W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC.
Also Publishes

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Nina Baym et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
edited by Jack Zipes et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Joyce Carol Oates

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
edited by M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF LITERATURE BY WOMEN
edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY
edited by Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY
edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF THEORY AND CRITICISM
edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD LITERATURE
edited by Sarah Lawall et al.

THE NORTON FACSIMILE OF THE FIRST FOLIO OF SHAKESPEARE
prepared by Charlton Hinman

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE
edited by Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT NOVEL
edited by Jerome Beaty

THE NORTON READER
edited by Linda H. Peterson and John C. Brereton

THE NORTON SAMPLER
edited by Thomas Cooley

THE NORTON SHAKESPEARE, BASED ON THE OXFORD EDITION
edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al.

For a complete list of Norton Critical Editions, visit
www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nce_home.htm

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

TOLSTOY'S SHORT FICTION

REVISED TRANSLATIONS
BACKGROUNDS AND SOURCES
CRITICISM

Second Edition

Edited and with revised translations by
MICHAEL R. KATZ
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *New York* • *London*

"Ne sors pas de ta ligne; à vos places, sacré nom!"[2] cries a French corporal, and the soldiers separate with evident reluctance.

And here, in the midst of a group of French officers, one of our young cavalry officers is gushing. They are talking about some Count Sazonof, *"que j'ai beaucoup connu, monsieur,"* says a French officer with only one epaulette. *"C'est un de ces vrais comtes russes, comme nous les aimons."*[3]

"Il y a un Sazonoff, que j'ai connu," says the cavalry officer, *"mais il n'est pas comte, à moins que je sache, un petit brun de votre âge à peu près."*[4]

"C'est ça, monsieur, c'est lui. Oh! que je voudrais le voir, ce cher comte. Si vous le voyez, je vous prie bien de lui faire mes compliments—Capitaine Latour,"[5] he said, bowing.

"N'est-ce pas terrible la triste besogne que nous faisons? Ça chauffait cette nuit, n'est-ce pas?"[6] said the cavalry officer, wishing to maintain the conversation and pointing to the corpses.

"Oh, monsieur, c'est affreux! Mais quels gaillards vos soldats, quels gaillards! C'est un plaisir que de se battre avec des gaillards comme eux."[7]

"Il faut avouer que les vôtres ne se mouchent pas du pied non plus,"[8] said the cavalry officer, bowing and imagining himself very agreeable.

But enough.

Let us look instead at this ten-year-old boy in an old cap (probably his father's), with shoes on his stockingless feet and nankeen trousers held up by one brace. At the very beginning of the truce he came over the entrenchments and has been walking around the valley ever since, looking with dull curiosity at the French and at the corpses that lie on the ground and gathering blue flowers with which the valley is strewn. Returning home with a large bunch he holds his nose to escape the stench that is borne towards him by the wind and stopping near a heap of corpses, he gazes for a long time at a terrible headless body that lies nearest to him. After standing there for some time he draws nearer and touches the stiff outstretched arm of the corpse with his foot. The arm trembles a little. He touches it again more boldly; it moves and falls back to its old position. The boy gives a sudden scream, hides his face in his flowers, and runs towards the fortifications as fast as his legs can carry him.

2. "Don't leave your ranks; to your places, damn it!"
3. "Whom I knew very intimately, monsieur. He is one of those real Russian counts of whom we are so fond."
4. "I am acquainted with a Sazonoff, but he is not a count, as far as I know—a small dark man, about your age."
5. "Just so, monsieur, that is he. Oh, how I should like to meet the dear count. If you should see him, please be so kind as to give him my regards—Captain Latour."
6. "Isn't it terrible, this sad duty we are engaged in? It was hectic work last night, wasn't it?"
7. "Ah, monsieur, it is terrible! But what fine fellows your men are, what fine fellows! It is a pleasure to fight with such fellows!"
8. "It must be admitted that yours are no fools either."

Yes, there are white flags on the bastions and trenches but the flowery valley is covered with dead bodies. The glorious sun is sinking towards the blue sea, and the undulating blue sea glitters in the golden light. Thousands of people crowd together, look at, speak to, and smile at one another. And these people—Christians professing the one great law of love and self-sacrifice—on seeing what they have done do not immediately fall repentant on their knees before Him who has given them life and placed in the soul of each a fear of death and a love of the good and the beautiful and they do not embrace like brothers with tears of joy and gladness.

The white flags are lowered, the engines of death and suffering are sounding again, innocent blood is flowing, and the air is filled with moans and curses.

There, I have said what I wished to say this time. But I am seized by an oppressive doubt. Perhaps I ought to have left it unsaid. What I have said perhaps belongs to that class of evil truths that lie unconsciously hidden in the soul of each man and should not be uttered lest they become harmful, as the dregs in a bottle must not be disturbed for fear of spoiling the wine. . . .

Where in this tale is the evil that should be avoided, and where the good that should be imitated? Who is the villain and who the hero of my story? All are good and all are bad.

Not Kalugin, with his brilliant courage—*bravoure de gentilhomme*[9]—and the vanity that influences all his actions, not Praskukhin, the empty harmless fellow (though he fell in battle for his faith, monarch, and fatherland), not Mikhaylov with his shyness, nor Pesth, a child without firm principles or convictions, can be either the villain or the hero of this tale.

The hero of my tale—whom I love with all the power of my soul, whom I have tried to portray in all its beauty, who has been, is, and always will be beautiful—is Truth.

Three Deaths†

A Tale

I

It was autumn. Two vehicles were going along the highway at a quick trot. In the first sat two women: a lady, thin and pale, and a maidservant, plump, rosy, and shining. The maid's short dry hair escaped

9. A gentleman's bravery.
† This piece was first published in 1859.

from under her faded bonnet and her red hand in its torn glove kept pushing it back in fits and starts; her full bosom, covered by a woollen shawl, breathed health, her quick black eyes watched the fields as they glided past the window, glanced timidly at her mistress, and then restlessly scanned the corners of the carriage. In front of her nose dangled her mistress's bonnet, pinned to the luggage carrier and on her lap lay a puppy; her feet were raised on the boxes standing on the floor and just audibly tapped against them to the creaking of the coach-springs and the clatter of the window panes.

Having folded her hands on her knees and closed her eyes, the lady swayed feebly against the pillows placed at her back, and, frowning slightly, coughed inwardly. On her head she had a white nightcap, and a blue kerchief was tied round her delicate white throat. A straight line receding under the cap parted her light brown, extremely flat, pomaded hair, and there was something dry and deathly about the whiteness of the skin of that wide parting. Her features were delicate and handsome, but her skin was flabby and rather sallow, though there was a hectic flush on her cheeks. Her lips were dry and restless, her scanty eyelashes had no curl in them, and her cloth travelling coat fell in straight folds over a sunken breast. Though her eyes were closed her face bore an expression of weariness, irritation, and habitual suffering.

A footman, leaning on the arms of his seat, was dozing on the box. The mail-coach driver, shouting lustily, urged on his four big sweating horses, occasionally turning to the other driver who called to him from the calèche[1] behind. The broad parallel tracks of the wheels spread themselves evenly and fast on the muddy, chalky surface of the road. The sky was grey and cold and a damp mist was settling on the fields and road. It was stuffy in the coach and there was a smell of Eau-de-Cologne and dust. The invalid drew back her head and slowly opened her splendid dark eyes, which were large and shining.

"Again," she said, nervously pushing away with her beautiful thin hand an end of her maid's cloak which had lightly touched her foot, and her mouth twitched painfully. Matresha gathered up her cloak with both hands, rose on her strong legs, and seated herself farther away, while her fresh face grew scarlet. The lady, leaning with both hands on the seat, also tried to raise herself so as to sit up higher, but her strength failed her. Her mouth twisted, and her whole face became distorted by a look of impotent malevolence and irony. "You might at least help me! . . . No, don't bother! I can do it myself, only don't put your bags or anything behind me, for goodness' sake! . . . No, it's better not to touch me since you don't know how to!" The lady closed her eyes and then, quickly raising her eyelids, glared at the

1. A light, low-wheeled carriage with an adjustable top or hood.

maid again. Matresha, looking at her, bit her red lower lip. A deep sigh rose from the invalid's chest and turned into a cough before it was completed. She turned away, puckered her face, and clutched her chest with both hands. When the coughing fit was over she closed her eyes once more and continued to sit motionless. The carriage and calèche entered a village. Matresha stretched out her thick hand from under her shawl and crossed herself.

"What is it?" asked her mistress.

"A post-station, madam."

"I'm asking why you crossed yourself."

"There's a church, madam."

The invalid turned to the window and began to cross herself slowly, looking with large wide-open eyes at the big village church her carriage was passing.

The carriage and calèche both stopped at the post-station and the invalid's husband and doctor stepped out of the calèche and went up to the coach.

"How are you feeling?" asked the doctor, taking her pulse.

"Well, my dear, how are you—not too tired?" asked the husband in French. "Wouldn't you like to get out?"

Matresha, gathering up the bundles, squeezed herself into a corner so as not to interfere with their conversation.

"Nothing much, about the same," replied the invalid. "I won't get out."

After standing there a while her husband went into the station-house, and Matresha, too, jumped out of the carriage and ran on tiptoe across the mud and in at the gate.

"If I feel ill, it's no reason for you not to have lunch," said the sick woman with a slight smile to the doctor, who was standing at her window.

"None of them cares at all about me," she added to herself as soon as the doctor, having slowly walked away from her, ran quickly up the steps to the station-house. "They are well, so they don't care. Oh, my God!"

"Well, Edvard Ivanovich?" said the husband, rubbing his hands as he met the doctor with a merry smile. "I have ordered the lunch-basket to be brought in. What do you think about it?"

"A splendid idea," replied the doctor.

"Well, how is she?" asked the husband with a sigh, lowering his voice and lifting his eyebrows.

"As I told you: it is impossible for her to reach Italy—God grant she gets as far as Moscow, especially in this weather."

"But what are we to do? Oh, my God, my God!" and the husband hid his eyes with his hand. "Bring it here!" he said to the man who had brought in the lunch-basket.

"She ought to have stayed home," said the doctor, shrugging his shoulders.

"But what could I do?" rejoined the husband. "You know I used every possible means to get her to stay. I spoke of the expense, of our children whom we had to leave behind, and of my business affairs, but she would not listen to anything. She is making plans for life abroad as if she were in good health. To tell her about her own condition would be to kill her."

"But she is dead already—you must know that, Vasily Dmitrich. A person can't live without lungs, and new lungs won't grow. It is sad and difficult, but what is to be done? My business and yours is to see that her end is made as peaceful as possible. A priest is needed for that."

"Oh, my God! Think about me, having to remind her about her will. Come what may I can't tell her that, you know how good she is . . ."

"Still, try to persuade her to wait till the roads are fit for travel," said the doctor, shaking his head significantly, "or something bad may happen on the journey."

"Aksyusha, hello Aksyusha!" yelled the station-master's daughter, throwing her jacket over her head and stamping her feet on the muddy back porch. "Come let's take a look at the Shirkin lady: they say she is being taken abroad for chest trouble, and I've never seen what consumptive people look like!"

She jumped onto the threshold, and seizing one another by the hand the two girls ran out of the gate. Checking their pace, they passed the coach and looked in at the open window. The invalid turned her head towards them but, noticing their curiosity, frowned and turned away.

"De-arie me!" said the station-master's daughter, quickly turning her head. "What a wonderful beauty she must have been, and see what she's like now! It's dreadful. Did you see, did you, Aksyusha?"

"Yes, how thin!" Aksyusha agreed. "Let's go and look again, as if we were going to the well. See, she turned away, and I didn't see her. What a pity, Masha!"

"Yes, and what mud!" said Masha, and they both ran through the gate.

"Evidently I look terrible," thought the invalid. "If only I could get abroad quicker. I would soon recover there."

"Well, my dear, how are you?" said her husband, approaching her, still chewing.

"Always the same question," thought the invalid, "and he himself is eating."

"So-so," she murmured through her closed teeth.

"You know, my dear, I'm afraid you'll get worse travelling in this weather, and Edvard Ivanovich says so too. Don't you think we'd better turn back?"

She remained angrily silent.

"Perhaps the weather will improve and the roads be fit for travel; you will get better meanwhile, and then we will all go together."

"Excuse me. If I had not listened to you for so long, I should now at least have reached Berlin, and have been quite well."

"What could be done, my angel? You know it was impossible. But now if you stay another month you would get better, I will have finished my business, and we could take the children with us."

"The children are well, but I am not."

"But do understand, my dear, that in this weather if you should get worse on the road. . . . At least you would be at home."

"What of being at home? . . . To die at home?" answered the invalid, flaring up. But the word "die" evidently frightened her, and she looked imploringly and questioningly at her husband. He hung his head and was silent. The invalid's mouth suddenly widened like a child's, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Her husband hid his face in his handkerchief and silently stepped away from the carriage.

"No, I will go on," said the invalid, and lifting her eyes to the sky she folded her hands and began whispering incoherent words: "Oh, my God, what is it all for?" she said, and her tears flowed faster. She prayed long and fervently, but her chest ached and felt as tight as before; the sky, the fields, and the road were just as grey and gloomy, and the autumnal mist fell, neither thickening nor lifting, and settled on the muddy road, the roofs, the carriage, and the sheepskin coats of the drivers, who talking in their strong cheerful voices were greasing the wheels and harnessing the horses.

II

The carriage was ready but the driver still tarried. He had gone into the drivers' room at the station. It was hot, stuffy, and dark in there, with an oppressive smell of baking bread, cabbage, sheepskin garments, and humanity. Several drivers were sitting in the room, and a cook was busy at the oven, on the top of which lay a sick man wrapped in sheepskins.

"Uncle Fyodor! I say, Uncle Fyodor!" said the young driver, entering the room in his sheepskin coat with a whip stuck in his belt, and addressing the sick man.

"Why do you want Fyodor, you lazybones?" asked one of the drivers. "There's your carriage waiting for you."

"I want to ask for his boots; mine are quite worn out," answered the young fellow, tossing back his hair and straightening the mittens tucked in his belt. "Is he asleep? I say, Uncle Fyodor!" he repeated, walking over to the oven.

"What is it?" answered a weak voice, and a lean face with a red beard looked down from the oven, while a broad, emaciated, pale, and hairy hand pulled up the coat over the dirty shirt covering his angular shoulder.

"Give me a drink, lad. . . . What do you want?"

The lad handed him up a dipper with some water.

"Well, you see, Fyodor," he said, stepping from foot to foot, "I expect you don't need your new boots now; won't you let me have them? I don't suppose you'll be walking about any more."

The sick man, lowering his weary head to the shiny dipper and immersing his sparse drooping moustache in the turbid water, drank feebly but eagerly. His matted beard was dirty, and his sunken clouded eyes had difficulty in looking up at the lad's face. Having finished his drink he tried to lift his hand to wipe his wet lips, but could not do so, and rubbed them on the sleeve of his coat instead. Silently, and breathing heavily through his nose, he looked straight into the lad's eyes, collecting his strength.

"But perhaps you promised them to someone else?" asked the lad. "If that's so, it's all right. The worst of it is, it's wet outside and I have to go about my work, so I said to myself: 'Suppose I ask Fyodor for his boots; I expect he doesn't need them.' If you need them yourself—just say so."

Something began to rumble and gurgle in the sick man's chest; he doubled up and began to choke with an abortive cough in his throat.

"Need them indeed!" the cook snapped unexpectedly so as to be heard by the whole room. "He hasn't come down from the oven in over a month! Hear how he's choking—it makes me ache inside just to hear him. What does he want with boots? They won't bury him in new boots. And it was high time long ago—God forgive me the sin! See how he chokes. He ought to be taken into the other room or somewhere. They say there are hospitals in town. Is it right that he should take up the whole corner?—there's no more to be said. I've no room at all, and yet they expect cleanliness!"

"Hello, Sergey! Come along and take your place, the nobles are waiting!" shouted the drivers' overseer, looking in at the door.

Sergey was about to go without waiting for a reply, but the sick man, while coughing, let him understand by a look that he wanted to give him an answer.

"Take my boots, Sergey," he said when he had mastered the cough and rested a moment. "But listen. . . . Buy a stone for me when I die," he added hoarsely.

"Thank you, uncle. I'll take them, and I'll buy a stone for sure."

"There, lads, you heard that?" the sick man managed to utter, and bent double again and began to choke.

"All right, we heard," said one of the drivers. "Go and take your seat, Sergey, there's the overseer running back. The Shirkin lady is ill, you know."

Sergey quickly pulled off his unduly large, dilapidated boots and threw them under a bench. Uncle Fyodor's new boots just fitted him, and having put them on, he went to the carriage with his eyes fixed on his feet.

"What fine boots! Let me grease them," said a driver, who held some axle-grease in his hand, as Sergey climbed onto the box and gathered up the reins. "Did he give them to you for nothing?"

"Why, are you envious?" Sergey replied, rising and wrapping the skirts of his coat under his legs. "Off with you! Gee up, my beauties!" he shouted to the horses, flourishing the whip, and the carriage and calèche with their occupants, portmanteaux, and trunks rolled rapidly along the wet road and disappeared in the grey autumnal mist.

The sick driver was left on the top of the oven in the stuffy room and, unable to relieve himself by coughing, turned with an effort onto his other side and became silent.

Till late in the evening people came in and out of the room and dined there. The sick man made no sound. When night came, the cook climbed up onto the oven and stretched over his legs to get her sheepskin coat down.

"Don't be cross with me, Nastasya," said the sick man. "I shall soon leave your corner empty."

"All right, all right, never mind," muttered Nastasya. "But what is it that hurts you? Tell me, uncle."

"My whole inside has wasted away. God knows what it is!"

"I suppose your throat hurts when you cough?"

"Everything hurts. My death has come—that's how it is. Oh, oh, oh!" moaned the sick man.

"Cover up your feet like this," said Nastasya, drawing his coat over him as she climbed down from the oven.

A night-light burnt dimly in the room. Nastasya and some ten drivers slept on the floor or on benches, snoring loudly. The sick man groaned feebly, coughed, and turned around on the oven. Towards morning he grew quite quiet.

"I had a queer dream last night," said Nastasya the next morning, stretching herself in the dim light. "I dreamt that Uncle Fyodor got down from the oven and went out to chop wood. 'Come, Nastasya,' he says, 'I'll help you!' and I say, 'How can you chop wood now?', but he just seizes the axe and begins chopping quickly, so that the chips fly all about. 'Why,' I say, 'haven't you been ill?' 'No,' he says, 'I am well,' and he swings the axe so fast that I was quite frightened. I gave a cry and woke up. I wonder whether he's dead! Uncle Fyodor! I say, Uncle Fyodor!"

Fyodor did not answer.

"True enough he may have died. I'll go and see," said one of the drivers, waking up.

The lean hand covered with reddish hair that hung down from the oven was pale and cold.

"I'll go tell the station-master," said the driver. "I think he's dead."

Fyodor had no relatives: he was from some distant place. They buried him the next day in the new cemetery beyond the wood, and Nastasya went on for days telling everybody about her dream, and about having been the first to discover that Uncle Fyodor was dead.

III

Spring had come. Rivulets of water coursed down the wet streets of the city, gurgling between lumps of frozen manure; the colors of people's clothes as they moved along the streets looked vivid and their voices sounded shrill. Behind garden-fences the buds on trees were swelling and their branches were just audibly swaying in the fresh breeze. Everywhere transparent drops were forming and falling. . . . The sparrows chirped and fluttered awkwardly with their little wings. On the sunny side of the street, on the fences, houses, and trees, everything was in motion and sparkling. There was joy and youth everywhere in the sky, on the earth, and in the hearts of men.

In one of the main streets fresh straw had been strewn on the road before a large, important house, where the invalid who had been in such a hurry to go abroad lay dying.

At the closed door of her room stood her husband and an elderly woman. On the sofa a priest sat with bowed head, holding something wrapped in his stole. In a corner of the room the sick woman's old mother lay on an invalid chair weeping bitterly: beside her stood one maidservant holding a clean handkerchief, waiting for her to ask for it; another was rubbing her temples with something and blowing under the old lady's cap onto her grey head.

"Well, may Christ help you, dear friend," the husband said to the elderly woman who stood near him at the door. "She has such confidence in you and you know how to talk to her so well; persuade her as well as you can, my dear—go to her." He was about to open the door, but her cousin stopped him, pressing her handkerchief several times to her eyes and giving her head a shake.

"Well, I don't think I look as if I had been crying now," she said and, opening the door herself, went in.

The husband was in great agitation and seemed quite distracted. He walked towards the old woman, but still several steps away from her he turned back, walked about the room, and went up to the priest. The priest looked at him, raised his eyebrows to heaven, and sighed: his thick, greyish beard also rose as he sighed and then came down again.

"My God, my God!" said the husband.

"What can be done?" said the priest with a sigh, and again his eyebrows and beard rose and fell.

"And her mother is here!" said the husband almost in despair. "She won't be able to bear it. You see, loving her as she does . . . I don't know! If you would only try to comfort her, Father, and persuade her to go away."

The priest got up and went to the old woman.

"It is true, no one can appreciate a mother's heart," he said—"but God is merciful."

The old woman's face suddenly twitched all over, and she began to hiccup hysterically.

"God is merciful," the priest continued when she grew a little calmer. "Let me tell you of a patient in my parish who was much worse off than Mary Dmitrievna, and a simple tradesman cured her in a short time with various herbs. That tradesman is still in Moscow. I told Vasily Dmitrich—we might try him. . . . At any rate it would comfort the invalid. To God all is possible."

"No, she won't live," said the old woman. "God is taking her instead of me," and the hysterical hiccuping grew so violent that she fainted.

The sick woman's husband hid his face in his hands and ran out of the room.

In the passage the first person he met was his six-year-old son, who was running full speed after his younger sister.

"Won't you order the children to be taken to their mamma?" asked the nurse.

"No, she doesn't want to see them—it would upset her."

The boy stopped a moment, looked intently into his father's face, then gave a kick and ran on, shouting merrily.

"She pretends to be the black horse, Papa!" he shouted, pointing to his sister.

Meanwhile in the other room the cousin sat down beside the invalid, and tried by skilful conversation to prepare her for the thought of death. The doctor was preparing some medicine at another window.

The patient, in a white dressing gown, sat up in bed supported all round by pillows, and looked at her cousin in silence.

"Ah, my dear friend," she said, unexpectedly interrupting her, "don't attempt to prepare me! Don't treat me like a child. I am a Christian. I know it all. I know I don't have long to live, and know that if my husband had listened to me sooner I would now have been in Italy and perhaps—no, certainly—would have been well. Everybody told him so. But what can be done? Evidently this is God's wish. We have all

sinned heavily. I know that, but I trust that in God's mercy everybody will be forgiven, probably all will be forgiven. I try to understand myself. I have many sins to answer for, dear friend, but then how much I have had to suffer! I try to bear my sufferings patiently . . ."

"Shall I call the priest, my dear? You will feel even more comfortable after receiving communion," said her cousin.

The sick woman bent her head in assent.

"God forgive me, sinner that I am!" she whispered.

The cousin went out and signalled with her eyes to the priest.

"She is an angel!" she said to the husband, with tears in her eyes. The husband burst into tears; the priest went into the next room; the invalid's mother was still unconscious, and all was silent there. Five minutes later he came out again, and after taking off his stole, straightened out his hair.

"Thank God she is calmer now," he said, "and wishes to see you."

The cousin and the husband went into the sick-room. The invalid was weeping silently, gazing at an icon.

"I congratulate you, my dear,"[2] said her husband.

"Thank you! How well I feel now, what inexpressible sweetness!" said the sick woman, and a soft smile played on her thin lips. "How merciful God is! Is He not? Merciful and all powerful!" Again she looked at the icon with eager entreaty, her eyes full of tears.

Then suddenly, as if she remembered something, she beckoned to her husband to come closer.

"You never want to do what I ask . . ." she said in a feeble and dissatisfied voice.

The husband, craning his neck, listened to her humbly.

"What is it, my dear?"

"How many times have I said that these doctors don't know anything; there are simple women who can heal and who cure. The priest told me . . . there is also a tradesman . . . Send for them!"

"For whom, my dear?"

"O God, you don't want to understand anything!" . . . And the sick woman's face puckered and she closed her eyes.

The doctor came and took her hand. Her pulse was beating more and more feebly. He glanced at the husband. The invalid noticed that gesture and looked round in fear. The cousin turned away and began to cry.

"Don't cry, don't torture yourself and me," said the patient. "Don't take the last of my tranquillity away from me."

"You're an angel," said the cousin, kissing her hand.

"No, kiss me here! Only dead people are kissed on the hand. My God, my God!"

2. It was customary in Russia to congratulate people who had received communion.

That same evening the patient became a corpse, and the body lay in a coffin in the music room of the large house. A deacon sat alone in that big room reading the psalms of David through his nose in a monotonous voice. A bright light from the wax candles in their tall silver candlesticks fell on the pale brow of the dead woman, on her heavy wax-like hands, on the stiff folds of the pall which brought out in awesome relief her knees and toes. The deacon read on monotonously without understanding the words, and in the quiet room the words sounded strange and died away. Now and then from a distant room came the sounds of children's voices and the patter of their feet.

"Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled," said the psalter. "Thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth. The glory of the Lord shall endure for ever."

The dead woman's face looked stern and majestic. Neither in her clear cold brow nor in her firmly closed lips was there any movement. She seemed all attention. But had she understood those solemn words even now?

IV

A month later a stone chapel was being erected over the grave of the deceased woman. On the driver's tomb there was still no stone, and only the light green grass sprouted on the mound which served as the sole token of the past existence of a man.

"It will be a sin, Sergey," said the cook at the station-house one day, "if you don't buy a stone for Fyodor. You kept saying 'It's winter, it's winter!' but why don't you keep your word now? You know I witnessed it. He has already come back once to ask you to do it; if you don't buy him a stone, he'll come again and choke you."

"But why? I'm not backing out of it," replied Sergey. "I'll buy a stone just as I said I would, and pay a ruble and a half for it. I haven't forgotten, but it has to be fetched. When I happen to be in town I'll buy one."

"You might at least put up a cross—you ought to—or else it's really wrong," interposed an old driver. "You know you're wearing his boots."

"Where can I get a cross? I can't cut one out of a log."

"What do you mean, can't cut one out of a log? You take an axe and go into the forest early, and there you can cut one. Cut down a young ash or something like that, and you can make a cross . . . you may have to treat the forester to some vodka; but one can't afford to treat him for every trifle. When I broke my splinter-bar and went and cut a new one, nobody said a word."

Early in the morning, as soon as it was daybreak, Sergey took an axe and went into the woods.

A cold white cover of dew, which was still falling untouched by the sun, lay on everything. The east was growing imperceptibly brighter, reflecting its pale light on the vault of heaven still veiled by a covering of clouds. Not a blade of grass below, nor a leaf on the topmost branches of the trees, stirred. Only occasionally a sound of wings amid the brush, or a rustling on the ground, broke the silence of the forest. Suddenly a strange sound, foreign to Nature, resounded and died away at the outskirts of the forest. Again the sound was heard, and rhythmically repeated at the foot of the trunk of one of the motionless trees. A tree-top began to tremble in an unusual manner, its sap-filled leaves whispered something, and the robin who had been sitting in one of its branches fluttered twice from place to place with a whistle, and jerking its tail sat down on another tree.

The axe at the bottom gave off a more muffled sound, moist white chips scattered on the dewy grass and a slight creaking was heard above the sound of the blows. The tree, shuddering in its whole body, bent down and quickly rose again, vibrating with fear on its roots. For an instant all was still, but the tree bent again, a crashing sound came from its trunk, and with its branches breaking and its boughs hanging down, it fell with its crown on the damp earth.

The sounds of the axe and the footsteps were silenced. The robin whistled and flitted higher. A twig which it brushed with its wings shook a little and then with all its foliage grew still like the rest. The trees flaunted the beauty of their motionless branches still more joyously in the newly cleared space.

The first sunbeams, piercing the translucent cloud, shone through and spread over earth and sky. The mist began to quiver like waves in the hollows, the dew sparkled and played on the verdure, the transparent little clouds grew whiter, and hurriedly dispersed over the deepening azure vault of the sky. The birds stirred in the thicket and, as though bewildered, twittered joyfully about something; the sap-filled leaves whispered gladly and peacefully on the treetops, and the branches of those that were living began to rustle slowly and majestically over the dead and prostrate tree.

A Prisoner in the Caucasus†

I

An officer named Zhilin was serving in the army in the Caucasus.

One day he received a letter from home. It was from his mother, who wrote: 'I am getting old, and should like to see my dear son once

† This piece was first published in 1872.

more before I die. Come and say good-bye to me and bury me, and then, if God pleases, return to service again with my blessing. But I have found a girl for you, who is sensible and good and has some property. If you can love her, you might marry her and remain at home.'

Zhilin thought it over, It was quite true, the old lady was failing fast and he might not have another chance to see her alive. He had better go, and, if the girl was nice, why not marry her?

So he went to his Colonel, obtained a leave of absence, said good-bye to his comrades, stood the soldiers four pailfuls of vodka as a farewell treat, and got ready to go.

It was a time of war in the Caucasus. The roads were not safe by night or day. If ever a Russian ventured to ride or walk any distance away from his fort, the Tartars killed him or carried him off to the hills. So it had been arranged that twice every week a body of soldiers should march from one fortress to the next to convoy travellers from point to point.

It was summer. At daybreak the baggage-train got ready under shelter of the fortress; the soldiers marched out; and all started along the road. Zhilin was on horseback, and a cart with his things went with the baggage-train. They had sixteen miles to cover. The baggage train moved slowly; sometimes the soldiers stopped, or perhaps a wheel would come off one of the carts, or a horse would refuse to go on, and then everybody had to wait.

When by the sun it was already past noon, they had not gone half the way. It was dusty and hot, the sun was scorching, and there was no shelter anywhere: a bare plain all round—not a tree, not a bush, by the road.

Zhilin rode on in front, and stopped, waiting for the baggage to overtake him. Then he heard the signal-horn sounded behind him: the company had again stopped. So he began to think: 'Hadn't I better ride on by myself? My horse is a good one: if the Tartars do attack me, I can gallop away. Perhaps, however, it would be wiser to wait.'

As he sat considering, Kostilin, an officer carrying a gun, rode up to him and said:

'Come along, Zhilin, let's go on by ourselves. It's dreadful; I am famished and the heat is terrible. My shirt is wringing wet.'

Kostilin was a stout, heavy man, and the perspiration was running down his red face. Zhilin thought awhile, and then asked: 'Is your gun loaded?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Well, then, let's go, but on condition that we keep together.'

So they rode forward along the road across the plain, talking, but keeping a look-out on both sides. They could see afar all round. But after crossing the plain the road ran through a valley between two