

The Wife

Anton Pavlovich TCheckov

Uploaded Jan 2012

I

I received the following letter.

Dear Sir, Pavel Andreitch!

Not far from you—that is to say, in the village of Pestrovo—very distressing incidents are taking place, concerning which I feel it my duty to write to you. All the peasants of that village sold their cottages and all their belongings, and set off for the province of Tomsk, but did not succeed in getting there, and have come back. Here, of course, they have nothing now; everything belongs to other people. They have settled three or four families in a hut, so that there are no less than fifteen persons of both sexes in each hut, not counting the young children; and the long and the short of it is, there is nothing to eat. There is famine and there is a terrible pestilence of hunger, or spotted, typhus; literally every one is stricken. The doctor's assistant says one goes into a cottage and what does one see? Every one is sick, every one delirious, some laughing, others frantic; the huts are filthy; there is no one to fetch them water, no one to give them a drink, and nothing to eat but frozen potatoes. What can Sobol (our Zemstvo doctor - Sobol in Russian means sable-marten) and his lady assistant do when more than medicine the peasants need bread which they have not? The District Zemstvo refuses to assist them, on the ground that their names have been taken off the register of this district, and that they are now reckoned as inhabitants of Tomsk; and, besides, the Zemstvo has no money.

Laying these facts before you, and knowing your humanity, I beg you not to refuse immediate help.

“Your well-wisher.”

Obviously the letter was written by the doctor with the animal name (Sobol) or his lady assistant. Zemstvo doctors and their assistants go on for years growing more and more convinced every day that they can do nothing, and yet continue to receive their salaries from people who are living upon frozen potatoes, and consider they have a right to judge whether I am humane or not.

Worried by the anonymous letter and by the fact that peasants came every morning to the servants' kitchen and went down on their knees there, and that twenty sacks of rye had been stolen at night out of the barn, the wall having first been broken in, and by the general depression which was fostered by conversations, newspapers, and horrible weather—worried by all this, I worked listlessly and ineffectively. I was writing “A History of Railways”; I had to read a great number of Russian and foreign books, pamphlets, and articles in the magazines, to make calculations, to refer to logarithms, to think and to write; then again to read, calculate, and think; but as soon as I took up a book or began to think, my thoughts were in a muddle, my eyes began blinking, I would get up from the table with a sigh and begin walking about the big rooms of my deserted country-house. When I was tired of walking about I would stand still at my study window, and, looking across the wide courtyard, over the pond and the bare young birch-trees and the great fields covered with recently fallen, thawing snow, I saw on a low hill on the horizon a group of mud-coloured huts from which a black muddy road ran down in an irregular streak through the white field. That was Pestrovo, concerning which my anonymous correspondent had written to me. If it had not been for the crows who, foreseeing rain or snowy weather, floated cawing over the pond and the fields, and the tapping in the carpenter's shed, this bit of the world about which such a fuss was being made would have seemed like the Dead Sea; it was all so still, motionless, lifeless, and dreary!

My uneasiness hindered me from working and concentrating myself; I did not know what it was, and chose to believe it was disappointment. I had actually given up my post in the Department of Ways and Communications, and had come here into the country expressly to live in peace and to devote myself to writing on social questions. It had long been my cherished dream. And now I had to say good-bye both to peace and to literature, to give up

everything and think only of the peasants. And that was inevitable, because I was convinced that there was absolutely nobody in the district except me to help the starving. The people surrounding me were uneducated, unintellectual, callous, for the most part dishonest, or if they were honest, they were unreasonable and unpractical like my wife, for instance. It was impossible to rely on such people, it was impossible to leave the peasants to their fate, so that the only thing left to do was to submit to necessity and see to setting the peasants to rights myself.

I began by making up my mind to give five thousand roubles to the assistance of the starving peasants. And that did not decrease, but only aggravated my uneasiness. As I stood by the window or walked about the rooms I was tormented by the question which had not occurred to me before: how this money was to be spent. To have bread bought and to go from hut to hut distributing it was more than one man could do, to say nothing of the risk that in your haste you might give twice as much to one who was well-fed or to one who was making money out of his fellows as to the hungry. I had no faith in the local officials. All these district captains and tax inspectors were young men, and I distrusted them as I do all young people of today, who are materialistic and without ideals. The District Zemstvo, the Peasant Courts, and all the local institutions, inspired in me not the slightest desire to appeal to them for assistance. I knew that all these institutions who were busily engaged in picking out plums from the Zemstvo and the Government pie had their mouths always wide open for a bite at any other pie that might turn up.

The idea occurred to me to invite the neighbouring landowners and suggest to them to organize in my house something like a committee or a centre to which all subscriptions could be forwarded, and from which assistance and instructions could be distributed throughout the district; such an organization, which would render possible frequent consultations and free control on a big scale, would completely meet my views. But I imagined the lunches, the dinners, the suppers and the noise, the waste of time, the verbosity and the bad taste which that mixed provincial company would inevitably bring into my house, and I made haste to reject my idea.

As for the members of my own household, the last thing I could look for was help or support from them. Of my father's household, of the household of my childhood, once a big and noisy family, no one remained but the governess Mademoiselle Marie, or, as she was now called, Marya Gerasimovna, an absolutely insignificant person. She was a precise little old lady of seventy, who wore a light grey dress and a cap with white ribbons, and looked like a china doll. She always sat in the drawing-room reading.

Whenever I passed by her, she would say, knowing the reason for my brooding:

“What can you expect, Pasha? I told you how it would be before. You can judge from our servants.”

My wife, Natalya Gavrilovna, lived on the lower storey, all the rooms of which she occupied. She slept, had her meals, and received her visitors downstairs in her own rooms, and took not the slightest interest in how I dined, or slept, or whom I saw. Our relations with one another were simple and not strained, but cold, empty, and dreary as relations are between people who have been so long estranged, that even living under the same roof gives no semblance of nearness. There was no trace now of the passionate and tormenting love—at one time sweet, at another bitter as wormwood—which I had once felt for Natalya Gavrilovna. There was nothing left, either, of the outbursts of the past—the loud altercations, upbraidings, complaints, and gusts of hatred which had usually ended in my wife's going abroad or to her own people, and in my sending money in small but frequent instalments that I might sting her pride oftener. (My proud and sensitive wife and her family live at my expense, and much as she would have liked to do so, my wife could not refuse my money: that afforded me satisfaction and was one comfort in my sorrow.) Now when we chanced to meet in the corridor downstairs or in the yard, I bowed, she smiled graciously. We spoke of the weather, said that it seemed time to put in the double windows, and that some one with bells on their harness had driven over the dam. And at such times I read in her face: “I am faithful to you and am not disgracing your good name which you think so much about; you are sensible and do not worry me; we are quits.”

I assured myself that my love had died long ago, that I was too much absorbed in my work to think seriously of my relations with my wife. But, alas! that was only what I imagined. When my wife talked aloud downstairs I listened intently to her voice, though I could not distinguish one word. When she played the piano downstairs I stood up and listened. When her carriage or her saddlehorse was brought to the door, I went to the window and waited to see her out of the house; then I watched her get into her carriage or mount her horse and ride out of the yard. I felt that there was something wrong with me, and was afraid the expression of my eyes or my face might betray me. I looked after my wife and then watched for her to come back that I might see again from the window her face, her shoulders, her fur coat, her hat. I felt dreary, sad, infinitely regretful, and felt inclined in her absence

to walk through her rooms, and longed that the problem that my wife and I had not been able to solve because our characters were incompatible, should solve itself in the natural way as soon as possible—that is, that this beautiful woman of twenty-seven might make haste and grow old, and that my head might be grey and bald.

One day at lunch my bailiff informed me that the Pestrovo peasants had begun to pull the thatch off the roofs to feed their cattle. Marya Gerasimovna looked at me in alarm and perplexity.

“What can I do?” I said to her. “One cannot fight single-handed, and I have never experienced such loneliness as I do now. I would give a great deal to find one man in the whole province on whom I could rely.”

“Invite Ivan Ivanitch,” said Marya Gerasimovna.

“To be sure!” I thought, delighted. “That is an idea! C’est raison,” I hummed, going to my study to write to Ivan Ivanitch. “C’est raison, c’est raison.”



II

Of all the mass of acquaintances who, in this house twenty-five to thirty-five years ago, had eaten, drunk, masqueraded, fallen in love, married, bored us with accounts of their splendid packs of hounds and horses, the only one still living was Ivan Ivanitch Bragin. At one time he had been very active, talkative, noisy, and given to falling in love, and had been famous for his extreme views and for the peculiar charm of his face, which fascinated men as well as women; now he was an old man, had grown corpulent, and was living out his days with neither views nor charm. He came the day after getting my letter, in the evening just as the samovar was brought into the dining-room and little Marya Gerasimovna had begun slicing the lemon.

“I am very glad to see you, my dear fellow,” I said gaily, meeting him. “Why, you are stouter than ever....”

“It isn’t getting stout; it’s swelling,” he answered. “The bees must have stung me.”

With the familiarity of a man laughing at his own fatness, he put his arms round my waist and laid on my breast his big soft head, with the hair combed down on the forehead like a Little Russian’s, and went off into a thin, aged laugh.

“And you go on getting younger,” he said through his laugh. “I wonder what dye you use for your hair and beard; you might let me have some of it.” Sniffing and gasping, he embraced me and kissed me on the cheek. “You might give me some of it,” he repeated. “Why, you are not forty, are you?”

“Alas, I am forty-six!” I said, laughing.

Ivan Ivanitch smelt of tallow candles and cooking, and that suited him. His big, puffy, slow-moving body was swathed in a long frock-coat like a coachman’s full coat, with a high waist, and with hooks and eyes instead of buttons, and it would have been strange if he had smelt of eau-de-Cologne, for instance. In his long, unshaven, bluish double chin, which looked like a thistle, his goggle eyes, his shortness of breath, and in the whole of his clumsy, slovenly figure, in his voice, his laugh, and his words, it was difficult to recognize the graceful, interesting talker who used in old days to make the husbands of the district jealous on account of their wives.

“I am in great need of your assistance, my friend,” I said, when we were sitting in the dining-room, drinking tea. “I want to organize relief for the starving peasants, and I don’t know how to set about it. So perhaps you will be so kind as to advise me.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Ivan Ivanitch, sighing. “To be sure, to be sure, to be sure....”

“I would not have worried you, my dear fellow, but really there is no one here but you I can appeal to. You know what people are like about here.”

“To be sure, to be sure, to be sure.... Yes.”

I thought that as we were going to have a serious, business consultation in which any one might take part, regardless of their position or personal relations, why should I not invite Natalya Gavrilovna.

“Tres faciunt collegium,” I said gaily. “What if we were to ask Natalya Gavrilovna? What do you think? Fenya,” I said, turning to the maid, “ask Natalya Gavrilovna to come upstairs to us, if possible at once. Tell her it’s a very important matter.”

A little later Natalya Gavrilovna came in. I got up to meet her and said:

“Excuse us for troubling you, Natalie. We are discussing a very important matter, and we had the happy thought that we might take advantage of your good advice, which you will not refuse to give us. Please sit down.”

Ivan Ivanitch kissed her hand while she kissed his forehead; then, when we all sat down to the table, he, looking at her tearfully and blissfully, craned forward to her and kissed her hand again. She was dressed in black, her hair was carefully arranged, and she smelt of fresh scent. She had evidently dressed to go out or was expecting somebody. Coming into the dining-room, she held out her hand to me with simple friendliness, and smiled to me as graciously as she did to Ivan Ivanitch—that pleased me; but as she talked she moved her fingers, often and abruptly leaned back in her chair and talked rapidly, and this jerkiness in her words and movements irritated me and reminded me of her native town—Odessa, where the society, men and women alike, had wearied me by its bad taste.

“I want to do something for the famine-stricken peasants,” I began, and after a brief pause I went on: “Money, of course, is a great thing, but to confine oneself to subscribing money, and with that to be satisfied, would be evading the worst of the trouble. Help must take the form of money, but the most important thing is a proper and sound organization. Let us think it over, my friends, and do something.”

Natalya Gavrilovna looked at me inquiringly and shrugged her shoulders as though to say, “What do I know about it?”

“Yes, yes, famine...” muttered Ivan Ivanitch. “Certainly... yes.”

“It’s a serious position,” I said, “and assistance is needed as soon as possible. I imagine the first point among the principles which we must work out ought to be promptitude. We must act on the military principles of judgment, promptitude, and energy.”

“Yes, promptitude...” repeated Ivan Ivanitch in a drowsy and listless voice, as though he were dropping asleep. “Only one can’t do anything. The crops have failed, and so what’s the use of all your judgment and energy?... It’s the elements.... You can’t go against God and fate.”

“Yes, but that’s what man has a head for, to contend against the elements.”

“Eh? Yes... that’s so, to be sure.... Yes.”

Ivan Ivanitch sneezed into his handkerchief, brightened up, and as though he had just woken up, looked round at my wife and me.

“My crops have failed, too.” He laughed a thin little laugh and gave a sly wink as though this were really funny. “No money, no corn, and a yard full of labourers like Count Sheremetyev’s. I want to kick them out, but I haven’t the heart to.”

Natalya Gavrilovna laughed, and began questioning him about his private affairs. Her presence gave me a pleasure such as I had not felt for a long time, and I was afraid to look at her for fear my eyes would betray my secret feeling. Our relations were such that that feeling might seem surprising and ridiculous.

She laughed and talked with Ivan Ivanitch without being in the least disturbed that she was in my room and that I was not laughing.

“And so, my friends, what are we to do?” I asked after waiting for a pause. “I suppose before we do anything else we had better immediately open a subscription-list. We will write to our friends in the capitals and in Odessa, Natalie, and ask them to subscribe. When we have got together a little sum we will begin buying corn and fodder

for the cattle; and you, Ivan Ivanitch, will you be so kind as to undertake distributing the relief? Entirely relying on your characteristic tact and efficiency, we will only venture to express a desire that before you give any relief you make acquaintance with the details of the case on the spot, and also, which is very important, you should be careful that corn should be distributed only to those who are in genuine need, and not to the drunken, the idle, or the dishonest.”

“Yes, yes, yes...” muttered Ivan Ivanitch. “To be sure, to be sure.”

“Well, one won’t get much done with that slobbering wreck,” I thought, and I felt irritated.

“I am sick of these famine-stricken peasants, bother them! It’s nothing but grievances with them!” Ivan Ivanitch went on, sucking the rind of the lemon. “The hungry have a grievance against those who have enough, and those who have enough have a grievance against the hungry. Yes... hunger stupefies and maddens a man and makes him savage; hunger is not a potato. When a man is starving he uses bad language, and steals, and may do worse.... One must realize that.”

Ivan Ivanitch choked over his tea, coughed, and shook all over with a squeaky, smothered laughter.

““There was a battle at Pol... Poltava,”” he brought out, gesticulating with both hands in protest against the laughter and coughing which prevented him from speaking. ““There was a battle at Poltava!’ When three years after the Emancipation we had famine in two districts here, Fyodor Fyodoritch came and invited me to go to him. ‘Come along, come along,’ he persisted, and nothing else would satisfy him. ‘Very well, let us go,’ I said. And, so we set off. It was in the evening; there was snow falling. Towards night we were getting near his place, and suddenly from the wood came ‘bang!’ and another time ‘bang!’ ‘Oh, damn it all!’... I jumped out of the sledge, and I saw in the darkness a man running up to me, knee-deep in the snow. I put my arm round his shoulder, like this, and knocked the gun out of his hand. Then another one turned up; I fetched him a knock on the back of his head so that he grunted and flopped with his nose in the snow. I was a sturdy chap then, my fist was heavy; I disposed of two of them, and when I turned round Fyodor was sitting astride of a third. We did not let our three fine fellows go; we tied their hands behind their backs so that they might not do us or themselves any harm, and took the fools into the kitchen. We were angry with them and at the same time ashamed to look at them; they were peasants we knew, and were good fellows; we were sorry for them. They were quite stupid with terror. One was crying and begging our pardon, the second looked like a wild beast and kept swearing, the third knelt down and began to pray. I said to Fedya: ‘Don’t bear them a grudge; let them go, the rascals!’ He fed them, gave them a bushel of flour each, and let them go: ‘Get along with you,’ he said. So that’s what he did.... The Kingdom of Heaven be his and everlasting peace! He understood and did not bear them a grudge; but there were some who did, and how many people they ruined! Yes... Why, over the affair at the Klotchkovs’ tavern eleven men were sent to the disciplinary battalion. Yes.... And now, look, it’s the same thing. Anisyin, the investigating magistrate, stayed the night with me last Thursday, and he told me about some landowner.... Yes.... They took the wall of his barn to pieces at night and carried off twenty sacks of rye. When the gentleman heard that such a crime had been committed, he sent a telegram to the Governor and another to the police captain, another to the investigating magistrate!... Of course, every one is afraid of a man who is fond of litigation. The authorities were in a flutter and there was a general hubbub. Two villages were searched.”

“Excuse me, Ivan Ivanitch,” I said. “Twenty sacks of rye were stolen from me, and it was I who telegraphed to the Governor. I telegraphed to Petersburg, too. But it was by no means out of love for litigation, as you are pleased to express it, and not because I bore them a grudge. I look at every subject from the point of view of principle. From the point of view of the law, theft is the same whether a man is hungry or not.”

“Yes, yes...” muttered Ivan Ivanitch in confusion. “Of course... To be sure, yes.”

Natalya Gavrilovna blushed.

“There are people...” she said and stopped; she made an effort to seem indifferent, but she could not keep it up, and looked into my eyes with the hatred that I know so well. “There are people,” she said, “for whom famine and human suffering exist simply that they may vent their hateful and despicable temperaments upon them.”

I was confused and shrugged my shoulders.

“I meant to say generally,” she went on, “that there are people who are quite indifferent and completely devoid of all feeling of sympathy, yet who do not pass human suffering by, but insist on meddling for fear people should be able to do without them. Nothing is sacred for their vanity.”

“There are people,” I said softly, “who have an angelic character, but who express their glorious ideas in such a form that it is difficult to distinguish the angel from an Odessa market-woman.”

I must confess it was not happily expressed.

My wife looked at me as though it cost her a great effort to hold her tongue. Her sudden outburst, and then her inappropriate eloquence on the subject of my desire to help the famine-stricken peasants, were, to say the least, out of place; when I had invited her to come upstairs I had expected quite a different attitude to me and my intentions. I cannot say definitely what I had expected, but I had been agreeably agitated by the expectation. Now I saw that to go on speaking about the famine would be difficult and perhaps stupid.

“Yes...” Ivan Ivanitch muttered inappropriately. “Burov, the merchant, must have four hundred thousand at least. I said to him: ‘Hand over one or two thousand to the famine. You can’t take it with you when you die, anyway.’ He was offended. But we all have to die, you know. Death is not a potato.”

A silence followed again.

“So there’s nothing left for me but to reconcile myself to loneliness,” I sighed. “One cannot fight single-handed. Well, I will try single-handed. Let us hope that my campaign against the famine will be more successful than my campaign against indifference.”

“I am expected downstairs,” said Natalya Gavrilovna.

She got up from the table and turned to Ivan Ivanitch.

“So you will look in upon me downstairs for a minute? I won’t say good-bye to you.”

And she went away.

Ivan Ivanitch was now drinking his seventh glass of tea, choking, smacking his lips, and sucking sometimes his moustache, sometimes the lemon. He was muttering something drowsily and listlessly, and I did not listen but waited for him to go. At last, with an expression that suggested that he had only come to me to take a cup of tea, he got up and began to take leave. As I saw him out I said:

“And so you have given me no advice.”

“Eh? I am a feeble, stupid old man,” he answered. “What use would my advice be? You shouldn’t worry yourself.... I really don’t know why you worry yourself. Don’t disturb yourself, my dear fellow! Upon my word, there’s no need,” he whispered genuinely and affectionately, soothing me as though I were a child. “Upon my word, there’s no need.”

“No need? Why, the peasants are pulling the thatch off their huts, and they say there is typhus somewhere already.”

“Well, what of it? If there are good crops next year, they’ll thatch them again, and if we die of typhus others will live after us. Anyway, we have to die—if not now, later. Don’t worry yourself, my dear.”

“I can’t help worrying myself,” I said irritably.

We were standing in the dimly lighted vestibule. Ivan Ivanitch suddenly took me by the elbow, and, preparing to say something evidently very important, looked at me in silence for a couple of minutes.

“Pavel Andreitch!” he said softly, and suddenly in his puffy, set face and dark eyes there was a gleam of the expression for which he had once been famous and which was truly charming. “Pavel Andreitch, I speak to you as a friend: try to be different! One is ill at ease with you, my dear fellow, one really is!”

He looked intently into my face; the charming expression faded away, his eyes grew dim again, and he sniffed and muttered feebly:

“Yes, yes.... Excuse an old man.... It’s all nonsense... yes.”

As he slowly descended the staircase, spreading out his hands to balance himself and showing me his huge, bulky back and red neck, he gave me the unpleasant impression of a sort of crab.

“You ought to go away, your Excellency,” he muttered. “To Petersburg or abroad.... Why should you live here and waste your golden days? You are young, wealthy, and healthy.... Yes.... Ah, if I were younger I would whisk away like a hare, and snap my fingers at everything.”



III

My wife’s outburst reminded me of our married life together. In old days after every such outburst we felt irresistibly drawn to each other; we would meet and let off all the dynamite that had accumulated in our souls. And now after Ivan Ivanitch had gone away I had a strong impulse to go to my wife. I wanted to go downstairs and tell her that her behaviour at tea had been an insult to me, that she was cruel, petty, and that her plebeian mind had never risen to a comprehension of what I was saying and of what I was doing. I walked about the rooms a long time thinking of what I would say to her and trying to guess what she would say to me.

That evening, after Ivan Ivanitch went away, I felt in a peculiarly irritating form the uneasiness which had worried me of late. I could not sit down or sit still, but kept walking about in the rooms that were lighted up and keeping near to the one in which Marya Gerasimovna was sitting. I had a feeling very much like that which I had on the North Sea during a storm when every one thought that our ship, which had no freight nor ballast, would overturn. And that evening I understood that my uneasiness was not disappointment, as I had supposed, but a different feeling, though what exactly I could not say, and that irritated me more than ever.

“I will go to her,” I decided. “I can think of a pretext. I shall say that I want to see Ivan Ivanitch; that will be all.”

I went downstairs and walked without haste over the carpeted floor through the vestibule and the hall. Ivan Ivanitch was sitting on the sofa in the drawing-room; he was drinking tea again and muttering something. My wife was standing opposite to him and holding on to the back of a chair. There was a gentle, sweet, and docile expression on her face, such as one sees on the faces of people listening to crazy saints or holy men when a peculiar hidden significance is imagined in their vague words and mutterings. There was something morbid, something of a nun’s exaltation, in my wife’s expression and attitude; and her low-pitched, half-dark rooms with their old-fashioned furniture, with her birds asleep in their cages, and with a smell of geranium, reminded me of the rooms of some abbess or pious old lady.

I went into the drawing-room. My wife showed neither surprise nor confusion, and looked at me calmly and serenely, as though she had known I should come.

“I beg your pardon,” I said softly. “I am so glad you have not gone yet, Ivan Ivanitch. I forgot to ask you, do you know the Christian name of the president of our Zemstvo?”

“Andrey Stanislavovitch. Yes....”

“Merci,” I said, took out my notebook, and wrote it down.

There followed a silence during which my wife and Ivan Ivanitch were probably waiting for me to go; my wife did not believe that I wanted to know the president’s name—I saw that from her eyes.

“Well, I must be going, my beauty,” muttered Ivan Ivanitch, after I had walked once or twice across the drawing-room and sat down by the fireplace.

“No,” said Natalya Gavrilovna quickly, touching his hand. “Stay another quarter of an hour.... Please do!”

Evidently she did not wish to be left alone with me without a witness.

“Oh, well, I’ll wait a quarter of an hour, too,” I thought.

“Why, it’s snowing!” I said, getting up and looking out of window. “A good fall of snow! Ivan Ivanitch”—I went on walking about the room—“I do regret not being a sportsman. I can imagine what a pleasure it must be coursing hares or hunting wolves in snow like this!”

My wife, standing still, watched my movements, looking out of the corner of her eyes without turning her head. She looked as though she thought I had a sharp knife or a revolver in my pocket.

“Ivan Ivanitch, do take me out hunting some day,” I went on softly. “I shall be very, very grateful to you.”

At that moment a visitor came into the room. He was a tall, thick-set gentleman whom I did not know, with a bald head, a big fair beard, and little eyes. From his baggy, crumpled clothes and his manners I took him to be a parish clerk or a teacher, but my wife introduced him to me as Dr. Sobol.

“Very, very glad to make your acquaintance,” said the doctor in a loud tenor voice, shaking hands with me warmly, with a naive smile. “Very glad!”

He sat down at the table, took a glass of tea, and said in a loud voice:

“Do you happen to have a drop of rum or brandy? Have pity on me, Olya, and look in the cupboard; I am frozen,” he said, addressing the maid.

I sat down by the fire again, looked on, listened, and from time to time put in a word in the general conversation. My wife smiled graciously to the visitors and kept a sharp lookout on me, as though I were a wild beast. She was oppressed by my presence, and this aroused in me jealousy, annoyance, and an obstinate desire to wound her. “Wife, these snug rooms, the place by the fire,” I thought, “are mine, have been mine for years, but some crazy Ivan Ivanitch or Sobol has for some reason more right to them than I. Now I see my wife, not out of window, but close at hand, in ordinary home surroundings that I feel the want of now I am growing older, and, in spite of her hatred for me, I miss her as years ago in my childhood I used to miss my mother and my nurse. And I feel that now, on the verge of old age, my love for her is purer and loftier than it was in the past; and that is why I want to go up to her, to stamp hard on her toe with my heel, to hurt her and smile as I do it.”

“Monsieur Marten,” I said, addressing the doctor, “how many hospitals have we in the district?”

“Sobol,” my wife corrected.

“Two,” answered Sobol.

“And how many deaths are there every year in each hospital?”

“Pavel Andreitch, I want to speak to you,” said my wife.

She apologized to the visitors and went to the next room. I got up and followed her.

“You will go upstairs to your own rooms this minute,” she said.

“You are ill-bred,” I said to her.

“You will go upstairs to your own rooms this very minute,” she repeated sharply, and she looked into my face with hatred.

She was standing so near that if I had stooped a little my beard would have touched her face.

“What is the matter?” I asked. “What harm have I done all at once?”

Her chin quivered, she hastily wiped her eyes, and, with a cursory glance at the looking-glass, whispered:

“The old story is beginning all over again. Of course you won’t go away. Well, do as you like. I’ll go away myself, and you stay.”

We returned to the drawing-room, she with a resolute face, while I shrugged my shoulders and tried to smile. There were some more visitors—an elderly lady and a young man in spectacles. Without greeting the new arrivals or taking leave of the others, I went off to my own rooms.

After what had happened at tea and then again downstairs, it became clear to me that our “family happiness,” which we had begun to forget about in the course of the last two years, was through some absurd and trivial reason beginning all over again, and that neither I nor my wife could now stop ourselves; and that next day or the day after, the outburst of hatred would, as I knew by experience of past years, be followed by something revolting which would upset the whole order of our lives. “So it seems that during these two years we have grown no wiser, colder, or calmer,” I thought as I began walking about the rooms. “So there will again be tears, outcries, curses, packing up, going abroad, then the continual sickly fear that she will disgrace me with some coxcomb out there, Italian or Russian, refusing a passport, letters, utter loneliness, missing her, and in five years old age, grey hairs.” I walked about, imagining what was really impossible—her, grown handsomer, stouter, embracing a man I did not know. By now convinced that that would certainly happen, ““Why,” I asked myself, “Why, in one of our long past quarrels, had not I given her a divorce, or why had she not at that time left me altogether? I should not have had this yearning for her now, this hatred, this anxiety; and I should have lived out my life quietly, working and not worrying about anything.”

A carriage with two lamps drove into the yard, then a big sledge with three horses. My wife was evidently having a party.

Till midnight everything was quiet downstairs and I heard nothing, but at midnight there was a sound of moving chairs and a clatter of crockery. So there was supper. Then the chairs moved again, and through the floor I heard a noise; they seemed to be shouting hurrah. Marya Gerasimovna was already asleep and I was quite alone in the whole upper storey; the portraits of my forefathers, cruel, insignificant people, looked at me from the walls of the drawing-room, and the reflection of my lamp in the window winked unpleasantly. And with a feeling of jealousy and envy for what was going on downstairs, I listened and thought: “I am master here; if I like, I can in a moment turn out all that fine crew.” But I knew that all that was nonsense, that I could not turn out any one, and the word “master” had no meaning. One may think oneself master, married, rich, a kammer-junker, as much as one likes, and at the same time not know what it means.

After supper some one downstairs began singing in a tenor voice.

“Why, nothing special has happened,” I tried to persuade myself. “Why am I so upset? I won’t go downstairs tomorrow, that’s all; and that will be the end of our quarrel.”

At a quarter past one I went to bed.

“Have the visitors downstairs gone?” I asked Alexey as he was undressing me.

“Yes, sir, they’ve gone.”

“And why were they shouting hurrah?”

“Alexey Dmitritch Mahonov subscribed for the famine fund a thousand bushels of flour and a thousand roubles. And the old lady—I don’t know her name—promised to set up a soup kitchen on her estate to feed a hundred and fifty people. Thank God... Natalya Gavrilovna has been pleased to arrange that all the gentry should assemble every Friday.”

“To assemble here, downstairs?”

“Yes, sir. Before supper they read a list: since August up to today Natalya Gavrilovna has collected eight thousand roubles, besides corn. Thank God.... What I think is that if our mistress does take trouble for the salvation of her soul, she will soon collect a lot. There are plenty of rich people here.”

Dismissing Alexey, I put out the light and drew the bedclothes over my head.

“After all, why am I so troubled?” I thought. “What force draws me to the starving peasants like a butterfly to a flame? I don’t know them, I don’t understand them; I have never seen them and I don’t like them. Why this uneasiness?”

I suddenly crossed myself under the quilt.

“But what a woman she is!” I said to myself, thinking of my wife. “There’s a regular committee held in the house without my knowing. Why this secrecy? Why this conspiracy? What have I done to them? Ivan Ivanitch is right—I must go away.”

Next morning I woke up firmly resolved to go away. The events of the previous day—the conversation at tea, my wife, Sobol, the supper, my apprehensions—worried me, and I felt glad to think of getting away from the surroundings which reminded me of all that. While I was drinking my coffee the bailiff gave me a long report on various matters. The most agreeable item he saved for the last.

“The thieves who stole our rye have been found,” he announced with a smile. “The magistrate arrested three peasants at Pestrovo yesterday.”

“Go away!” I shouted at him; and a propos of nothing, I picked up the cake-basket and flung it on the floor.



IV

After lunch I rubbed my hands, and thought I must go to my wife and tell her that I was going away. Why? Who cared? Nobody cares, I answered, but why shouldn’t I tell her, especially as it would give her nothing but pleasure? Besides, to go away after our yesterday’s quarrel without saying a word would not be quite tactful: she might think that I was frightened of her, and perhaps the thought that she has driven me out of my house may weigh upon her. It would be just as well, too, to tell her that I subscribe five thousand, and to give her some advice about the organization, and to warn her that her inexperience in such a complicated and responsible matter might lead to most lamentable results. In short, I wanted to see my wife, and while I thought of various pretexts for going to her, I had a firm conviction in my heart that I should do so.

It was still light when I went in to her, and the lamps had not yet been lighted. She was sitting in her study, which led from the drawing-room to her bedroom, and, bending low over the table, was writing something quickly. Seeing me, she started, got up from the table, and remained standing in an attitude such as to screen her papers from me.

“I beg your pardon, I have only come for a minute,” I said, and, I don’t know why, I was overcome with embarrassment. “I have learnt by chance that you are organizing relief for the famine, Natalie.”

“Yes, I am. But that’s my business,” she answered.

“Yes, it is your business,” I said softly. “I am glad of it, for it just fits in with my intentions. I beg your permission to take part in it.”

“Forgive me, I cannot let you do it,” she said in response, and looked away.

“Why not, Natalie?” I said quietly. “Why not? I, too, am well fed and I, too, want to help the hungry.”

“I don’t know what it has to do with you,” she said with a contemptuous smile, shrugging her shoulders. “Nobody asks you.”

“Nobody asks you, either, and yet you have got up a regular committee in my house,” I said.

“I am asked, but you can have my word for it no one will ever ask you. Go and help where you are not known.”

“For God’s sake, don’t talk to me in that tone.” I tried to be mild, and besought myself most earnestly not to lose my temper. For the first few minutes I felt glad to be with my wife. I felt an atmosphere of youth, of home, of feminine softness, of the most refined elegance—exactly what was lacking on my floor and in my life altogether. My wife was wearing a pink flannel dressing-gown; it made her look much younger, and gave a softness to her rapid and sometimes abrupt movements. Her beautiful dark hair, the mere sight of which at one time stirred me to passion, had from sitting so long with her head bent come loose from the comb and was untidy, but, to my eyes, that only made it look more rich and luxuriant. All this, though is banal to the point of vulgarity. Before me stood

an ordinary woman, perhaps neither beautiful nor elegant, but this was my wife with whom I had once lived, and with whom I should have been living to this day if it had not been for her unfortunate character; she was the one human being on the terrestrial globe whom I loved. At this moment, just before going away, when I knew that I should no longer see her even through the window, she seemed to me fascinating even as she was, cold and forbidding, answering me with a proud and contemptuous mockery. I was proud of her, and confessed to myself that to go away from her was terrible and impossible.

“Pavel Andreitch,” she said after a brief silence, “for two years we have not interfered with each other but have lived quietly. Why do you suddenly feel it necessary to go back to the past? Yesterday you came to insult and humiliate me,” she went on, raising her voice, and her face flushed and her eyes flamed with hatred; “but restrain yourself; do not do it, Pavel Andreitch! Tomorrow I will send in a petition and they will give me a passport, and I will go away; I will go! I will go! I’ll go into a convent, into a widows’ home, into an almshouse....”

“Into a lunatic asylum!” I cried, not able to restrain myself.

“Well, even into a lunatic asylum! That would be better, that would be better,” she cried, with flashing eyes. “When I was in Pestrovo today I envied the sick and starving peasant women because they are not living with a man like you. They are free and honest, while, thanks to you, I am a parasite, I am perishing in idleness, I eat your bread, I spend your money, and I repay you with my liberty and a fidelity which is of no use to any one. Because you won’t give me a passport, I must respect your good name, though it doesn’t exist.”

I had to keep silent. Clenching my teeth, I walked quickly into the drawing-room, but turned back at once and said:

“I beg you earnestly that there should be no more assemblies, plots, and meetings of conspirators in my house! I only admit to my house those with whom I am acquainted, and let all your crew find another place to do it if they want to take up philanthropy. I can’t allow people at midnight in my house to be shouting hurrah at successfully exploiting an hysterical woman like you!”

My wife, pale and wringing her hands, took a rapid stride across the room, uttering a prolonged moan as though she had toothache. With a wave of my hand, I went into the drawing-room. I was choking with rage, and at the same time I was trembling with terror that I might not restrain myself, and that I might say or do something which I might regret all my life. And I clenched my hands tight, hoping to hold myself in.

After drinking some water and recovering my calm a little, I went back to my wife. She was standing in the same attitude as before, as though barring my approach to the table with the papers. Tears were slowly trickling down her pale, cold face. I paused then and said to her bitterly but without anger:

“How you misunderstand me! How unjust you are to me! I swear upon my honour I came to you with the best of motives, with nothing but the desire to do good!”

“Pavel Andreitch!” she said, clasping her hands on her bosom, and her face took on the agonized, imploring expression with which frightened, weeping children beg not to be punished, “I know perfectly well that you will refuse me, but still I beg you. Force yourself to do one kind action in your life. I entreat you, go away from here! That’s the only thing you can do for the starving peasants. Go away, and I will forgive you everything, everything!”

“There is no need for you to insult me, Natalie,” I sighed, feeling a sudden rush of humility. “I had already made up my mind to go away, but I won’t go until I have done something for the peasants. It’s my duty!”

“Ach!” she said softly with an impatient frown. “You can make an excellent bridge or railway, but you can do nothing for the starving peasants. Do understand!”

“Indeed? Yesterday you reproached me with indifference and with being devoid of the feeling of compassion. How well you know me!” I laughed. “You believe in God—well, God is my witness that I am worried day and night....”

“I see that you are worried, but the famine and compassion have nothing to do with it. You are worried because the starving peasants can get on without you, and because the Zemstvo, and in fact every one who is helping them, does not need your guidance.”

I was silent, trying to suppress my irritation. Then I said:

“I came to speak to you on business. Sit down. Please sit down.”

She did not sit down.

“I beg you to sit down,” I repeated, and I motioned her to a chair.

She sat down. I sat down, too, thought a little, and said:

“I beg you to consider earnestly what I am saying. Listen.... Moved by love for your fellow-creatures, you have undertaken the organization of famine relief. I have nothing against that, of course; I am completely in sympathy with you, and am prepared to co-operate with you in every way, whatever our relations may be. But, with all my respect for your mind and your heart... and your heart,” I repeated, “I cannot allow such a difficult, complex, and responsible matter as the organization of relief to be left in your hands entirely. You are a woman, you are inexperienced, you know nothing of life, you are too confiding and expansive. You have surrounded yourself with assistants whom you know nothing about. I am not exaggerating if I say that under these conditions your work will inevitably lead to two deplorable consequences. To begin with, our district will be left unrelieved; and, secondly, you will have to pay for your mistakes and those of your assistants, not only with your purse, but with your reputation. The money deficit and other losses I could, no doubt, make good, but who could restore you your good name? When through lack of proper supervision and oversight there is a rumour that you, and consequently I, have made two hundred thousand over the famine fund, will your assistants come to your aid?”

She said nothing.

“Not from vanity, as you say,” I went on, “but simply that the starving peasants may not be left unrelieved and your reputation may not be injured, I feel it my moral duty to take part in your work.”

“Speak more briefly,” said my wife.

“You will be so kind,” I went on, “as to show me what has been subscribed so far and what you have spent. Then inform me daily of every fresh subscription in money or kind, and of every fresh outlay. You will also give me, Natalie, the list of your helpers. Perhaps they are quite decent people; I don’t doubt it; but, still, it is absolutely necessary to make inquiries.”

She was silent. I got up, and walked up and down the room.

“Let us set to work, then,” I said, and I sat down to her table.

“Are you in earnest?” she asked, looking at me in alarm and bewilderment.

“Natalie, do be reasonable!” I said appealingly, seeing from her face that she meant to protest. “I beg you, trust my experience and my sense of honour.”

“I don’t understand what you want.”

“Show me how much you have collected and how much you have spent.”

“I have no secrets. Any one may see. Look.”

On the table lay five or six school exercise books, several sheets of notepaper covered with writing, a map of the district, and a number of pieces of paper of different sizes. It was getting dusk. I lighted a candle.

“Excuse me, I don’t see anything yet,” I said, turning over the leaves of the exercise books. “Where is the account of the receipt of money subscriptions?”

“That can be seen from the subscription lists.”

“Yes, but you must have an account,” I said, smiling at her naivete. “Where are the letters accompanying the subscriptions in money or in kind? Pardon, a little practical advice, Natalie: it’s absolutely necessary to keep those

letters. You ought to number each letter and make a special note of it in a special record. You ought to do the same with your own letters. But I will do all that myself.”

“Do so, do so...” she said.

I was very much pleased with myself. Attracted by this living interesting work, by the little table, the naive exercise books and the charm of doing this work in my wife’s society, I was afraid that my wife would suddenly hinder me and upset everything by some sudden whim, and so I was in haste and made an effort to attach no consequence to the fact that her lips were quivering, and that she was looking about her with a helpless and frightened air like a wild creature in a trap.

“I tell you what, Natalie,” I said without looking at her; “let me take all these papers and exercise books upstairs to my study. There I will look through them and tell you what I think about it tomorrow. Have you any more papers?” I asked, arranging the exercise books and sheets of papers in piles.

“Take them, take them all!” said my wife, helping me to arrange them, and big tears ran down her cheeks. “Take it all! That’s all that was left me in life.... Take the last.”

“Ach! Natalie, Natalie!” I sighed reproachfully.

She opened the drawer in the table and began flinging the papers out of it on the table at random, poking me in the chest with her elbow and brushing my face with her hair; as she did so, copper coins kept dropping upon my knees and on the floor.

“Take everything!” she said in a husky voice.

When she had thrown out the papers she walked away from me, and putting both hands to her head, she flung herself on the couch. I picked up the money, put it back in the drawer, and locked it up that the servants might not be led into dishonesty; then I gathered up all the papers and went off with them. As I passed my wife I stopped and, looking at her back and shaking shoulders, I said:

“What a baby you are, Natalie! Fie, fie! Listen, Natalie: when you realize how serious and responsible a business it is you will be the first to thank me. I assure you you will.”

In my own room I set to work without haste. The exercise books were not bound, the pages were not numbered. The entries were put in all sorts of handwritings; evidently any one who liked had a hand in managing the books. In the record of the subscriptions in kind there was no note of their money value. But, excuse me, I thought, the rye which is now worth one rouble fifteen kopecks may be worth two roubles fifteen kopecks in two months’ time! Was that the way to do things? Then, “Given to A. M. Sobol 32 roubles.” When was it given? For what purpose was it given? Where was the receipt? There was nothing to show, and no making anything of it. In case of legal proceedings, these papers would only obscure the case.

“How naive she is!” I thought with surprise. “What a child!”

I felt both vexed and amused.



V

My wife had already collected eight thousand; with my five it would be thirteen thousand. For a start that was very good. The business which had so worried and interested me was at last in my hands; I was doing what the others would not and could not do; I was doing my duty, organizing the relief fund in a practical and business-like way.

Everything seemed to be going in accordance with my desires and intentions; but why did my feeling of uneasiness persist? I spent four hours over my wife’s papers, making out their meaning and correcting her mistakes, but instead of feeling soothed, I felt as though some one were standing behind me and rubbing my back with a rough hand. What was it I wanted? The organization of the relief fund had come into trustworthy hands, the hungry would be fed—what more was wanted?

The four hours of this light work for some reason exhausted me, so that I could not sit bending over the table nor write. From below I heard from time to time a smothered moan; it was my wife sobbing. Alexey, invariably meek, sleepy, and sanctimonious, kept coming up to the table to see to the candles, and looked at me somewhat strangely.

“Yes, I must go away,” I decided at last, feeling utterly exhausted. “As far as possible from these agreeable impressions! I will set off tomorrow.”

I gathered together the papers and exercise books, and went down to my wife. As, feeling quite worn out and shattered, I held the papers and the exercise books to my breast with both hands, and passing through my bedroom saw my trunks, the sound of weeping reached me through the floor.

“Are you a kammer-junker?” a voice whispered in my ear. “That’s a very pleasant thing. But yet you are a reptile.”

“It’s all nonsense, nonsense, nonsense,” I muttered as I went downstairs. “Nonsense... and it’s nonsense, too, that I am actuated by vanity or a love of display.... What rubbish! Am I going to get a decoration for working for the peasants or be made the director of a department? Nonsense, nonsense! And who is there to show off to here in the country?”

I was tired, frightfully tired, and something kept whispering in my ear: “Very pleasant. But, still, you are a reptile.” For some reason I remembered a line out of an old poem I knew as a child: “How pleasant it is to be good!”

My wife was lying on the couch in the same attitude, on her face and with her hands clutching her head. She was crying. A maid was standing beside her with a perplexed and frightened face. I sent the maid away, laid the papers on the table, thought a moment and said:

“Here are all your papers, Natalie. It’s all in order, it’s all capital, and I am very much pleased. I am going away tomorrow.”

She went on crying. I went into the drawing-room and sat there in the dark. My wife’s sobs, her sighs, accused me of something, and to justify myself I remembered the whole of our quarrel, starting from my unhappy idea of inviting my wife to our consultation and ending with the exercise books and these tears. It was an ordinary attack of our conjugal hatred, senseless and unseemly, such as had been frequent during our married life, but what had the starving peasants to do with it? How could it have happened that they had become a bone of contention between us? It was just as though pursuing one another we had accidentally run up to the altar and had carried on a quarrel there.

“Natalie,” I said softly from the drawing-room, “hush, hush!”

To cut short her weeping and make an end of this agonizing state of affairs, I ought to have gone up to my wife and comforted her, caressed her, or apologized; but how could I do it so that she would believe me? How could I persuade the wild duck, living in captivity and hating me, that it was dear to me, and that I felt for its sufferings? I had never known my wife, so I had never known how to talk to her or what to talk about. Her appearance I knew very well and appreciated it as it deserved, but her spiritual, moral world, her mind, her outlook on life, her frequent changes of mood, her eyes full of hatred, her disdain, the scope and variety of her reading which sometimes struck me, or, for instance, the nun-like expression I had seen on her face the day before—all that was unknown and incomprehensible to me. When in my collisions with her I tried to define what sort of a person she was, my psychology went no farther than deciding that she was giddy, impractical, ill-tempered, guided by feminine logic; and it seemed to me that that was quite sufficient. But now that she was crying I had a passionate desire to know more.

The weeping ceased. I went up to my wife. She sat up on the couch, and, with her head propped in both hands, looked fixedly and dreamily at the fire.

“I am going away tomorrow morning,” I said.

She said nothing. I walked across the room, sighed, and said:

“Natalie, when you begged me to go away, you said: ‘I will forgive you everything, everything’ So you think I have wronged you. I beg you calmly and in brief terms to formulate the wrong I’ve done you.”

“I am worn out. Afterwards, some time...” said my wife.

“How am I to blame?” I went on. “What have I done? Tell me: you are young and beautiful, you want to live, and I am nearly twice your age and hated by you, but is that my fault? I didn’t marry you by force. But if you want to live in freedom, go; I’ll give you your liberty. You can go and love whom you please.... I will give you a divorce.”

“That’s not what I want,” she said. “You know I used to love you and always thought of myself as older than you. That’s all nonsense.... You are not to blame for being older or for my being younger, or that I might be able to love some one else if I were free; but because you are a difficult person, an egoist, and hate every one.”

“Perhaps so. I don’t know,” I said.

“Please go away. You want to go on at me till the morning, but I warn you I am quite worn out and cannot answer you. You promised me to go to town. I am very grateful; I ask nothing more.”

My wife wanted me to go away, but it was not easy for me to do that. I was dispirited and I dreaded the big, cheerless, chill rooms that I was so weary of. Sometimes when I had an ache or a pain as a child, I used to huddle up to my mother or my nurse, and when I hid my face in the warm folds of their dress, it seemed to me as though I were hiding from the pain. And in the same way it seemed to me now that I could only hide from my uneasiness in this little room beside my wife. I sat down and screened away the light from my eyes with my hand.... There was a stillness.

“How are you to blame?” my wife said after a long silence, looking at me with red eyes that gleamed with tears. “You are very well educated and very well bred, very honest, just, and high-principled, but in you the effect of all that is that wherever you go you bring suffocation, oppression, something insulting and humiliating to the utmost degree. You have a straightforward way of looking at things, and so you hate the whole world. You hate those who have faith, because faith is an expression of ignorance and lack of culture, and at the same time you hate those who have no faith for having no faith and no ideals; you hate old people for being conservative and behind the times, and young people for free-thinking. The interests of the peasantry and of Russia are dear to you, and so you hate the peasants because you suspect every one of them of being a thief and a robber. You hate every one. You are just, and always take your stand on your legal rights, and so you are always at law with the peasants and your neighbours. You have had twenty bushels of rye stolen, and your love of order has made you complain of the peasants to the Governor and all the local authorities, and to send a complaint of the local authorities to Petersburg. Legal justice!” said my wife, and she laughed. “On the ground of your legal rights and in the interests of morality, you refuse to give me a passport. Law and morality is such that a self-respecting healthy young woman has to spend her life in idleness, in depression, and in continual apprehension, and to receive in return board and lodging from a man she does not love. You have a thorough knowledge of the law, you are very honest and just, you respect marriage and family life, and the effect of all that is that all your life you have not done one kind action, that every one hates you, that you are on bad terms with every one, and the seven years that you have been married you’ve only lived seven months with your wife. You’ve had no wife and I’ve had no husband. To live with a man like you is impossible; there is no way of doing it. In the early years I was frightened with you, and now I am ashamed.... That’s how my best years have been wasted. When I fought with you I ruined my temper, grew shrewish, coarse, timid, mistrustful.... Oh, but what’s the use of talking! As though you wanted to understand! Go upstairs, and God be with you!”

My wife lay down on the couch and sank into thought.

“And how splendid, how enviable life might have been!” she said softly, looking reflectively into the fire. “What a life it might have been! There’s no bringing it back now.”

Any one who has lived in the country in winter and knows those long dreary, still evenings when even the dogs are too bored to bark and even the clocks seem weary of ticking, and any one who on such evenings has been troubled by awakening conscience and has moved restlessly about, trying now to smother his conscience, now to interpret it, will understand the distraction and the pleasure my wife’s voice gave me as it sounded in the snug little room, telling me I was a bad man. I did not understand what was wanted of me by my conscience, and my wife, translating it in her feminine way, made clear to me in the meaning of my agitation. As often before in the

moments of intense uneasiness, I guessed that the whole secret lay, not in the starving peasants, but in my not being the sort of a man I ought to be.

My wife got up with an effort and came up to me.

“Pavel Andreitch,” she said, smiling mournfully, “forgive me, I don’t believe you: you are not going away, but I will ask you one more favour. Call this”—she pointed to her papers—“self-deception, feminine logic, a mistake, as you like; but do not hinder me. It’s all that is left me in life.” She turned away and paused. “Before this I had nothing. I have wasted my youth in fighting with you. Now I have caught at this and am living; I am happy.... It seems to me that I have found in this a means of justifying my existence.”

“Natalie, you are a good woman, a woman of ideas,” I said, looking at my wife enthusiastically, “and everything you say and do is intelligent and fine.”

I walked about the room to conceal my emotion.

“Natalie,” I went on a minute later, “before I go away, I beg of you as a special favour, help me to do something for the starving peasants!”

“What can I do?” said my wife, shrugging her shoulders. “Here’s the subscription list.”

She rummaged among the papers and found the subscription list.

“Subscribe some money,” she said, and from her tone I could see that she did not attach great importance to her subscription list; “that is the only way in which you can take part in the work.”

I took the list and wrote: “Anonymous, 5,000.”

In this “anonymous” there was something wrong, false, conceited, but I only realized that when I noticed that my wife flushed very red and hurriedly thrust the list into the heap of papers. We both felt ashamed; I felt that I must at all costs efface this clumsiness at once, or else I should feel ashamed afterwards, in the train and at Petersburg. But how efface it? What was I to say?

“I fully approve of what you are doing, Natalie,” I said genuinely, “and I wish you every success. But allow me at parting to give you one piece of advice, Natalie; be on your guard with Sobol, and with your assistants generally, and don’t trust them blindly. I don’t say they are not honest, but they are not gentlefolks; they are people with no ideas, no ideals, no faith, with no aim in life, no definite principles, and the whole object of their life is comprised in the rouble. Rouble, rouble, rouble!” I sighed. “They are fond of getting money easily, for nothing, and in that respect the better educated they are the more they are to be dreaded.”

My wife went to the couch and lay down.

“Ideas,” she brought out, listlessly and reluctantly, “ideas, ideals, objects of life, principles....you always used to use those words when you wanted to insult or humiliate some one, or say something unpleasant. Yes, that’s your way: if with your views and such an attitude to people you are allowed to take part in anything, you would destroy it from the first day. It’s time you understand that.”

She sighed and paused.

“It’s coarseness of character, Pavel Andreitch,” she said. “You are well-bred and educated, but what a... Scythian you are in reality! That’s because you lead a cramped life full of hatred, see no one, and read nothing but your engineering books. And, you know, there are good people, good books! Yes... but I am exhausted and it wearies me to talk. I ought to be in bed.”

“So I am going away, Natalie,” I said.

“Yes... yes.... Merci....”

I stood still for a little while, then went upstairs. An hour later—it was half-past one—I went downstairs again with a candle in my hand to speak to my wife. I didn’t know what I was going to say to her, but I felt that I must

say some thing very important and necessary. She was not in her study, the door leading to her bedroom was closed.

“Natalie, are you asleep?” I asked softly.

There was no answer.

I stood near the door, sighed, and went into the drawing-room. There I sat down on the sofa, put out the candle, and remained sitting in the dark till the dawn.



VI

I went to the station at ten o'clock in the morning. There was no frost, but snow was falling in big wet flakes and an unpleasant damp wind was blowing.

We passed a pond and then a birch copse, and then began going uphill along the road which I could see from my window. I turned round to take a last look at my house, but I could see nothing for the snow. Soon afterwards dark huts came into sight ahead of us as in a fog. It was Pestrovo.

“If I ever go out of my mind, Pestrovo will be the cause of it,” I thought. “It persecutes me.”

We came out into the village street. All the roofs were intact, not one of them had been pulled to pieces; so my bailiff had told a lie. A boy was pulling along a little girl and a baby in a sledge. Another boy of three, with his head wrapped up like a peasant woman's and with huge mufflers on his hands, was trying to catch the flying snowflakes on his tongue, and laughing. Then a wagon loaded with fagots came toward us and a peasant walking beside it, and there was no telling whether his beard was white or whether it was covered with snow. He recognized my coachman, smiled at him and said something, and mechanically took off his hat to me. The dogs ran out of the yards and looked inquisitively at my horses. Everything was quiet, ordinary, as usual. The emigrants had returned, there was no bread; in the huts “some were laughing, some were delirious”; but it all looked so ordinary that one could not believe it really was so. There were no distracted faces, no voices whining for help, no weeping, nor abuse, but all around was stillness, order, life, children, sledges, dogs with dishevelled tails. Neither the children nor the peasant we met were troubled; why was I so troubled?

Looking at the smiling peasant, at the boy with the huge mufflers, at the huts, remembering my wife, I realized there was no calamity that could daunt this people; I felt as though there were already a breath of victory in the air. I felt proud and felt ready to cry out that I was with them too; but the horses were carrying us away from the village into the open country, the snow was whirling, the wind was howling, and I was left alone with my thoughts. Of the million people working for the peasantry, life itself had cast me out as a useless, incompetent, bad man. I was a hindrance, a part of the people's calamity; I was vanquished, cast out, and I was hurrying to the station to go away and hide myself in Petersburg in a hotel in Bolshaya Morskaya.

An hour later we reached the station. The coachman and a porter with a disc on his breast carried my trunks into the ladies' room. My coachman Nikanor, wearing high felt boots and the skirt of his coat tucked up through his belt, all wet with the snow and glad I was going away, gave me a friendly smile and said:

“A fortunate journey, your Excellency. God give you luck.”

Every one, by the way, calls me “your Excellency,” though I am only a collegiate councillor and a kammer-junker. The porter told me the train had not yet left the next station; I had to wait. I went outside, and with my head heavy from my sleepless night, and so exhausted I could hardly move my legs, I walked aimlessly towards the pump. There was not a soul anywhere near.

“Why am I going?” I kept asking myself. “What is there awaiting me there? The acquaintances from whom I have come away, loneliness, restaurant dinners, noise, the electric light, which makes my eyes ache. Where am I going, and what am I going for? What am I going for?”

And it seemed somehow strange to go away without speaking to my wife. I felt that I was leaving her in uncertainty. Going away, I ought to have told that she was right, that I really was a bad man.

When I turned away from the pump, I saw in the doorway the station-master, of whom I had twice made complaints to his superiors, turning up the collar of his coat, shrinking from the wind and the snow. He came up to me, and putting two fingers to the peak of his cap, told me with an expression of helpless confusion, strained respectfulness, and hatred on his face, that the train was twenty minutes late, and asked me would I not like to wait in the warm?

“Thank you,” I answered, “but I am probably not going. Send word to my coachman to wait; I have not made up my mind.”

I walked to and fro on the platform and thought, should I go away or not? When the train came in I decided not to go. At home I had to expect my wife’s amazement and perhaps her mockery, the dismal upper storey and my uneasiness; but, still, at my age that was easier and as it were more homelike than travelling for two days and nights with strangers to Petersburg, where I should be conscious every minute that my life was of no use to any one or to anything, and that it was approaching its end. No, better at home whatever awaited me there.... I went out of the station. It was awkward by daylight to return home, where every one was so glad at my going. I might spend the rest of the day till evening at some neighbour’s, but with whom? With some of them I was on strained relations, others I did not know at all. I considered and thought of Ivan Ivanitch.

“We are going to Bragino!” I said to the coachman, getting into the sledge.

“It’s a long way,” sighed Nikanor; “it will be twenty miles, or maybe twenty-five.”

“Oh, please, my dear fellow,” I said in a tone as though Nikanor had the right to refuse. “Please let us go!”

Nikanor shook his head doubtfully and said slowly that we really ought to have put in the shafts, not Circassian, but Peasant or Siskin; and uncertainly, as though expecting I should change my mind, took the reins in his gloves, stood up, thought a moment, and then raised his whip.

“A whole series of inconsistent actions...” I thought, screening my face from the snow. “I must have gone out of my mind. Well, I don’t care....”

In one place, on a very high and steep slope, Nikanor carefully held the horses in to the middle of the descent, but in the middle the horses suddenly bolted and dashed downhill at a fearful rate; he raised his elbows and shouted in a wild, frantic voice such as I had never heard from him before:

“Hey! Let’s give the general a drive! If you come to grief he’ll buy new ones, my darlings! Hey! look out! We’ll run you down!”

Only now, when the extraordinary pace we were going at took my breath away, I noticed that he was very drunk. He must have been drinking at the station. At the bottom of the descent there was the crash of ice; a piece of dirty frozen snow thrown up from the road hit me a painful blow in the face.

The runaway horses ran up the hill as rapidly as they had downhill, and before I had time to shout to Nikanor my sledge was flying along on the level in an old pine forest, and the tall pines were stretching out their shaggy white paws to me from all directions.

“I have gone out of my mind, and the coachman’s drunk,” I thought. “Good!”

I found Ivan Ivanitch at home. He laughed till he coughed, laid his head on my breast, and said what he always did say on meeting me:

“You grow younger and younger. I don’t know what dye you use for your hair and your beard; you might give me some of it.”

“I’ve come to return your call, Ivan Ivanitch,” I said untruthfully. “Don’t be hard on me; I’m a townsman, conventional; I do keep count of calls.”

"I am delighted, my dear fellow. I am an old man; I like respect.... Yes."

From his voice and his blissfully smiling face, I could see that he was greatly flattered by my visit. Two peasant women helped me off with my coat in the entry, and a peasant in a red shirt hung it on a hook, and when Ivan Ivanitch and I went into his little study, two barefooted little girls were sitting on the floor looking at a picture-book; when they saw us they jumped up and ran away, and a tall, thin old woman in spectacles came in at once, bowed gravely to me, and picking up a pillow from the sofa and a picture-book from the floor, went away. From the adjoining rooms we heard incessant whispering and the patter of bare feet.

"I am expecting the doctor to dinner," said Ivan Ivanitch. "He promised to come from the relief centre. Yes. He dines with me every Wednesday, God bless him." He craned towards me and kissed me on the neck. "You have come, my dear fellow, so you are not vexed," he whispered, sniffing. "Don't be vexed, my dear creature. Yes. Perhaps it is annoying, but don't be cross. My only prayer to God before I die is to live in peace and harmony with all in the true way. Yes."

"Forgive me, Ivan Ivanitch, I will put my feet on a chair," I said, feeling that I was so exhausted I could not be myself; I sat further back on the sofa and put up my feet on an arm-chair. My face was burning from the snow and the wind, and I felt as though my whole body were basking in the warmth and growing weaker from it.

"It's very nice here," I went on—"warm, soft, snug... and goose-feather pens," I laughed, looking at the writing-table; "sand instead of blotting-paper."

"Eh? Yes... yes.... The writing-table and the mahogany cupboard here were made for my father by a self-taught cabinet-maker—Glyeb Butyga, a serf of General Zhukov's. Yes... a great artist in his own way."

Listlessly and in the tone of a man dropping asleep, he began telling me about cabinet-maker Butyga. I listened. Then Ivan Ivanitch went into the next room to show me a polisher wood chest of drawers remarkable for its beauty and cheapness. He tapped the chest with his fingers, then called my attention to a stove of patterned tiles, such as one never sees now. He tapped the stove, too, with his fingers. There was an atmosphere of good-natured simplicity and well-fed abundance about the chest of drawers, the tiled stove, the low chairs, the pictures embroidered in wool and silk on canvas in solid, ugly frames. When one remembers that all those objects were standing in the same places and precisely in the same order when I was a little child, and used to come here to name-day parties with my mother, it is simply unbelievable that they could ever cease to exist.

I thought what a fearful difference between Butyga and me! Butyga who made things, above all, solidly and substantially, and seeing in that his chief object, gave to length of life peculiar significance, had no thought of death, and probably hardly believed in its possibility; I, when I built my bridges of iron and stone which would last a thousand years, could not keep from me the thought, "It's not for long....it's no use." If in time Butyga's cupboard and my bridge should come under the notice of some sensible historian of art, he would say: "These were two men remarkable in their own way: Butyga loved his fellow-creatures and would not admit the thought that they might die and be annihilated, and so when he made his furniture he had the immortal man in his mind. The engineer Asorin did not love life or his fellow-creatures; even in the happy moments of creation, thoughts of death, of finiteness and dissolution, were not alien to him, and we see how insignificant and finite, how timid and poor, are these lines of his...."

"I only heat these rooms," muttered Ivan Ivanitch, showing me his rooms. "Ever since my wife died and my son was killed in the war, I have kept the best rooms shut up. Yes... see..."

He opened a door, and I saw a big room with four columns, an old piano, and a heap of peas on the floor; it smelt cold and damp.

"The garden seats are in the next room..." muttered Ivan Ivanitch. "There's no one to dance the mazurka now.... I've shut them up."

We heard a noise. It was Dr. Sobol arriving. While he was rubbing his cold hands and stroking his wet beard, I had time to notice in the first place that he had a very dull life, and so was pleased to see Ivan Ivanitch and me; and, secondly, that he was a naive and simple-hearted man. He looked at me as though I were very glad to see him and very much interested in him.

"I have not slept for two nights," he said, looking at me naively and stroking his beard. "One night with a confinement, and the next I stayed at a peasant's with the bugs biting me all night. I am as sleepy as Satan, do you know."

With an expression on his face as though it could not afford me anything but pleasure, he took me by the arm and led me to the dining-room. His naive eyes, his crumpled coat, his cheap tie and the smell of iodoform made an unpleasant impression upon me; I felt as though I were in vulgar company. When we sat down to table he filled my glass with vodka, and, smiling helplessly, I drank it; he put a piece of ham on my plate and I ate it submissively.

"Repetitia est mater studiorum," said Sobol, hastening to drink off another wineglassful. "Would you believe it, the joy of seeing good people has driven away my sleepiness? I have turned into a peasant, a savage in the wilds; I've grown coarse, but I am still an educated man, and I tell you in good earnest, it's tedious without company."

They served first for a cold course white sucking-pig with horse-radish cream, then a rich and very hot cabbage soup with pork on it, with boiled buckwheat, from which rose a column of steam. The doctor went on talking, and I was soon convinced that he was a weak, unfortunate man, disorderly in external life. Three glasses of vodka made him drunk; he grew unnaturally lively, ate a great deal, kept clearing his throat and smacking his lips, and already addressed me in Italian, "Eccellenza." Looking naively at me as though he were convinced that I was very glad to see and hear him, he informed me that he had long been separated from his wife and gave her three-quarters of his salary; that she lived in the town with his children, a boy and a girl, whom he adored; that he loved another woman, a widow, well educated, with an estate in the country, but was rarely able to see her, as he was busy with his work from morning till night and had not a free moment.

"The whole day long, first at the hospital, then on my rounds," he told us; "and I assure you, Eccellenza, I have not time to read a book, let alone going to see the woman I love. I've read nothing for ten years! For ten years, Eccellenza. As for the financial side of the question, ask Ivan Ivanitch: I have often no money to buy tobacco."

"On the other hand, you have the moral satisfaction of your work," I said.

"What?" he asked, and he winked. "No," he said, "better let us drink."

I listened to the doctor, and, after my invariable habit, tried to take his measure by my usual classification—materialist, idealist, filthy lucre, gregarious instincts, and so on; but no classification fitted him even approximately; and strange to say, while I simply listened and looked at him, he seemed perfectly clear to me as a person, but as soon as I began trying to classify him he became an exceptionally complex, intricate, and incomprehensible character in spite of all his candour and simplicity. "Is that man," I asked myself, "capable of wasting other people's money, abusing their confidence, being disposed to sponge on them?" And now this question, which had once seemed to me grave and important, struck me as crude, petty, and coarse.

Pie was served; then, I remember, with long intervals between, during which we drank home-made liquors, they gave us a stew of pigeons, some dish of giblets, roast sucking-pig, partridges, cauliflower, curd dumplings, curd cheese and milk, jelly, and finally pancakes and jam. At first I ate with great relish, especially the cabbage soup and the buckwheat, but afterwards I munched and swallowed mechanically, smiling helplessly and unconscious of the taste of anything. My face was burning from the hot cabbage soup and the heat of the room. Ivan Ivanitch and Sobol, too, were crimson.

"To the health of your wife," said Sobol. "She likes me. Tell her her doctor sends her his respects."

"She's fortunate, upon my word," sighed Ivan Ivanitch. "Though she takes no trouble, does not fuss or worry herself, she has become the most important person in the whole district. Almost the whole business is in her hands, and they all gather round her, the doctor, the District Captains, and the ladies. With people of the right sort that happens of itself. Yes.... The apple-tree need take no thought for the apple to grow on it; it will grow of itself."

"It's only people who don't care who take no thought," said I.

"Eh? Yes..." muttered Ivan Ivanitch, not catching what I said, "that's true.... One must not worry oneself. Just so, just so.... Only do your duty towards God and your neighbour, and then never mind what happens."

“Eccellenza,” said Sobol solemnly, “just look at nature about us: if you poke your nose or your ear out of your fur collar it will be frost-bitten; stay in the fields for one hour, you’ll be buried in the snow; while the village is just the same as in the days of Rurik, the same Petchenyegs and Polovtsi. It’s nothing but being burnt down, starving, and struggling against nature in every way. What was I saying? Yes! If one thinks about it, you know, looks into it and analyses all this hotchpotch, if you will allow me to call it so, it’s not life but more like a fire in a theatre! Any one who falls down or screams with terror, or rushes about, is the worst enemy of good order; one must stand up and look sharp, and not stir a hair! There’s no time for whimpering and busying oneself with trifles. When you have to deal with elemental forces you must put out force against them, be firm and as unyielding as a stone. Isn’t that right, grandfather?” He turned to Ivan Ivanitch and laughed. “I am no better than a woman myself; I am a limp rag, a flabby creature, so I hate flabbiness. I can’t endure petty feelings! One mopes, another is frightened, a third will come straight in here and say: ‘Fie on you! Here you’ve guzzled a dozen courses and you talk about the starving!’ That’s petty and stupid! A fourth will reproach you, Eccellenza, for being rich. Excuse me, Eccellenza,” he went on in a loud voice, laying his hand on his heart, “but your having set our magistrate the task of hunting day and night for your thieves—excuse me, that’s also petty on your part. I am a little drunk, so that’s why I say this now, but you know, it is petty!”

“Who’s asking him to worry himself? I don’t understand!” I said, getting up.

I suddenly felt unbearably ashamed and mortified, and I walked round the table.

“Who asks him to worry himself? I didn’t ask him to.... Damn him!”

“They have arrested three men and let them go again. They turned out not to be the right ones, and now they are looking for a fresh lot,” said Sobol, laughing. “It’s too bad!”

“I did not ask him to worry himself,” said I, almost crying with excitement. “What’s it all for? What’s it all for? Well, supposing I was wrong, supposing I have done wrong, why do they try to put me more in the wrong?”

“Come, come, come, come!” said Sobol, trying to soothe me. “Come! I have had a drop, that is why I said it. My tongue is my enemy. Come,” he sighed, “we have eaten and drunk wine, and now for a nap.”

He got up from the table, kissed Ivan Ivanitch on the head, and staggering from repletion, went out of the dining-room. Ivan Ivanitch and I smoked in silence.

“I don’t sleep after dinner, my dear,” said Ivan Ivanitch, “but you have a rest in the lounge-room.”

I agreed. In the half-dark and warmly heated room they called the lounge-room, there stood against the walls long, wide sofas, solid and heavy, the work of Butyga the cabinet maker; on them lay high, soft, white beds, probably made by the old woman in spectacles. On one of them Sobol, without his coat and boots, already lay asleep with his face to the back of the sofa; another bed was awaiting me. I took off my coat and boots, and, overcome by fatigue, by the spirit of Butyga which hovered over the quiet lounge-room, and by the light, caressing snore of Sobol, I lay down submissively.

And at once I began dreaming of my wife, of her room, of the station-master with his face full of hatred, the heaps of snow, a fire in the theatre. I dreamed of the peasants who had stolen twenty sacks of rye out of my barn.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing the magistrate let them go,” I said.

I woke up at the sound of my own voice, looked for a moment in perplexity at Sobol’s broad back, at the buckles of his waistcoat, at his thick heels, then lay down again and fell asleep.

When I woke up the second time it was quite dark. Sobol was asleep. There was peace in my heart, and I longed to make haste home. I dressed and went out of the lounge-room. Ivan Ivanitch was sitting in a big arm-chair in his study, absolutely motionless, staring at a fixed point, and it was evident that he had been in the same state of petrification all the while I had been asleep.

“Good!” I said, yawning. “I feel as though I had woken up after breaking the fast at Easter. I shall often come and see you now. Tell me, did my wife ever dine here?”

“So-ome-ti-mes... sometimes,” muttered Ivan Ivanitch, making an effort to stir. “She dined here last Saturday. Yes.... She likes me.”

After a silence I said:

“Do you remember, Ivan Ivanitch, you told me I had a disagreeable character and that it was difficult to get on with me? But what am I to do to make my character different?”

“I don’t know, my dear boy.... I’m a feeble old man, I can’t advise you.... Yes.... But I said that to you at the time because I am fond of you and fond of your wife, and I was fond of your father.... Yes. I shall soon die, and what need have I to conceal things from you or to tell you lies? So I tell you: I am very fond of you, but I don’t respect you. No, I don’t respect you.”

He turned towards me and said in a breathless whisper:

“It’s impossible to respect you, my dear fellow. You look like a real man. You have the figure and deportment of the French President Carnot—I saw a portrait of him the other day in an illustrated paper... yes.... You use lofty language, and you are clever, and you are high up in the service beyond all reach, but haven’t real soul, my dear boy... there’s no strength in it.”

“A Scythian, in fact,” I laughed. “But what about my wife? Tell me something about my wife; you know her better.”

I wanted to talk about my wife, but Sobol came in and prevented me.

“I’ve had a sleep and a wash,” he said, looking at me naively. “I’ll have a cup of tea with some rum in it and go home.”



VII

It was by now past seven. Besides Ivan Ivanitch, women servants, the old dame in spectacles, the little girls and the peasant, all accompanied us from the hall out on to the steps, wishing us good-bye and all sorts of blessings, while near the horses in the darkness there were standing and moving about men with lanterns, telling our coachmen how and which way to drive, and wishing us a lucky journey. The horses, the men, and the sledges were white.

“Where do all these people come from?” I asked as my three horses and the doctor’s two moved at a walking pace out of the yard.

“They are all his serfs,” said Sobol. “The new order has not reached him yet. Some of the old servants are living out their lives with him, and then there are orphans of all sorts who have nowhere to go; there are some, too, who insist on living there, there’s no turning them out. A queer old man!”

Again the flying horses, the strange voice of drunken Nikanor, the wind and the persistent snow, which got into one’s eyes, one’s mouth, and every fold of one’s fur coat....

“Well, I am running a rig,” I thought, while my bells chimed in with the doctor’s, the wind whistled, the coachmen shouted; and while this frantic uproar was going on, I recalled all the details of that strange wild day, unique in my life, and it seemed to me that I really had gone out of my mind or become a different man. It was as though the man I had been till that day were already a stranger to me.

The doctor drove behind and kept talking loudly with his coachman. From time to time he overtook me, drove side by side, and always, with the same naive confidence that it was very pleasant to me, offered me a cigarette or asked for the matches. Or, overtaking me, he would lean right out of his sledge, and waving about the sleeves of his fur coat, which were at least twice as long as his arms, shout:

“Go it, Vaska! Beat the thousand roubles! Hey, my kittens!”

And to the accompaniment of loud, malicious laughter from Sobol and his Vaska the doctor's kittens raced ahead. My Nikanor took it as an affront, and held in his three horses, but when the doctor's bells had passed out of hearing, he raised his elbows, shouted, and our horses flew like mad in pursuit. We drove into a village, there were glimpses of lights, the silhouettes of huts. Some one shouted:

"Ah, the devils!" We seemed to have galloped a mile and a half, and still it was the village street and there seemed no end to it. When we caught up the doctor and drove more quietly, he asked for matches and said:

"Now try and feed that street! And, you know, there are five streets like that, sir. Stay, stay," he shouted. "Turn in at the tavern! We must get warm and let the horses rest."

They stopped at the tavern.

"I have more than one village like that in my district," said the doctor, opening a heavy door with a squeaky block, and ushering me in front of him. "If you look in broad daylight you can't see to the end of the street, and there are side-streets, too, and one can do nothing but scratch one's head. It's hard to do anything."

We went into the best room where there was a strong smell of table-cloths, and at our entrance a sleepy peasant in a waistcoat and a shirt worn outside his trousers jumped up from a bench. Sobol asked for some beer and I asked for tea.

"It's hard to do anything," said Sobol. "Your wife has faith; I respect her and have the greatest reverence for her, but I have no great faith myself. As long as our relations to the people continue to have the character of ordinary philanthropy, as shown in orphan asylums and almshouses, so long we shall only be shuffling, shamming, and deceiving ourselves, and nothing more. Our relations ought to be businesslike, founded on calculation, knowledge, and justice. My Vaska has been working for me all his life; his crops have failed, he is sick and starving. If I give him fifteen kopecks a day, by so doing I try to restore him to his former condition as a workman; that is, I am first and foremost looking after my own interests, and yet for some reason I call that fifteen kopecks relief, charity, good works. Now let us put it like this. On the most modest computation, reckoning seven kopecks a soul and five souls a family, one needs three hundred and fifty roubles a day to feed a thousand families. That sum is fixed by our practical duty to a thousand families. Meanwhile we give not three hundred and fifty a day, but only ten, and say that that is relief, charity, that that makes your wife and all of us exceptionally good people and hurrah for our humaneness. That is it, my dear soul! Ah! if we would talk less of being humane and calculated more, reasoned, and took a conscientious attitude to our duties! How many such humane, sensitive people there are among us who tear about in all good faith with subscription lists, but don't pay their tailors or their cooks. There is no logic in our life; that's what it is! No logic!"

We were silent for a while. I was making a mental calculation and said:

"I will feed a thousand families for two hundred days. Come and see me tomorrow to talk it over."

I was pleased that this was said quite simply, and was glad that Sobol answered me still more simply:

"Right."

We paid for what we had and went out of the tavern.

"I like going on like this," said Sobol, getting into the sledge. "Eccellenza, oblige me with a match. I've forgotten mine in the tavern."

A quarter of an hour later his horses fell behind, and the sound of his bells was lost in the roar of the snow-storm. Reaching home, I walked about my rooms, trying to think things over and to define my position clearly to myself; I had not one word, one phrase, ready for my wife. My brain was not working.

But without thinking of anything, I went downstairs to my wife. She was in her room, in the same pink dressing-gown, and standing in the same attitude as though screening her papers from me. On her face was an expression of perplexity and irony, and it was evident that having heard of my arrival, she had prepared herself not to cry, not to entreat me, not to defend herself, as she had done the day before, but to laugh at me, to answer me contemptuously, and to act with decision. Her face was saying: "If that's how it is, good-bye."

“Natalie, I’ve not gone away,” I said, “but it’s not deception. I have gone out of my mind; I’ve grown old, I’m ill, I’ve become a different man—think as you like.... I’ve shaken off my old self with horror, with horror; I despise him and am ashamed of him, and the new man who has been in me since yesterday will not let me go away. Do not drive me away, Natalie!”

She looked intently into my face and believed me, and there was a gleam of uneasiness in her eyes. Enchanted by her presence, warmed by the warmth of her room, I muttered as in delirium, holding out my hands to her:

“I tell you, I have no one near to me but you. I have never for one minute ceased to miss you, and only obstinate vanity prevented me from owning it. The past, when we lived as husband and wife, cannot be brought back, and there’s no need; but make me your servant, take all my property, and give it away to any one you like. I am at peace, Natalie, I am content.... I am at peace.”

My wife, looking intently and with curiosity into my face, suddenly uttered a faint cry, burst into tears, and ran into the next room. I went upstairs to my own storey.

An hour later I was sitting at my table, writing my “History of Railways,” and the starving peasants did not now hinder me from doing so. Now I feel no uneasiness. Neither the scenes of disorder which I saw when I went the round of the huts at Pestrovo with my wife and Sobol the other day, nor malignant rumours, nor the mistakes of the people around me, nor old age close upon me—nothing disturbs me. Just as the flying bullets do not hinder soldiers from talking of their own affairs, eating and cleaning their boots, so the starving peasants do not hinder me from sleeping quietly and looking after my personal affairs. In my house and far around it there is in full swing the work which Dr. Sobol calls “an orgy of philanthropy.” My wife often comes up to me and looks about my rooms uneasily, as though looking for what more she can give to the starving peasants “to justify her existence,” and I see that, thanks to her, there will soon be nothing of our property left and we shall be poor; but that does not trouble me, and I smile at her gaily. What will happen in the future I don’t know.



Comment about this article on email : udhaydharshans@gmail.co