workmen on the roof of a tanning shed. Below, with his cap pushed to the back of his head, a sentry is pacing backwards and forwards.

Wearily my mind recalls the many scores of Russian folk whom it has seen perish to no purpose. And as it does so it feels crushed, as in a vice, beneath the burden of great and inexorable sorrow with which all life is dowered.