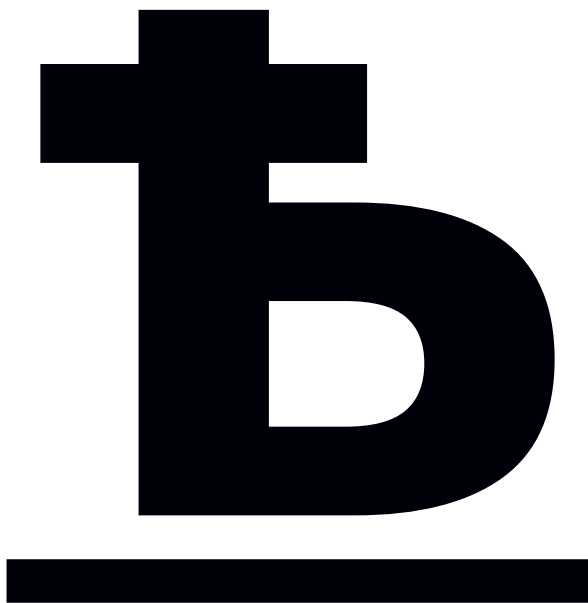


Two Tales

by E. A. Gan

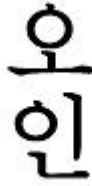


The Ideal

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The Court of Society

77



Bell & Bett
Main Street
Brosna
County Kerry
V92 C9XE
Ireland

Идеаль
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The Ideal

The house, where all the gentry were gathering, was magnificently illuminated; lampions on the gates, lampions at the entrance; coaches, carriages, gigs and sleighs were bringing up entire cargoes of grand-mothers, mothers, daughters and grand-daughters; it was a grand occasion. The two gendarmes, standing by the porch, were not able to shoo away the discharged *équipages*. Clerical officers were shaking off snow from their greatcoats, artillerymen, looking with a smile of disdain on these fellows in tail-coats, were proudly smoothing out their moustaches and dishevelled hair. But how much more there was within the hall!

Four chandeliers hung down majestically from the ceiling; along by the walls were placed divans, upholstered in an orange chintz with green patterns, and at the front part of the hall, underneath an enormous mirror, stood two crimson armchairs. Above in the gallery all of thirteen musicians sat with raised bows awaiting the arrival of the governor, prepared on his entrance to fill the hall with the strains of the *polonaise* from *Rusalka*. The divans were already occupied with ladies of all ages and ranks; civil officials were meekly pacing about the room, holding their round hats in their hands; cavalrymen were impatiently jangling their spurs; old men were unctuously circling by the card-tables that were set up, but no one would yet begin either to dance or to play. The company resembled a huge pagan idol, into which the moving spirit has yet to be inspired. Here and there a man, in passing behind the divans, would halt at the back of a young maid and, inclining himself, whisper to her

something that was probably most pleasant, because a smile would suddenly blossom on the girl's lips and, looking at her, the mamma would adjust her own bonnet with a self-satisfied air.

Now appeared the tiny public-prosecutor in his enormous wig, which for fully thirty years already had been crowning this head, profound repository of laws. Behind him sailed the stout lady prosecutor with their four daughters, of whom the youngest was taller by a head than her papa. The civil officials deferentially parted before the prudent jurist, however, a number of the artillery-men did flutter about his daughters.

"*Mademoiselle Espérance*, are you engaged for the *mazurka*?"

"Oh, I am!"

"By whom?"

"Munsieur Cidorenko."

"How unfortunate I am."

And the cavalier expressed his sorrow with a quotation from a particular Russian poem, the author of which would have experienced an even greater sorrow, on hearing how mercilessly his verses were mangled.

The hall was entirely filled but still the dancing did not commence; ten o'clock was striking; there was impatience on every face; but they all sat as though in fetters. Behold, a rose-coloured cloud floated into the hall, the portent of a bright luminary. This was the town-mayor. A murmur of hope passed through the whole assembly; from the doorway up as far as the crimson armchairs and broad passage was formed, and a profound silence came to reign in the hall, as at sea a stillness before a storm; the musicians applied their

bows; a joyous quivering shook the young maidens to their very core, and the governor momentarily came through the door, leading by the arm his majestic other half, who was adorned with pieces of silk lace, flowers, feathers, a bright raspberry-coloured beret and a bronze *ferronnière*, the three suspended glass beads of which were swinging like pendulums above her broad nose. On entering the hall he presented his hat to the on-duty official, who had been standing by the door for this exact purpose since the very beginning of the evening. The governor and his lady were continuing their procession; all heads were bowed, accordingly as they drew near, ladies rose from their places: indeed! they stood up; such is the immutable etiquette of gubernatorial balls. It was only the military men, who permitted themselves to bow in a free-and-easy manner. The dread pair lowered themselves into the soft armchairs; the ladies all surrounded the governor's wife and she indulgently nodded to them and some few she even graciously questioned as to their health. Bustling about more than any was the little wife of the chief of police, who had arrived with her and was dressed according to the newest illustration of a Moscow fashionable magazine.

"Madam Birbenko," the lady governor said languidly to the fidgeting lady chief of police, "do not, I pray you, place yourself *vis à vis* to me for the *quadrilles*. I appear simply too enormous facing you."

"As it pleases you, your Excellency," Madam Birbenko answered obediently.

“Do tell me, *mesdames*,” the lady governor spoke again, “does one of you know, whether we shall see Colonel Holzberg’s wife here this evening?”

“I doubt it,” exclaimed the lady chief of police. “For she floats as a vapour beneath the heavens and will not descend for the events of our earthly gaiety, though she lets slip no occasion to enjoy the earthly pleasures.”

“You are intimately acquainted with her, it would seem?” innocently enquired the newly-arrived wife of a landowner.

“Oh, my God, is it then necessary to be acquainted for an age in order to know a woman? A bird is known by its flight; and does one not hear what is said?”

“I was hearing,” said the lady prosecutor, “that she is all the time reading little books and that even her husband is heartily sick of these little books; Lieutenant Giberishsky was relating that the colonel is often minded to cast them into the fire.”

“Oh, *Maman*,” said this lady’s eldest daughter with an expiring voice, raising upwards grey eyes, which, in defiance of all her efforts, she could not turn languidly-expressive, “you did not say how the lieutenant assured us that she is writing a romance, which will soon be put into print.”

“Well, to be sure, a novel of morals!” cried the lady chief of police with a malicious smile. “These meek ones do love to make a show of virtues, which are not to be found in themselves.”

“Well, why is it that you suppose her to have hidden vices?” said a voice from the group. “I have long known Madam Holzberg and I assure you that society would gain much, if there were within it a few more women like her.”

“Ah, my God, a sympathetic intercession!” retorted the lady chief of police under her breath and her look turned to that quarter with such a fury, that the two ward-policemen over by the door, in their terror, doffed their hats.

At this time there entered the hall a young woman of about twenty-two years, not a beauty but well-formed, attractive, dressed extremely simply: without a single flower or a single piece of bronze jewellery. From the first glance it was possible to say of her – not at all plain – but a second glance gave rise to the desire to examine her features closely and the more you were scrutinising them, the more reluctant was your gaze to turn away from that sweet face. Her dark eyes timidly looked out from beneath long, black eyelashes; in her smile there was something indescribably kind and the shadow of melancholy would often flit across this face but a forced cheerfulness would overcome it; in despite of the fear and the almost childlike shyness, her bearing was noble and even a little proud. She was looking about herself, as in former times a Christian in the Roman arena looked upon the savage beasts, trembling before their blazing looks, their sharp claws but rising in spirit above their ferocity and strength, aspiring with joyous hope towards the heaven that was close at hand. I felt sad to look upon this uncommon woman, born to embellish through herself the choice of humanity; it was sad to see this radiant, poetic soul encircled by a swarm of venomous wasps, which took a pleasure in stinging her from every side. In the provinces the position of a man of higher intellect is unbearable; but truly awful is the condition of a woman, whom Nature itself has set above the crowd.

“Your colonel’s wife wished to astound us with the artlessness of a shepherdess... How sweet that is!” said the wife of the chief of police to a particular officer, as they made haste, much as that was possible with her short-little legs, so as to overtake Mrs. Holzberg and be the second couple taking to the floor.

The *polonaise* dragged on interminably; the governor danced one turn with all the spouses of his subordinates, strictly observing their seniority in rank, and the governor’s wife did so with all the officers, strictly observing the graduation of their good looks. Finally, in accordance with her wish, a waltz was struck up.

O waltz, so greatly defamed and yet so beloved of the dancing world, if thou hast anywhere retained thy purity, then it is in the crowded halls of provincial towns, where the adroit dance-partners do not support their ladies but often hold on to them so as not to lose time with the music and get their feet entangled with those of the following couple; where the long spurs of cavalymen, giving no quarter, stick into tender female legs; where the smell of pomade, which many of the men so lavishly apply to their hair, compels their dance-partners to turn aside their little noses and ardently wish for the completion of the round.

At this time Mrs. Colonel Holzberg was, in great emotion, gripping the hands of one young girl; in spite of all her efforts to govern herself, the tears all but gushed forth from beneath her eyelashes and a bright flush lit up her pale cheeks. This maiden was looking upon her with no less excitement but she seemed a little older than Mrs. Holzberg and knew better how to manage her feelings. A few curious glances were

directed at them but in that first moment of joyous meeting they did not notice anything.

“Vera,” Mrs. Holzberg was saying, “was it thus we thought that we should meet? Ah, how distressing it is to have such a reunion here, at a ball! It brings me back to the moment of our wretched parting, you remember, beside the freshly-made grave of our mother! How many years has it been, during which I have not received even a line from you? Say, did you know that I am married?”

“I did but I did not know precisely your husband’s surname, neither that nor your place of residence.”

“Are you still living with that relative of yours?”

“She and I have come to stay in these parts.”

“Praise be to God! Now I am no longer alone in the world!”

“Olga! You still are that same ardent hothead. Compose yourself, dear one. Do you see, how we are creating a very absorbing scene for the curious? Tomorrow I shall be yours for the entire day but today forget about my presence. Here comes your dance-partner, the *quadrille* awaits you; go then, until we meet again.”

And, Vera, having freed her hand, hurriedly disappeared into the crowd and went away to the changing room, so as to recover from an inner commotion of her own, which had taken hold of her, at variance with the assumed indifference at this unexpected meeting with the friend of her childhood days, the sister of her heart. Mrs. Holzberg mechanically held out her hand to her dance-partner, a young landowner of that province; he was recently arrived from Petersburg, played considerable part in local society and was attracting the universal attention of the feminine sex, notwithstanding

his black tail-coat, an item that had become an object of scorn, since the time that two mounted-artillery batteries had taken up quarters in the town. The young landowner led her out for the *quadrille* and placed her facing the governor's wife. The strains of Rossini were heard; everything came into motion; jostling and clustering the couples trotted bustling from one place to another; alone among them the colonel's wife remained immobile, as if the memory of the past had driven from her mind the sense of the present moment.

"Madam Holzberg, your turn!" a mocking voice squeaked, passing close by her.

"Your turn," her dance-partner repeated in a bass-voice.

She came to herself and danced through the first figure but in the course of the *quadrille* she lost the time of the music a few times, made a muddle of her figures and gave irrelevant replies to the Petersburger dance-partner. He, playing with his diamond-stud buttons, gave her an occasional, perplexed sideways look and complacently struck up poses before the great mirror.

The next day everybody was making a great deal, in confidence, about the unheard-of disarray of Colonel Holzberg's wife, during that time when the 'Petersburger' had been dancing with her. Many suspected that there was between them a long-standing acquaintance; some were making this known as a reliable fact and the all-knowing wife of the chief of police was already relating with regard to this situation some highly amusing anecdotes that she had derived from the glances of the colonel's wife and from her own surmising. Poor Madam Colonel!

You must know that at this time three individuals were the objects of relentless attention on the part the inhabitants of this town – Mrs. Colonel Holzberg; then the wife of the Colonel Lifletkov who commanded the other battery, and the newly arrived from Petersburg *Monsieur* Noraritsky – but each of these from a different cause. The first they could not pardon her coldness towards a society that breathed petty envy and gossip, towards that ulcer on provincial towns; nor her predilection for the solitary life, her estrangement from all acquaintanceships and especially the simplicity of her costumes, which were without any adornment. The second had risen up as a dangerous rival of all the fashionable ladies of the town; twice in the year she had sent from Moscow entire consignments of costumes; she was quite justified in considering herself a beauty and on the parquetry she was as truly commander to her officers, as was her husband to them in the field. *Monsieur* Noraritsky occupied minds for this following reason: Noraritsky did not have relatives in the town and his estate was not in need of attention – why, therefore, must he move for the entire winter from the capital to a dunghill of a town? Without a doubt, said the men, he has been dismissed from the service. Without a doubt, said the women, he did not find in Petersburg a woman after his own heart and he has returned to his native region to seek out a second birth or a first love or, to speak more plainly, a lawful wife. How could one fail to take note of a man, from whom one might, on occasion, win a considerable sum? How, on the other hand, could one not notice a man of about thirty years with great side-whiskers, with three diamond-stud buttons on his shirt-front, a fellow who would so sweetly

lounge on a chair before *pianofortes* and sing “*The Talisman*” and “*The Red Pinafore*” in a half-bass, half-tenor voice and who could fall back on the eight-hundred souls, whom he would inherit from his papa, located at a distance of fifty *versts* from the town? By all such marks of esteem, each step by Mesdames Holzberg and Lifletkova and by Mr. Noraritsky was the basis of a new piece of scandal. And in this winter, to make matters worse, there were as many balls and banquets, as would not been known in those parts since the time of the Battle of Kulikovo. Each and every day the ladies were crowding the old wooden stalls; the merchants were hanging out the most stylish gauzes and fabrics; at each ball young girls and ladies were appearing in new dresses and with new prospects.

The second daughter of the public prosecutor had already become well enough acquainted with Noraritsky; he would always dance the *mazurka* with her; but sometimes he appeared not indifferent likewise to the daughter of a retired general, who had at one time gone away to be educated at a school and for this reason still wove a charming spell with her childish innocence and sweet playfulness; and sometimes his tolerant gaze would land on the daughter of the head of the merchants’ guild, heiress to two large houses and several hundreds of thousands in ready money. These three *Graces* were grappling between themselves, chasing after the heart of the *Adonis* from Petersburg, now one would outpace the others, now she would fall behind again in sorrow and in rage. When Mrs. Colonel Holzberg had appeared at the ball, Noraritsky had danced the first *quadrille* with her. That in itself was enough. The lady colonel was on every tongue. He

also wished to dance the *mazurka* with her but she declined and went home. He, meanwhile, spent the remaining part of the evening wandering about with his hat in hand, not dancing and hardly speaking with anyone, something that very seldom occurred with him. What a broad canvas for scandalmongering! All were up in arms; all were beginning to hiss with fury! A week later Noraritsky made a call on Holzberg and the colonel invited him to dinner for the following day. Towards the evening of that day everyone was relating that the lady colonel had put on a new silk bonnet and for the dinner had ordered two additional courses.

But let us return to the day, which immediately followed that of the ball. At ten o'clock in the morning Vera was already to be found in Olga's rooms and, without tiresome onlookers, they were able to give themselves up to their true feelings.

Imagine two flowers that have grown up from a single stem, that have been nourished by the same dew, refreshed and caressed by the one breeze; which beneath the threatening thundercloud would nestle up together and afterwards merrily flaunt themselves underneath the spring sunshine, admiring each the beauty of the other. Imagine, then, that a cruel hand had broken them off from the bush they were born on and, not content with this, had severed their still suffering stems and planted the flowers in different places, under different skies, in unfamiliar soils. The poor flowers did not wither but could the one spirit, which had been violently divided into two, give life to them both as it had done previously? Torrid heat scorched them, the storm cloud drenched them with freezing rain, both alike bowed their orphaned heads towards the earth; they had no one from

whom to expect a comforting glance, no one to encourage with a cheerful smile; and with indifference they awaited the whirlwind, which would tear them up from this new root and turn them back into dust.

Thus did Vera and Olga grow up; Olga's mother had taken in the orphaned Vera and she had forgotten her orphanhood. In a happy southern land, on a southern Crimean shore they had lived, making no count of the days. They woke with the sun for study, for outings, for discussions without end; throughout the short southern winters they all the more ardently devoted themselves to learning under the thoughtful guidance of their mother.

But in order to understand the characters of these two young persons, it is necessary to know a little of their education.

Olga's mother, an intelligent, almost learned woman, was something of a freethinker. Not by dint of her own meditations but, during those summers, when every, to outward appearance, brilliant aphorism becomes imprinted in the intellect, she had read all the works of the philosophers of the French school and she considered the immutable conditions of the life of woman to be a fabrication, fit only for the multitudes. In her own life she had not experienced those powerful reversals, which sometimes force ingrained freethinkers to direct their gaze heavenward; she lived quietly, without variation: she fulfilled all her responsibilities with a strict accuracy, she was kind for her own sake and for that of others and she brought up her daughters in accordance with these principles. They studied everything with the exception of that, which ought to serve as the foundation for all else; but their mother was

endeavouring from a tender age to cultivate in them, to the highest degree, a sense of nobility; the objects of their veneration were the actions of great men. Self-sacrifice, magnanimous behaviour would set their youthful hearts a-tremble and from their earliest age they were accustomed to feel and think after the examples of the ancients. Never did a lie defile their mouths; their promise, once given, they would hold fast to and fulfil in the face of all circumstances, in imitation of that Roman, the victim of his own *parole*, who caused tears of wonder to flow down their cheeks. Add to this an utter seclusion, where nothing would disappoint their notions, where, to the contrary, everything nourished the seeds of fruits, not of this century, that had been sown in them, where the ruins of the fortress of Genoa and a high cliff were continually rising up before their fervent imagination, now as the ancient *Capitolium*, now as the Tarpeian rock and where a library of several hundred tomes was open to them from their thirteenth year. Picture all of this and you will understand their upsurges of the heart, pardon the excessive fancifulness of the mind. You will say that there are not now many examples of such an upbringing. I do not know! Certainly, there are now by far fewer of them, ever since in the household education of the young Balzac has taken the place of Cicero.

Yes, after six years' separation they saw one another again; but how the years had altered them! Who would have recognised in the quiet, slow step of Olga, in her pale face and the sad expression of her eyes, in the cold and harsh judgements of Vera, in her indifference to all feelings of the heart, who would have recognised, I say, those frisky

maidens, who like chamois used clamber up unassailable crags, laugh on the brink of chasms, who greeted the sunrise standing upon the wreckage of an ancient Christian place of worship, admiring the purple colour of the morning clouds and the reddened surface of the sea? Who, drawn by an attraction not understood by themselves, used to seek out perilous places, with delight would seat themselves on the high precipice, beneath which the waves were boiling and there, in great rapture, would read at first Plutarch, later on the inventions of the Countess de Genlis and the Baroness de Staël?

So many stories, so many mutual confidences! For the first time, after a lapse of six years, they unburdened their souls, each pouring into the mind of the other feelings that had long lain heavy upon them.

“Yes!” Vera went on, having related to her friend the events of her past years, “this disappointment, this unexpected moral blow transformed my entire existence. I saw how out of place in our society are a high understanding, magnanimity, nobleness and I drew up on my own account an outline of my future life. I am, in the true sense of the word, alone in the world, no one loves me, no one troubles over me, and I conceived the idea of applying all the tender feelings of my heart, all that lies within it, of devotion, love, friendship, everything, to my own person. The narrowest kind of egoism, that is my path. I am not able to love with my first, pure love and I do not wish to give myself over to any kind of secondary feeling; and therefore I shall never be married. I shall leave this world as an incomer leaves a foreign land, where he was constrained to speak the language of others and where he

counted his sojourn as merely so many strange meals. I wish and I am endeavouring to bring myself to such a degree of indifference, that my feelings will become incapable of any kind of tenderness. I wish to make myself impervious to all mental, spiritual sensations and to live, like the oyster, solely through the body.”

Olga was listening to her in amazement; this language was for her new and incomprehensible; for her, who, quite to the contrary, was casting from her all earthly thoughts and was living solely by the spirit; in the social world she dragged out a dozing existence, almost mechanically fulfilling the obligations imposed on her by society and waking to full life only when alone by herself, with her spiritual interlocutors.

Having examined her position you would forgive her her excessive dreaminess. There are individuals who are born into a society for I know not what reason, because into this world, full of cold theorising and calculations, they bring with them a spirit that is avid for profound, true feelings; a mind, which, seeing the entire meaninglessness of the masquerade veil of proprieties, can never reconcile its own behaviour with the opinion of that despot – society, and above all it bears the hope for its own portion of happiness! These individuals, constrained to follow along the common rut, must, like the enamoured *Duc de Lorraine*, while holding burning coals in the palm of the hand, reveal them to no one, though their very body be reduced to ashes along with the coals – if they do not wish to make themselves the object of ridicule. Never will they become accustomed to the conditions of society, they will be a burden to themselves and to others, and even

their voice is so alien to the whole world that it will nowhere find an echo.

This had happened with Olga; with her education, with the form of her thinking and of her life up to her fifteenth year, how could she accept her lot in the way that thousands of women would have accepted it? The death of her mother ripped her from a peaceful refuge, separated her from the friend of her childhood and cast her into the arms of a particular relative, an elderly colonel, burdened with his own family, who, while fulfilling the duty of a Christian and of a relative, thought with unease that it would, probably, be no simple matter for him to get a girl, who had no dowry, off his hands. But then the young Colonel Holzberg – young, that is, by the time-reckoning of her uncle, on whom the rank of colonel had been conferred in his fifty-eighth year – just imagine, was taken with Olga and offered her his hand: he could not proffer his heart; ‘for said item was not to be found in the quarter stores of His Worship’. Her uncle gave thanks to Providence and, not deliberating long, made his decision known to Olga: two weeks later the poor orphan, her heart not yet restored from that first blow, her reason dulled by the intoxication of unexpected happenings, not knowing herself what she was about, was standing at the altar by the side of a man, whose face she hardly knew.

Little by little the stupor passed off; Olga came to herself and her position began to present itself to her more clearly. She saw herself bound to a man, with whom she could not have even the least amount of sympathetic feeling. In the years of her maidenhood, or better of her childhood, it was not love, which exclusively occupied her thoughts; sometimes after

reading some novel of morals she would dream of her ideal one; for a few days she saw in every twinkling star eyes, which were burning into her heart; but this dream would soon fade away and give way to another, and Olga did not regard love as a necessity of life, as the object of a woman's existence. Had her husband been a man of intellect, possessing the least amount of intuition, he could easily have bound her to him, by sometimes making a show of sharing in her childish enthusiasms, sometimes demonstrating the peril of these to one in her position, he would have been able to cure her of intelligence, numb her, turn her materialistic, shape her after his own pattern; certainly that was difficult, but not impossible. But Colonel Holzberg was a worthy German; a glorious master on his battery, a bold cavalryman, at times both blacksmith and saddler, at times a horse-dealer that no Gypsy born could hoodwink; he knew every detail of a cannon and of the ammunition wagon but the heart of a woman was, for him, an impenetrable strongbox. He had married because he had turned forty and it was high time to start a family; because he had liked Olga and he had supposed that, though she did not possess a dowry, she might, nevertheless, constitute his happiness in winter quarters.

Regarding woman's happiness he had a short and plain conception: gentle handling, indulgence of whims and a stylish hat – this was what, in his opinion, could not fail to make a woman happy and to which he, on entering the married state, had mentally pledged himself by his signature. Thus, fate had not only not given this poetical woman a husband, who would have been capable of understanding

her, making use of all the treasures of her mind, soul, heart, of taking pleasure in the beauties of her inner world or, at the very least, of burying them in the ground and hiding them for ever from her own consciousness but, further, it had flung her among people who were utterly unlike her.

Do you know what kind of life it is that the so-called military lady leads? Olga had married and a few days later their carriage rode out into the muddy streets of a Jewtown. Ragged, half-naked beggar-women, raising a screech, were surrounding this for them rare sight; on both sides of the street extended the wretched, soiled shacks of peasants and of the clan of Judas; at every turn one's glances encountered a repulsive filthiness. The carriage halted in the yard of one of the hovels, which was freshly whitewashed and enclosed with a new fence. This was the colonel's living quarters. A soldier was pacing with measured steps alongside of a green sentry-box and past this Holzberg led his young wife into the meanest room, covered with carpets; on the walls hung sabres and pistols, in all corners were smoking implements of different sizes and merits and tobacco pouches stood out boldly, beaded and silken ones that had been embroidered for the then unmarried colonel by gentle neighbours. Three similar rooms made up their dwelling. In the morning her husband showed her around the sheds, the stable and so on; for dinner a group of officers, one dozen-strong, would assemble and set the small room ringing with their noisy conversations; at times in this merry hour the subordinates would pay compliment to the colonel's lady, each in accordance with his wit, and after the meal all would disperse to go to sleep; Holzberg would also go to bed and

silence would set in in the humble dwelling, interrupted only by his sonorous snoring. When it gets dark, for want of anything better to do, the officers again gather at their commanding officer's dwelling, light a pipe and sit themselves around the samovar. Olga barely manages to fill the glasses, as they are quickly drained; they talk of drills, horses, dogs, pistols, saddles; they interpret their orders, complain about the slowness of advancement; meanwhile the smoke from the pipes is growing thick, a dense cloud is forming, filling the entire room, candles flicker weakly in the smoky atmosphere, surrounded by a crown of reddish-blue colour, like the flickering of a lantern in air that is compressed by a frost of twenty degrees below freezing. Now the tables are arranged for cards and in the small room are heard only the technical exclamations of cardplay, incomprehensible to Olga, who has not been initiated into the mysteries of these hieroglyphs, devised at one time for someone witless but now providing occupation for a good half of the sensible people. Occasionally the most fearless from among the officers make an incursion upon the literary domain, dull witticisms and puns are exchanged in a crossfire that is, happily, of short duration; soon an important question about the abilities for front-line service of Bombardier such-and-such or about the hooves of a recently delivered horse replaces the question on the leading-lights of letters and a salvo of tobacco smoke from all mouths covers everything in a shroud of stifling darkness.

And today and tomorrow and eternally it is always the same and the same; the years, in which kingdoms are built up and torn down, seem to have forgotten about the little Jewtown.

From time to time the coming of some general or other, some or other inspection would disturb this order of things in Olga's monotonous life; then the military men were all fussing, epaulettes and cartridge boxes were beaming in new gilt and no one wanted to smoke in the rooms; but the superior would only sweep down and fly off again and the very next day everything would revert to its former state. One day the captain's wife came to congratulate Olga on the news or on the rumour that her husband was soon to be made a general.

"Oh, do not say such a thing to me!" cried poor Olga in her despair. "For there will come into my home twelve additional, never-quenching pipes!"

Such was the life that Olga had fallen into. At first she tried with all her heart to form a friendship with her husband, to discover within him a person she could speak with, an echo of her own feelings; but he would laugh, yawn and interrupt her enthusiastic dreamings with a request to order for the next day's dinner a little more ham or, becoming bored with hearing sounds that for him carried no meaning, he would begin to play, after his own manner, some song, which would outrage the very existence of poor Olga.

In this situation feelings are like the plant touch-me-not: receiving an unpleasant contact they shrivel up and wither; and although, having had respite, they return to their former state, nevertheless, the imprint of the careless hand remains upon them. Olga had grasped her situation and conducted no more conversations with her husband, except about the most commonplace things. And this difference of mind, this mental solitude reinforced in her the tendency towards

seclusion and dreaminess. Her youthful, fervent imagination, finding no kind of nourishment in its surroundings, confined itself within its limits and derived fire from out of its own mines. Whenever her husband, together with his entire company of officers, would set out on a foraging raid upon the name-day cakes of the neighbouring landowners, then only did Olga breathe easily – give herself up to her books, her poems and to her fantasies, and to these she was indebted for no small number of her happy moments, for the few pale rays of light in this cheerless, dismal life.

Having finally become accustomed to her condition, she in part reconciled herself to it. At times happy dreams of childhood and want of knowledge as to Vera's fate would still trouble her peace; but before her in the hazy distance there shone but one tiny star and towards this she was making her way with regular steps, looking about her as a weary traveller will look upon the monotonous steppes, when up ahead the night's resting place is already in view. This tiny star stood shining above the grave.

Now, after many years of separation, Olga and Vera had unexpectedly met in the small town, into which the artillery-battery commanded by Holzberg had been transferred. They became inseparable in spite of the wrath of the town's ladies. As before, Olga avoided their acquaintance and their balls, so far as this was permitted by decorum and her husband, in whom it was impressed, like an eleventh commandment, that women love balls and dresses and, consequently, his wife ought to love them.

By virtue of this conviction Holzberg one day passed on to his wife his invitation to a soirée, which, according to him, it was

not possible to decline. Half of the town was already assembling in the drawing-room, when Mrs. Colonel Holzberg entered. A sudden *sshh* hissed from every mouth and beneath the welcoming smile of the hostess a viper-tongued laugh had not yet managed to hide itself.

The governor's wife seated her on the armchair by the side of the divan – the divan was set aside solely for the accommodation of those of highest rank – and the little wife of the chief of police, who was placed beside Olga, having cast a significant glance upon her, leapt up from her armchair and in a loud voice called out to Noraritsky, wondering if he might like to take her place?

The dancing had not yet begun; the conversation was now sparking up, now dying down, like coal in the fireplace at the beginning of autumn; the young girls had crowded into one corner and were whispering amongst themselves; ladies in bonnets sat decorously with gilded teacups in their hands, while very young women fluttered from one place to another or, with their little heads thrown back, conversed with the officers standing at the backs of their armchairs.

Noraritsky languorously settled himself on the place, which had been offered to him by the obliging wife of the chief of police and he began with Olga a conversation – it is true, I do not remember about what but I can aver that Noraritsky never conducted trifling conversations.

“Pavel Nikiforovich!” the wife of the postmaster called out from the side facing, “what was that parcel, which you received today from Petersburg?”

“I have had sent a number of French novels; I cannot exist without the newest things from the world of literature – the

most recent poems by Hugo and the new poem by the renowned Anatoly Borisovich T.”

“The new poem from T.!”

“May we not have the use of your new books?” was heard from every quarter.

“The poem by T.! The poem, about which so much has been bruited in the journals even before its appearance in published form! Oh, *Monsieur* Noraritsky...”

Even Olga, with glowing face and tightly gripped hands, directed pleading looks towards him. Noraritsky graciously bowed before his public as a mark of his consent and addressed Olga:

“Are you also to be numbered among the worshippers of Anatoly T.? Do you admire his poetry?”

“Do I admire it? Can you show me the woman who does not find in his heavenly poems the echo of her own feelings, who is not delirious about him, does not adore him?”

“You are much too susceptible to rapture,” said Noraritsky. “Indeed, he is a person of great talent but he is far too fond of abstract descriptions, far too verbose.”

Olga threw him an indignant glance and, not deigning to make a retort, turned away towards the old general’s wife, who, having already drained her third cup of tea, was casting glances full of maternal love upon the tables for cardplay that had been made ready.

At the mid-point of the ball the dances were interrupted; from an adjacent room there sprang forth a lad of about twelve years of age, dressed in a fantastical Cossack costume, with a tambourine in his hands and, for the entertainment of those present, he threw himself into dancing out *kazachoks*.

This pleasant surprise was repeated without fail at every ball given by the celebrated *Amphitryon*, who, passing all around the hall, would exclaim: "What a talent! Is it not so?" To which the onlookers, bowing, always replied: "A veritable talent, your Excellency! An absolute genius!" Fatigued by this tasteless spectacle, Olga had in the meantime gone away to the ladies' changing room, taken refuge behind the long screens and, having thrown herself upon an armchair, without any thought sank into a reverie.

Ten minutes had not passed, when several ladies fluttered up to the large mirror and their voices began all at once to babble:

"Oh, my God, what an intolerable evening!"

"My shoe has cracked."

"Is it possible to be more stupid than that Enamelijk? He has worn me to the bone with his stories."

"Did you all see how ill-dressed *Marie* is this evening?"

"When, pray, has she been better?"

"Will they at some time cease to exhaust us with this unbearable *kazachok*?"

"This evening Madam Holzberg was most sweet."

"In particular when that blush began to play about her cheeks, following her words with Noraritsky."

"No, this is, by all that is holy, unlike anything else under the sun!" spoke one voice with warmth. "It is not enough to disgrace herself in the home; no, she must also cause a scandal such as this at balls."

"What has happened?" enquired a number of voices with curiosity.

“Can it be that you do not see? Madam Holzberg, this paragon of innocence, this flower-of-the-fields... disgusting to look upon!”

“Why, what is she doing? Tell us, please!”

“Ah, my God! The entire town is speaking of this, everyone sees it, all apart from that flat-cap of a husband. If only someone would enlighten him!”

The impatient questions were repeated; that voice was continuing:

“Is it possible that none of you remarked the overt liaison with Noraritsky? He is spending his days and nights in her home, in public gatherings he devotes himself solely to her, everywhere he is extolling her mind, talents. What more do you need?”

“I have been a number of times in Madam Holzberg’s home but I never met Noraritsky there,” objected one voice.

“Is that all? Is there only one door to her house? She is not such a fool, as that she would not try to conceal her affair; but neither are we such fools that we could not uncover it. I well know her dwelling; we lived in it for two years, when my husband had only just been nominated chief of police.”

Olga heard these absurd accusations; they fell upon her heart like molten lead, but pride would not permit her to counter them: the charge was too base. As if she would enter into adulterous relations! As if she would ruin the purity of her own conscience, stain herself in her own opinion, which for her was more precious than all the opinions in the world! As if she would deceive her husband and defile her lips with a lie. No, this accusation was like a filthy snowball, that

having struck against her granitic chastity, had sprung back and with its fragments dirtied solely the accusers.

She rose; her heart was bursting but her eyes were blazing with the fire of a noble self-assurance and on her lips came a smile of disdain. She issued from behind the screens and slowly walked past the crowd of women that had mustered about the tub-thumping wife of the chief of police. And when one meets women such as this – thank God, these meetings are rare – without willing it, the question arises in one’s mind, from what peculiar stuff have they been created? Are they the incarnation of demons or nature’s mockery of humanity, a divine wrath sent down to earth along with famine and plague? The beauty, the politeness, the chastity of a woman seem to be to them a personal insult. Back-biting and slander are as necessary to them as air and if the gates of the Mohammedan paradise were opened to them with the stipulation that they not dissect anyone’s behaviour, not pour bile over a single white flower, which might happen to be in their path, then they, with a sigh casting a look into the bright garden of happiness, would return to the muddy streets of their earthly abodes, so as to have simply the pleasure of back-biting and slandering.

“What did I do to them?” poor Olga, with tears in her eyes, was the next day saying to her friend. “Where did they unearth the basis for this ridiculous fable?”

“Do you still wonder about this? Is it possible you don’t know that their own feelings and their own characters are the foundation of all tales, the mainspring of all their opinions? Plumbing the depths of their own black thought, they see in

it, how they would act in a similar case and in this manner they draw their conclusions on all things.”

“Oh, my poet, my Anatoly, how justly do you say...”

“Yes, that is more sensible; read a few stanzas of your favourite poet and be comforted over this absurd slander, on account of which, be assured, not a single one of your hairs will turn grey.”

“From Mr. Noraritsky,” said the servant, who had entered and handed Olga a parcel.

At the mention of his name her brows again darkened: she reluctantly took the parcel in her hands, but she had hardly unwrapped it when her face brightened. With an expression of blissful joy she cried out, clasping the package to her breast:

“Him! Him! I shall once more hear his sounds, once more read his celestial feelings!”

“Olga!”

“Vera!”

“Is it possible that the chill of the years and of experience have not cooled your childish passion for a person wholly unknown to you? At fifteen it was merely amusing but now...”

“For an unknown person? Vera! What does this mean? Can even you say that he is a stranger to me? Anatoly unknown to me? My ideal? My poet, whose songs awakened my childhood imagination, gave it the breath of life, educated my soul? Who mitigated my solitude, who comforted me in grief, who redoubled my joys, if not he, if not Anatoly? And you say that I love a person, who is unknown to me! No, I have become intimate with each one of his thoughts; I know all the

turnings of his noble heart; I worship him; I shall sacrifice the last joy of my life, not one rich in delights, the final drop of my blood, for his happiness, I shall render my soul for the prolongation of his life... Yes, yes; I love him but I do not love with an earthly love, it is not a person that I love... No, no, Vera, you are mistaken!"

"Wait a little, you will awaken."

"Do not wish such a thing for me, Vera, if you love me only a little! Listen to what I shall tell you and then judge, if your wish be well-founded; I am completely separated from people, there is not a single thread binding me to the world, no friendly support of a family, no acquired friendship, no hope for the future, no desire, no fear. What is there for me to hope for, what to fear? What upheavals might improve or further darken my lot? My past, present, future, everything was concentrated and perished in the fraudulent aim of my predestination. I am walking in a dense fog, not knowing either whither or wherefore I go! And can you possibly think that I would have sufficient strength to bear such an existence, if it were not illumined by even a feeble heavenly ray, if in all of Nature not a single echo answered my sensations? In society and also in my own home I play a rote-learned part; it is only alone, in my own company, that I become that, which Nature created me to be. But can I always be contented by myself? Is there in the world a being, which thinks with my thoughts, feels with my heart, looks with my eyes, in sonorous song gives life to my dreams? There is not in me a fine feeling, no noble thought, that he could not clothe in the lively forms of his language, not embellish with the unearthly harmony of his verses, every

throb of my heart finds an echo in his inspired songs, each word of his loudly answers within my heart. And you wish to deprive me of this final, solitary consolation! What will become of me if I grow cold even towards this feeling? Which way will my barren existence turn, with what will it be filled? Take from a beggar the last kopeck and say to him: now your burden is light! Rip a lunatic from out of the one dream, which gladdens and makes him happy and affirm, that now he is cured of his disorder... Oh! Do not wish it... No, no!"

Exhausted from the mental agitation, Olga fell into an armchair and covered her glowing face with her hands. Vera took hold of her hands and, with the solicitude of a mother, looked into her face.

"Olga!" said she. "I am older than you, both in years and in bitter experience! Listen to what I shall say to you: nourish your dreams, take comfort in them, at the moment they are not harmful. But, as friend and as sister, I wish that you may never meet your ideal or, at least, no sooner than in twenty years from now: then, then, perhaps, the meeting would be without danger!"

Olga did not answer; her eyes were cast down in thought, her breast was heaving.

Spring came early. The willows began to turn green; all the trees were covered in a delicate fluff and rosy buds; the broad river gaily rolled out blue waves, liberated from two months' imprisonment.

Outside of town, on the steep bank of the river, a grove stands out in all its beauty. To this place do the town-dwellers hasten on the first of May to celebrate the coming of spring; there are arranged picnics, perambulations; but the

time for such things was not yet come and only two women, muffled in winter coats and wearing large hats, were strolling along the narrow paths of the small wood.

“Why is it,” said one of them, “that spring always casts a melancholy over me, instead of rejoicing, as all living creatures rejoice at it? Autumnal fogs, winter snowstorms do not occasion in me such a heavy feeling as this; it lies heavy upon my breast and sometimes reduces me to tears without any apparent cause.”

“It may be, that this season reminds you of our childhood, our cheerful Crimea, its green gardens? The recollection of the past is always attended by a feeling of sadness, because all that was ill in the past is consigned to oblivion and we remember with regret solely the happy moments. For this reason it does seem to us to be better than the present.”

“Yes! How wonderful that time was. Do you remember, Vera, do you remember those southern evenings beneath the vault of a clear sky? Do you remember that warm, fragrant air, where each breath is a delight in itself, where all is quiet, so that it is possible to imagine oneself the only living being in this Eden, where the far-off breaking of the marine waves, like the sound of a pendulum, mingle with the mild murmur of the fountain?”

“Oh! Vera! What world, what splendour of great halls will take the place of this delight? Thoughts crowd the mind, obscure apparitions drift before my eyes... That is not waking but nor is it sleeping; wakefulness cannot to such an extent free itself from all mundane thoughts, become pure, rise up; sleep cannot be so real, cannot pour such tranquillity, such

inexpressible silence into the feelings... Vera! Do you remember this?"

"Do not distress me with these remembrances. Truly, you are breaking my system of coldness and indifference. I try to avoid all that could to some extent disturb my person but you, often in one breath, turn all my sensible intentions to ashes.

"Do you know," Vera added with a smile, "that sometimes you force me to regret it that I encountered you? Now, if fate once more separates us, a bitter feeling will be left in my mind and I shall have to toil once again at my recovery from this unpleasant ailment."

"And, perhaps, this may come sooner than you think; my husband has been saying to me that we shall hardly return to this place from the training camps."

"But while they are in camp you will remain here?"

"That may be, if we do not hear anything certain before the time of their departure."

"But there is no need to look into the future. There is business enough in the present! What reason is there to shoulder an unnecessary burden? But let us return to your melancholy: you were, were you not, making ready to read that message from your poet, which you received at the start of the spring?"

A shade of sorrow came over Olga's face, now made bright by the spring air.

"Do not speak in mockery of my poet and of my melancholy or you will compel me to conduct even with you the conversation of a social call and to express drawing-room feelings."

Vera gave her a reproaching look; Olga was continuing:

“In the springtime I the more keenly feel my orphanhood, Vera! This air is seething with love... yet, I am alone! The questions about the purpose of my existence agitate my soul more strongly: who will settle them for me? All and everything round about me is mute. I sometimes compare my lot with that of the blade of grass in the field, which grows, lives out its vegetal life, without action, without feelings, advantaging no one and not knowing for what reason it was created. And I live like it does; and I shall wither from the winter frosts, leaving behind no traces of myself. Is this a life? The life of a creature animated by the divine breath?”

“Splendid! It is a pity that is not in verse; it would turn out a considerable elegy. But who, in your opinion, is happy? Is it not the woman, who is anxious for her dozen children? Or the empty-headed coquette, who is laying out nets for everyone, only so that she will one day be caught in them herself? Or the soulless poppet, who is waltzing her way through life, skipping into every fashionable boutique, in rapture trying on every new hat; who would, if such a thing were possible, as she is about to go down into the grave, have a shroud of the very latest fashion sewn for her? Ah! Which of them would you like to be?”

“The choice is difficult! But your survey is too one-sided.”

“I have specified for you the situation of the greater part of womanhood; exceptions are very rare.”

“But what evil genius so perverted the destiny of women? Now she is born, in order to please, attract, entertain in man’s moments of leisure, to dress up, dance, to exercise dominion in society but in truth to be a paper ruler, to whom

the jester bows in the presence of observers and whom, in private, he throws into a dark corner. In social gatherings thrones are erected for us; it is our pride that decorates these and we do not notice that these tinsel raised-chairs have but three legs, that we have only to lose our balance a little, for us to fall and be trampled by the feet of the crowd, which understands nothing. Truly, sometimes it does seem, as though God's world was created solely for men; to them the Universe with all its mysteries has been revealed, language, arts and knowledge are also for their benefit; freedom is for them and all the joys of life. From the cradle, woman is fettered with the chains of proprieties, is enmeshed with the terrible: 'What will people say' – and if her hopes for domestic happiness are not realised, what remains for her outside of herself? Her poor, limited education does not permit her even to devote herself to important occupations and she must, against her will, throw herself into the maelstrom of society or else drag out a colourless existence up to the grave!"

"Or else choose the fantasy and attach herself to it with all the strength of her heart, fall in love at a distance, send by the mail that is carried upon zephyrs some sighs and declarations to her ideal, who is two thousand *versts* away, and live by this platonic love. Is that not how it is? I completed your thought."

Olga turned away from her in dissatisfaction. Yet another month flew by; the artillery unit left the town, accompanied by the sighs of the wives and the curses of a number of husbands.

And Olga is again thrown into a new world. Once more unknown faces, unknown places. This wandering life is most

unappealing for a lady. However, there is in the character of a human being the capacity to get used to the most unpleasant of situations. The cramped hovel, the view of a dirty street, the semi-savage Borderlanders with their stoic lack of concern and indifference to everything, so long as they have their bowl of dumplings and goblet of vodka, all of this is not in the least alluring in the present moment; but, taking one's leave of these things, an involuntary sigh escapes from the heart; the secret chain of habit has been attaching us to them. But in her nomadic life the poor 'military lady' does not dare to become friends with anyone or with anything whatever; the awful phrase 'Marching Orders' hangs eternally like a black cloud above her! The agreed signal will sound and you leave everything, tear your heart away from everything, to which it had become accustomed, which was dear to it; pack your feelings into a travelling bag and go you know not where. If any situation at all may constantly nourish the thought of eternity in the unoccupied heart of a woman, then it is the wandering life of officers' wives, who, while not sharing the duties and occupations of their husbands, share only the inconstancy of this way of life.

A momentary visitor, everywhere a newcomer, the wife of a military man is never confident that the following week will find her in the same place, that Fate will again bring her together with the person, whom she has befriended in defiance of good sense. Thus she wanders from land to land, until having stumbled upon the edge of the grave, she will depart for the eternal resting place.

What sort of people does Olga come across? We shall not follow her. An endlessly anxious life in true reality is often very monotonous upon paper.

The months rapidly succeeded one another, changing nothing in Olga's mental condition. The people surrounding her considered her to be cold, indifferent, often dull: she did not in the least attempt to dissuade them of this; she took delight in preserving, in the very depths of her soul, the ardent feelings, the aspiration towards all things higher and her adoration of the poet; she concealed her inner life, as a miser hides his treasures in a dense forest and, when all about is falling asleep, when for everyone the night is beginning, then only does it dawn for him; he sneaks up to the particular place and, alone, in freedom, he abandons himself to his raptures. So also Olga, alone in her shack, often forgot her state and was carried far afield in her thoughts; she had visions of the dreams and hopes of her advanced childhood; dreams and hopes that had been buried along with her mother.

But Olga was not always occupied solely with the inner life of her poet: with indescribable pleasure she would listen to chance stories of his way of life, his inclinations, his habits; sometimes it seemed to her that one line, written by his hand, would be more precious to her than the Vatican library. But he did not know of her existence; and it was in vain that Olga directed towards him her soul and her thoughts; he is on high, far off and does not notice her in the crowd of his worshippers.

But here now is Olga in Petersburg. In Petersburg, do you say? Yes, she is here, she is in the theatre; the theatre is full,

the boxes are glittering; the stalls are dappled with a thousand heads. They are giving the first performance of an original Russian drama, noisily the door of the neighbouring box is opened. Olga timidly glances back at the feathers and diamonds of the ladies arriving. By her side sat the small, fattish colonel with a huge ginger moustache.

“What! Holzberg! What in glory brought you here?” was heard from the neighbouring box.

“Ah! It is you Clovenov,” cried Holzberg. “It has only been three days, since I arrived in Petersburg.”

“On duty?”

“No, I am on leave; I am trying to obtain a comfortable posting. I do not know, whether I shall succeed.”

The colonel, having settled himself in the corner of the box, started up an unending conversation with his old comrade.

The curtain went up, all fell silent, the play was beginning. Olga was suppressing her breathing, so as not to utter a single word. ‘What harmony, what thoughts!’ she was exclaiming in her soul. Each expression was falling onto her flaming heart as heavenly dew. And in whose head had these sonorous thoughts come into being? From whose spirit had flown this ardent love for our native Russia, this rapturous feeling for the weal of the fatherland? Even if the handbill had not revealed to Olga the name of the author, she would have guessed it; she would have divined the name of Anatoly by fellow feeling – by this inspired poetry – for he alone was in the position so eloquently to give voice to that, which every Russian heart feels in silence. Round about her was heard a whisper: “Obviously a provincial! She is wholly absorbed in what she is watching!” From below were directed to her

importunate lorgnettes and telescopic sights of all dimensions. But was she concerned about them? During the short intervals she would have a dull look around her but all of it seemed to her chaos; inside her ardent head there was also chaos but it was a chaos full of celestial feelings. She would come up from her oblivion and give her soul some rest for a minute, only to plunge with renewed strength into the magical world of her rapture.

The play came to an end; the thunder of applause shook the building; in a frenzy the amateurs of the dramatic arts were crying out, calling back the actors and actresses but the greater number were looking for the author. Olga's entire soul was in her eyes, when these cries were ringing out: she was looking at the box, in which he was supposed to appear, clasping her hands to her breast and seemingly trying to quieten the beating of an anxious heart; it was not the flush of a rose that covered her pale cheeks – no, they had begun to glow with the crimson colour of blood that was afire and, in that moment, she could have been taken for a priestess of the Delphic oracle, waiting with hope and longing for the coming of the spirit. But in vain, the author was making no appearance!

Holzberg, throwing the boa onto his wife's shoulders, was whispering:

“Let us go, Olinka; I really need to sleep.” She was not listening. In the two neighbouring boxes they were passing judgement on the merits of the drama.

In the box to the right: “Great, excellent, a marvel!”

In the box to the left: “Turgid and frivolous! Saccharine!”

In the box to the right: “He is a man of genius!”

In the box to the left: “He is one of those writers, whose genius or talent is sufficient only for one book, that is, for their first. They shone for one day and then faded away for ever.”

Olga was not listening.

The cries were beginning to quieten, the favoured actors had come out on stage, taken their bows and gone off, the boxes were emptying; the colonel was tugging at his wife’s sleeve, assuring her, now in Russian, now in German, that he greatly wanted to go *schlafen* and Olga, with the bitter feeling of cheated hope, turned about towards the doorway, preparing to leave.

The door of the box to the left opened and the ladies began to babble with one voice:

“Ah, Anatoly Borisovich, we congratulate you! What a success.”

“You reduced me to tears!”

“Why did you not appear when they were calling for you?”

“Glorious, *mon cher*,” a fat general was saying, pressing the hand of the man entering. “Splendid, Brother Anatoly!”

“Anatoly!” cried one more voice.

Olga, forgetting all decorum, not noticing the looks her exclamation had drawn to her, had taken hold of the back of a chair so as not to fall and two large tears had started from her eyes, which were fastened with inexpressible feeling on the poet, on her ideal.

To many this will seem excessive and unnatural in a woman of twenty-three years. But I ask for it to be born in mind that Olga had never possessed the skill of measuring her feelings by the yardstick of society’s stipulations or of setting them

limits, that she did not know how to marvel coldly at what was wonderful. Her soul retained all the ardour, all of its primitive strength; the springs of this soul were as yet new and not weakened by frequent use; the objects of the outside world had up till then slid off the icy shell, in which she had enclosed her finest feelings and the sacred fire of these feelings had not yet turned cold from contact with the all-powerful: 'not done in society'.

Holzberg, who had gone a few steps out of the box, now returned, not seeing his wife behind him. "Olinka, are you feeling faint? Probably from the heat!" And the rotund colonel began fussing and ran into the corridor to find a glass of water.

All of this lasted no longer than two or three minutes. Olga recovered herself: her involuntary state of distraction was followed by great embarrassment; she noticed also the derisive glances of the ladies nearby and the deeply searching look of Anatoly. Whose authorial pride would not be moved rather by this exclamation flying out from the bottom of a heart, by this disarray, than by all the greetings of fashionable ladies, who a minute before had been damning the play?

The colonel had returned, dragging along with him an attendant with a large carafe of water.

"It has passed off!" said Olga and disappeared from the sight of the amazed women looking on.

Holzberg rushed after his wife, the crowd held them up; they could only move slowly forwards. In this moment Olga felt on her face that same searching look: it penetrated to her soul, threw her into confusion and set her trembling; she would

have liked to force her way through the crowd, to run; but the indifferent crowd, as if to taunt her, was barely moving and often brought her so close together with the ideal, that she could feel how the locks of her hair were moved about by his breathing. They rounded the interminable corridor and went down the stairs: Olga does not look around, does not dare to raise her eyes but she feels that he is here, alongside of her. With a smile the poet is looking at her, taking pleasure in her confusion as a tribute to his genius. But now the cold wind has begun to blow upon Olga through the opened door and it has refreshed her constricted breast. She did dare to raise her eyes and they encountered fiery, black eyes, which with endearment, almost with love were looking at Olga.

“Colonel Holzberg’s carriage!”

Olga threw herself through its door and, almost fainting, fell upon the cushions of the carriage.

What happened to her after this meeting? That is difficult to explain; and she least of all understood the troubled state of her soul. Her spiritual love for the poet had received more essence. With an all new enjoyment Olga read again his works and it seemed to her, as though she were reading them for the first time. Now, in expressing through his words her own love, her own melancholy, she was no longer relating to a vague form, that flashed at times beneath the stars, at times in the misty distance; her ideal had taken on earthly shapes; ever present before her like a conscience burned the black eyes, floated the dear form of the poet. But she had grown so used to the innocence of her spiritual love that not a single earthly intention disturbed its purity. She would

have recoiled in horror from anyone, who should say that she loved Anatoly and that, in thought, she had already betrayed the vow, made to her husband. Olga was deceiving herself but not her husband.

This had happened in September, which is cheerful and bright in southern parts, where the breeze still plays among the green leaves of the trees and the sky again takes on a light, springtime colour, but is foggy and rainy in Petersburg. However, as though in defiance of the customs of the two climates, in that year on the banks of the *Neva* a warm sun glittered and for three whole days the quiet, clear weather continued; all the inhabitants of the capital were hurrying to their acquaintances in their *dachas*, so as to bid farewell to gardens and to the fresh air. Olga also travelled to a female relative of her husband, who had long been asking her to come visit, wishing to become acquainted with her.

Mrs. Slowitova, a retired general's wife, occupied on one of the city's islands a middle-sized, handsome house with an attic, a green roof and a garden, which was intersected lengthwise by two straight paths, sufficiently long for the walks of those inhabitants of the capital with straitened waists, who, having strolled four hundred paces along them, may be entirely exhausted and have the pretext for afterwards resting the entire day on the divan. Mrs. Slowitova lived alone but occasionally her two sons, who had posts in Petersburg, would travel out to her for dinner. One of these was a poet, that is her wrote verses; the second had translated from the French three dreadful novella's, which had caused his blood to turn cold and his hair to rise up, of its own accord, higher than his quiff, which was outmoded à

la jeune France, and on this account he considered himself a man of letters. Notwithstanding these minor failings the young Slowitovs were good sons and very pleasant young people.

Mrs. Slowitova was very glad at Olga's coming, applied many kisses to the spouse of her dear nephew and begged her to spend some days in her home.

"Tomorrow Georginky and Vasilinky are to come. You shall become acquainted with my children."

Mrs. Slowitova was full of the praises of Georginky and Vasilinky and their literary exploits.

As expected, the next day, while her hostess was making herself ready in her room and Olga was sitting on her own in the garden underneath a lime-tree, a number of carriages drew up to the porch of the little house. Olga did not think it fitting to rush to acquaint herself with the dear brothers and so only abandoned her spot, when she was sent for by her hostess.

As she was approaching the drawing-room she heard a number of merry voices and, God knows for what reason, she felt a kind of fear, when she had put her hand on the bolt. She stood for a few moments in a strange excitement, neither daring to open the door, nor to go away. Finally, laughing at her own confusion, she entered the drawing room.

"Ah, Olga Alexandrovna," cried Mrs. Slowitova. "Please, come make the acquaintance of and become friends with my sons."

And she introduced her in turn to Georginky and Vasilinky.

"And here also," she was continuing, "is my niece Eugenia Antonovna Fraternaya; with her you will surely become friends..."

Olga turned. Before her stood a young, pretty woman, who was saying something friendly but further off, by the open window stood... He did. He! Anatoly! The poet was standing, leaning against the wall and with a smile, in which there twinkled a shade of craftiness, when Olga started on noticing him, he looked at her with eyes that were, as though greeting an old acquaintance.

“Olga Alexandrovna! Now with this gentleman you are, surely, acquainted from a distance,” said the indefatigable Mrs. Slowitova, ascribing Olga’s sudden confusion to provincial bashfulness. “Anatoly Borisovich, come here, let me introduce you to the wife of my nephew, Mrs. Colonel Holzberg. My dear Anatoly does not forget me, an old woman, who used to look after him as a child. Moreover, they are men of the same profession,” she added, indicating the natural-born poet and her own son, the home-made poet, “so how could they fail to be friendly!”

The day passed very merrily. Eugenia Antonovna was one of those women, who charm equally through their kindness, whether it be in a large company or in the domestic circle. Anatoly was extraordinarily jolly, he joked, laughed and made everyone laugh. Georginky and Vasilinky played their subordinate roles passably well. Even Olga put aside her usual coldness and became cheerful. The little wife of the chief of police would have instantly remarked, that the icy shell of her heart was beginning to melt from the rays of Anatoly’s poetic glory and, for the first time in her life, she would not have been speaking falsehood.

Olga sensed a new existence. Anatoly was constantly by her and she could not fail to see his now melancholy, now ardent

glances; she could not fail to notice, that his voice became more expressive and even more tender, when he was speaking with her. While Eugenia was singing an elegy of his, which was full of passion and entreaties for a return of affection, the poet was looking at his secret admirer with such feeling, his eyes so eloquently seconded every word of the elegy, that poor Olga stood, hardly breathing, leaned against the wall and the tears, which dared not gush from her eyes in the drawing room, flooded and pressed upon her heart.

Three days passed; no one thought of departure; only Georginky and Vasilinky did set off back to Petersburg, fearing that their superior in the department, who did not appreciate their literary merit, might call them to account over their prolonged absence, quite as if they were ordinary functionaries of the fourteenth grade. That evening Eugenia and Olga walked a long time in the garden. The poet, needless to say, accompanied them; Mrs. Slowitova, fearing the alluring charm of autumn evenings, had gone off to her room. That entrancing moment of the dusk had arrived, when at one side of the sky a rose-coloured strip of evening glow is still showing, while in the other innumerable stars are already lighting up, a haze is creeping up on objects and clothing them in vague, fabulous forms. This moment always inclines one to dreaminess, to meekness, to love; it seems as though our thoughts, like the surrounding objects, assume obscure forms and turn into visions of fancy. It is well known, even if I have not said so, that a conversation between young people of different sexes, no matter what way it is constructed, will unfailingly come down to debates –

melancholic or philosophical, depending on the characters of those conversing – about happiness and about true love.

Just so did the conversation between our strollers, which to begin with had concerned theatres and *belles-lettres*, also end. Eugenia Antonovna, who had married by her own choice, was maintaining, that there is no other happiness on earth, than to be married with a person one loves and to live without regarding either the past or the future. The poet proved in the most poetical manner that, apparently, true love does not require the legal trappings and so forth, that which always and in all languages the young poets have demonstrated. Olga was silent during these debates: and what could she say? What had she experienced of love? She was beginning to hide her secret thoughts even from herself. This is the first cautionary voice of our conscience. Why is it that we so seldom heed it?

So as to involve her in the conversation, Anatoly turned the talk towards a tale, which had been published in a certain journal, this had found its echo in the hearts of many women and was the object of general conversation. Eugenia was bothered by the unrealistic events of this tale, not knowing how to interpret their meaning. Olga, with her characteristic ardour, defended the author.

“I know only this,” said Eugenia, “that this tale brought me anguish, bad dreams; its unhappy hero...”

“Do not call him unhappy!” Olga interrupted her. “He loved so much, so powerfully, felt so deeply, that, in comparison with the miserable existence of the greater part of people, he was not completely unfortunate!”

“If you call not completely unfortunate a person, who suffered, was able fully to feel his suffering and found his only comfort in this sad recognition...”

“You are forgetting,” the poet objected, “he was sure that the person he loved returned his affection; and is not this certainty the greatest comfort through all sufferings, whatever impediments and distances may separate the lovers? To know a love, that is pure, of the spirit, having cast aside all the low passions of sensuality, beneath the lovely outer-shell of woman to love only the invisible soul, to penetrate the most secret turnings of this soul, to see in it oneself, to read one’s own love... Oh, no heavenly powers are capable of taking this happiness away from us. Place a universe between lovers of this kind, their souls shall not separate and even here at times a ray of happiness will flash upon their horizon.”

The poet was laughing in secret over his own rapturous speech but it produced the expected effect upon Olga’s soul. Anatoly’s character was utterly at odds with those sentiments, which he expressed in his works; fiery and sublime in poetry, in essence he was the most commonplace kind of man, greedy for all pleasures, a hothead in the round of his comrades and a Lovelace among women.

“Poets talk more about love than feel it,” said Eugenia, “and you, I suspect, are basing these propositions solely upon theory. Have you experienced a love of this kind? Have you weighed its meagre consolations against its torments?”

“No, up to the present time I have not loved,” he said expressively, gazing upon Olga, who caught and understood that look through the dusk of evening. “I avoid love,” he was

continuing, "I fear it, perhaps, with a foreboding. Who knows, whether I have not been apportioned the fate to encounter a person, who is cold but incapable of any deep impressions or whose affections are already engaged elsewhere or, which is worst of all, who will gratify with a brief encounter and, changing fancies, as one does gloves, will again present herself as free and easy and will not think of it that she has crumpled and mutilated the entire existence of a human being."

"And you also deny woman the finest capacity of her soul!" objected Olga, wounded by the attack. "Do you deny her the capacity to love powerfully, constantly, unconditionally, with complete selflessness, knowing neither obstacles nor fear; the ability to concentrate all the strength of the heart and the mind into one feeling, to weld together one's existence and one's love? No, do not deny woman this great gift. It is our property, our strength, our genius!"

"Have you loved?"

"I? Well, I am married..."

"What an answer! Love and wedlock do not always live together in harmony. I asked, if you have loved?"

Olga blushed, a secret vexation awoke within her.

"Yes, I have loved and I love... my husband," she answered with pride.

"Then by Eugenia Antonovna's system, you should be in a state of bliss: you love your husband and I had the good fortune to assure myself of his tender attachment to you."

"You did?"

“Yes, do you remember, in the theatre? When you became faint... from the heat; and when the colonel ran with such solicitude to fetch water.”

Olga was silent but in her heart indignation strove with the pleasant sensation of the recollection. Anatoly also fell silent, being satisfied, that he had assured himself of his victory.

“I am cold,” said Olga. “Let us go inside; tomorrow I shall go back to Petersburg.”

That very evening she took her leave of her hostess and at daybreak she went off, taking away with her memories, delicious for the heart and disturbing for the conscience. At the halfway mark a dandified cabriolet raced past the carriage of Mrs. Colonel Holzberg. Anatoly gave her a courteous bow.

He soon found an opportunity to make the acquaintance of Holzberg and it was the short-sighted colonel himself, who introduced him to Olga, stating that the verses would appear even more fine to her, when their author himself should read them. For the first time the opinion of the colonel was fully concordant with the opinion of the colonel’s wife.

The time flew quickly for the young day-dreamer; her dreamer’s ideal was continually by her and even during the times of his absence she was not parted from him. Always and everywhere she was meeting him or his name – his fame. In the morning, as she takes her tea, Olga unfolds the newspaper that has been brought, her eyes fall upon Anatoly’s verses or upon encomiums to his talent; at noon she travels out to enjoy a stroll and from the windows of shops continually look out portraits of her poet, which have recently gone on sale; at two o’clock she calls upon her

acquaintances and the tables of every drawing-room are decorated with his works in various formats and coverings; in the evening she goes to the theatre: there an even greater delight awaits her; there the thoughts are given more force through the expert playing of the actors, the bewitching scenery, from the harmonious sounds of the orchestra. There, God knows through what magnetic rapport, at each passionate expression in the play Olga would meet the profound, love-laden gaze of the poet.

Yes! Olga already loved him with all the power of an ardent soul; he could not be in any doubt of this but he was too well-schooled in the science of the female heart, that he would not comprehend at the same time the idealistic purity of her thoughts, that he would not see clearly that Olga was abandoning herself to this love with an instinctive faith in the sanctity of her feeling and that the least hint at earthly relations would degrade him in the eyes of this pure woman, would bring her out of her delusion, would show her the things in their true appearance. That is why he expertly crept into her heart; in a gradual and imperceptible manner he trained her to think his thoughts, to forget her own opinions for his opinions; in short he carefully wound himself around her, as a snake does a sleeping lamb, so as not to awaken it ahead of time and, in that moment when the poor thing does start up, to smother it in its embrace.

What incited him to such an arduous undertaking? How could he, the favourite poet of all women, amid so many enchanting, beautiful ladies, occupy himself with the humble Olga and dedicate to her the hours, which were craved in more than one brilliant circle. What had suggested to him

this desire? Caprice? Novelty? A much gratified self-esteem? Not long before this he had broken off a liaison with one of the Petersburg beauties and, casting his glance about, did not find an object capable of replacing his previous possession. Moreover, the very difficulties of this new conquest were enticing him, who was so spoiled with easy successes. He was at that time not occupied with any composition and, resting upon his laurels, he was ready to flutter from a garden rose to a violet of the Steppes.

But what was at this time the occupation of the colonel? Oh, he had also found in Petersburg his ideal! Signboards with depictions of sausages, ham, oysters and Strasbourg pies smiled so invitingly to his respectable imagination, the meals and the wines of the capital were spilling such an empyrean ecstasy over his sixth gastronomic sense, that he granted Olga the full freedom to go out into society or, sitting in her room, to dream about whatever pleased her. He took it for granted that his wife travelled with him but the objects of his present adoration, alas, remained in Petersburg. Over and above this, he was having meetings here with numerous colleagues, was looking for a favourable posting and on various other matters he was scouring the city day and night. Olga was no more attracted by the balls of the capital, than she had been by the banquets of the small towns, into which destiny had thrown her. The circle of her acquaintances was very limited and talks with Anatoly made for all the cheer of the poor day-dreamer. Often they spent the long winter evenings together, just the two of them, conversing or analysing the compositions of the poet: Olga listened with delight to his commentaries on passages, which seemed to

her incomprehensible, jealously she enquired about the objects of his tender epistles and elegies, about his old occupations, about his mode of life and the poet, captivated by her ingenuousness, took her into a labyrinth of novel conceptions, all the paths of which were so familiar to himself. The poet liked Olga's innocence, not this girlish innocence, which proceeds from an utter ignorance of society and of nature – the innocence of a woman, an innocence, which has its beginning in a blamelessness of spirit and of intentions, free from anything that could make the slightest, secret reproach to duty and bring a blush of conscience to the face. They had no doubt as to the mutual attachment between them and spoke of it with pleasure but as yet the fateful word had not flown from Anatoly's lips and the words 'friendship', 'sympathy of souls' skilfully disguised the passion, which already embraced all of Olga's existence and was rapidly bringing the poet closer to his aim.

One evening Olga was sitting alone in her room; round about her all was quiet; only the coals in the fireplace were crackling, now blazing up, now dying down and a strong wind would at times howl in the chimney; outside a blizzard was raging, snow was tapping on the window, *équipages* were moving about the streets, the talk of people passing by, the crying of coachmen, the crunch of wheels and runners were all coming to her hearing. This life outside of the house reinforced even more strongly in her the feeling of solitude. Olga was saddened, for more than a week she had received no news of Anatoly, before this, seldom would a day go past, without his either visiting her or providing comfort with some token of remembrance; now thousands of conjectures were

exciting her mind and she did not dare dwell upon even one of these.

At the doorway the little bell sounded. Olga started and leapt up from her seat. Why this? Twenty times a day this peal would sound and did not alarm her. But what does the loving heart of a woman not divine? Anatoly entered the room; with a glad cry Olga rushed to him:

“Where have you been for so long? What is it, Anatoly?”

“I have been unwell,” the poet answered, pressing her hand to his lips. “Olga... Did you notice my absence?”

A single glance was his answer but this glance told the poet of his triumph.

After any prolonged sadness, joy is all the stronger, Olga’s face beamed with gaiety; she did not draw back her hand and she could not speak; her voice was breaking; she gazed upon her poet with an indescribable feeling.

After this first confusion their conversation became animated and cheerful, but Anatoly upset it with a mournful conclusion: he reminded Olga of the approaching moment of their separation and, at this terrible word, her heart the more fiercely went out to the poet.

“Dear Olga,” he said finally, after a minute-long silence. “I should say to you... Do not look at me with such surprise; yes, you hear a change in my tone; this cold, proper formal tone we have been using up till this moment, a model of the prickly proprieties of society, has been unpleasantly clinging onto our talks; let us discard it. I should express what weighs upon my heart. How many times have I repeated to you that up to that point I was a stranger to love; that not one narrowed waist, not one schooled glance of the beauties of

this place had brought a palpitation to my heart? I was melancholy, Olga, I craved love but it, gossamer-winged fay, it only allured me and flew ever further away... I encountered you, oh my Olga, I fell in love with you, I love thee... Do not take fright at these words, my sweet, dear one, our hearts have understood them for a long time and what does a word matter? A name? An empty sound! Love and friendship – are they not one and the same feeling? Oh, do not withdraw your hand from me! Say that you also love me?”

“Enough, for God’s sake, enough! Do not downgrade my feeling for you with the name ‘love’; there is no name for it in our language... Why, why have you said to me...”

But her conscience was loudly saying over and over – he spoke the truth!

“Do not take this sacred name of love in the vulgar sense, in which it is profaned in society; understand me, my darling; my love is pure and sinless...”

But the poet’s gaze was avidly fastened upon Olga’s heaving breast.

“I cannot, I should not love you. I am married!”

“Do you also cling to this word? The poor creature! They wheedled and wrung from her tongue that fatal ‘yes’ and this ‘yes’ is supposed to smother within her heart all the feelings of nature, is supposed to fetter her with a chain of thorns to a man without a soul.”

“He is my husband! Anatoly, he loves me and I... I... honour him!”

“You are deceiving yourself, Olga; you wish to persuade yourself of esteem for a person, whom you do not respect; veneration, no more than love for him, are not lodged in your

heart. And he? You say that he loves you! Holzberg in love! I dare say, if it were to say to him – your wife is in peril: he would slowly finish eating his pie, wash it down with a glass of stout and then, to be sure, he would set off to rescue his beloved wife. Olga, awaken from your delusion!” he continued with an imploring voice. “You love me, your spirit has long belonged to me and in this moment it is in agreement with me... forget the world, as I have forgotten it for you! Become my other self, my genius!”

Within Olga a dreadful conflict was taking place; her feelings spoke strongly in Anatoly’s favour; they belonged wholly to him but her conscience and also religion were joined in battle against her love. She was pale, her lips were trembling and her eyes no longer dared, endearing and trusting as was their wont, to direct themselves at the poet. Losing patience Anatoly rose.

“Forgive me, Mrs. Holzberg,” he said with a forced coldness but also in quavering and distressed voice, “forgive me; it is I, who was under a delusion; I was supposing that after many years of arduous and colourless existence I had met, at last, a soul akin to my own; I thought that you understood my love and that you loved me with that same readiness to sacrifice everything in the world for this sacred feeling, with which I myself had sacrificed everything for you; at times it entered my thoughts, that the very Heavens had sent me in your guise a comforting angel and I worshipped you. Madam, I loved you and I forgot about everything, that was not you... Olga! Why, having revealed bliss to me, do you set up barriers to it, on account of empty prejudices, for the pitiful regulations of society, which people devised only for the

throng. You are a pure, angelic soul, you could cast off from yourself these grubby fetters, you could... But forgive me, madam, forgive my madness and my love! Farewell, Olga, be happy; forget about me... in your husband's embrace," he added with a bitter grin and he took a step towards the doorway.

Olga threw herself wildly towards him:

"Anatoly! Anatoly!" she cried, abandoning all her reserve. "You will drive me into madness. What do you want, what do you expect of me? My love? Can it be, you do not know, that it is you I breathe? You fashioned my soul, you brought it to life with a sacred fire and it long ago devoted itself to its second creator... What sacrifices do you ask of me? I can be your sister, your friend... your slave, if that is what you desire but... Anatoly! Take pity on me; do not destroy this blessed world of mine, in which I have only just begun to live in spirit."

Anatoly drew her towards him and passionately clasped her to his chest. Olga did not resist and, not aware of anything, she inclined her head onto the poet's shoulder.

"My Olga," he whispered and he fixed his hot lips upon her shoulder. Olga sensed the danger of the poet's pure love and she tore herself from his embrace, in an agitation beyond description she fell onto the divan.

For about a minute Anatoly remained motionless; his eyes glittered; he was biting his lip in indignation; finally, having slowly approached Olga, he stood before her with an awful appearance of despair and resolution, he fastened upon the unhappy woman a look both piercing and cold and uttered in a voice, which put her trembling in every limb:

“This then is your love, your trusting, devoted love? A single kiss frightens you! But I can suffer no further this half-love, this half-trust. Be mine, Olga, mine unconditionally or fare thee well. I shall not be long bewailing my delusion; look upon me; I carry in my breast the germ of death and, it may be, soon you will come to return me my hot kiss but it will not warm these already frozen lips! Farewell, Olga, be happy, if you can...”

He hurriedly disappeared behind the door. An indistinct groan escaped from Olga’s breast; she flew in pursuit of him but on the threshold she collided with the fat figure of the colonel. For the first time this meeting horrified her; she leapt back from her husband and tears gushed from the eyes of the overwrought Olga.

The colonel stood looking at her with his grey eyes wide open and, at last, he cried out in a pitiful voice: “Spasms, och, my Lord and Saviour, what spasms these are!” And, hastily freeing himself of his three-cornered hat and sabre, he trotted off to fetch his *Doctor Hoffman’s Droplets*. But Olga had in the meantime recovered from the terror, which the recollection of the aspect of the departing poet had inspired in her: in truth, in that appearance there had been something genuinely infernal.

The time was flying past; Olga does not see Anatoly. How much did she undergo and how much suffer during that time, concealing her struggle and her torment beneath a cold exterior, receiving and paying calls, listening to jokes and smiling, when all the while, with a slow hand, anguish was gripping her heart! This cannot be understood by those, who have never found themselves in similar circumstances. And

how strange it is that, when in moments of greatest sadness we are forced, while concealing matters of the heart, to present ourselves to society, to a crowd of cold but always observant individuals, then it is more easy to display a rabid gaiety, than tranquillity and indifference. Laughing, exciting others to laughter, we intoxicate ourselves and seem to be unfeignedly cheerful. And, as if purposely, in her presence no one recalled Anatoly: it seemed, as though everyone had forgotten about his existence. One hundred times the fatal question was prepared to fly from her tongue but, uncompleted, it would die upon her lips. She remained silent and deeply, inexpressibly was suffering in silence.

One day Olga had been invited to a ball. Perhaps she would meet Anatoly there or, at least, would hear of him! Still another strange hope decided her to accept this invitation: Anatoly was living just a small number of paces away from the house, in which the banquet was to be held; perhaps, in driving past his dwelling, she might catch a glance of his dear features through the window-panes or as little as a light twinkling from his room! An idle dream, a fancy but the heart, fatigued with vain waiting, will become enthused by the least hope. And here we see Olga in ballroom attire; here she is arriving among a merry crowd. It is already late, the company is busied with dances and with cardplay. She moves away into a side-room, a few persons known to her were gathered in a small circle. Hardly has Olga appeared in the doorway, when one of the ladies received her with the question:

“Olga Alexandrovna, do you at all know, what is the current state of our poet’s health?” Olga was confused.

"I have not seen him for some time," she answered with forced indifference.

"He is dangerously ill," continued the obliging lady. Olga winced, as if she had been wounded.

"Idle talk, my dear," objected another lady. "My cousin saw him the day before yesterday at Countess Ombroso's residence and he was very gay."

"That cannot be so; he is ill and not going from home," said the first lady.

"Who is this Countess Ombroso?" Olga asked with animation.

"Can it be," answered the second lady, "that you do not know of this *intrigante*, who is now turning the heads of our *fleurs de poix*, as Balzac names them?"

"An Italian?"

"Almost; she is a Russian but for the sake of Italy she has even forgotten her native tongue; she has travelled back, apparently, to take possession of some legacy or other."

"Together with a husband?"

"Yes, but she is to be numbered among those women, who do not make a public display of their own husbands. And what is more, no one knows with certainty, whether she is a widow, a married woman or the wife of several men; this is the third time, that she has made an appearance in Petersburg and every time she is using a different surname."

"But it is well known," said one old dame, "that her first or her second husband is Baron Lilienstrom, who is now still living in Lettland. She threw him over and made off with some Italian chap, who in his turn abandoned her."

"Have you seen this countess?"

“A number of times in the theatre, *belle femme*, and always surrounded by a crowd of menfolk.”

“This most beautiful countess, like the noonday sun, has blinded all who looked upon her and inflamed the coldest hearts of the inhabitants of northern climes.”

“What is surprising about this? How would they not surround a flower, which blooms and spreads its fragrance to all alike?”

In that moment Georginky entered the room.

“Here we have *Monsieur* Slowitov, who will say more precisely, how the poet does.”

“Is it not so,” said the first lady, turning to him, “that T. is very ill?”

“Is it not so that he was the day before yesterday at a *soirée* of the Countess Ombroso?” said the second lady.

The young fellow, having cast a meaningful glance at Olga, answered loudly:

“My poor friend! He was not at the ball; he is not travelling out anywhere. He is fast approaching the evening of his life. Today I was at his side and, judging by the words of the doctor and by some signs, his disease is incurable, for its origin is to be found in his mind and not in his weakened body.”

“Oh, my Lord! Tell us, what is it ails him?”

“Who is able to penetrate the secrets of others, particularly those of a poet? But I have this time past noticed that a concealed sadness was consuming him, that he was trying to conquer it but no, witch that it is, it has conquered him.”

“Might it not be, that he is in love?” the first lady was continuing. The young man shrugged his shoulders, his

glance once more turned towards Olga and it plainly conveyed a reproach.

“Whether he is in love, I do not know,” answered Georginky after a silence. “But I am sure that if my friend loves, then you will not otherwise extract from him the secret of his passion, than by tearing out with it his soul. If he loves unrequited, then he will die, certainly he is dying. I know him!”

Olga sat quietly; nothing in her revealed an inner anxiety; even the smile, that a few minutes before had flashed upon her lips, had not disappeared; it was a sudden and total petrification. The poor thing’s hands had become colder than the bronze fan, which she was gripping with such force that the bronze became bent in the slight hands.

The quadrille had finished in the hall; a number of new persons entered the small drawing-room; the ladies, who were sitting on the divans rose and mingled with the newcomers; at this moment Georginky walked past Olga, threw her a severe look and spoke, as though to himself: “My poor friend! Poor Anatoly!”

Olga began to tremble. Inexpressible grief and terror burnt through her heart; in her head there was noise and a ringing sound; every gauze dress seemed to her an apparition; any sound the moan of a dying man. And she was not by him! And she could not heal him with tender care, could not transfuse her own soul into his breast and die a happy woman, bequeathing to him her life and her breath! Olga rushes into her hostess’s study, separated from the drawing-room, and timorously looks about her; in front of her on the writing-table are the poems of Anatoly, together with his

portrait. Avidly she seizes hold of this sweet image, clasps it to her breast, kisses it but her burning lips only touch cold paper and she hears the final words of the poet: 'You will come to return me my hot kiss but it will not warm these already frozen lips!'

"I must see him!" she exclaims. "I will and shall see you, my Anatoly!"

The mad thought flashed in Olga's disordered mind. A woman of the social world would not entertain this thought or, at the very least, would think it over and weigh it a hundred times, before execution; but for a woman who has received from nature uncommon strength of spirit and of heart and was brought up in the midst of a wild country, for a woman with a set of ideas free from any dishonest intentions, for a woman, who walks the path of ideal virtue, the proprieties of society were as nothing. In this moment no thought was even entering her mind about the indecency of the action contemplated: what did it matter to her what unknown people would say, when a kindred spirit, preparing itself, perhaps, to leave this world, was summoning her for a final farewell. Besides, she was thinking that an absence of short duration from the ball would not be remarked upon. She knows the layout of the rooms, hurries along the corridor to the back-porch and hurls herself headlong down the stairs.

Here she now is, alone on one of the most crowded streets of Petersburg; pedestrians go past her, jostling; noisy talk deafens her; snow crunches beneath her feet; the frosty night stings her delicate little face; like a shadow she glides along by the wall. Across the street on the second storey of a tall

house shines a little light; she runs across to the other side of the street; her little satin shoes sink into the deep snow; in front of her there are gates. Olga stopped for a moment, caught her breath, once more she looked back to the house, from which a mad love had enticed her, and now here she is underneath the dark vault of the gates. Here is the door, there is the stairs. She hurriedly runs up. Here is the house-number eleven. Her hand reached for the bell and fell away. But voices sounded in the corridor, in fright Olga tugs the handle of the bell, the door opens, she runs into the lobby. The sleep-dulled servant was not in the least surprised at the arrival of a woman. He led her into the hall, bid her await the master's return in his study and disappeared.

The astonished Olga was left alone. Trembling she goes through the door of the study, into which the servant had introduced his candle, before going off to his rest; in perplexity she peers about her; she sees Asiatic splendour, a floor, covered with carpets, along the walls light eastern sofa's, flowers in the windows, by the fireplace a pyramid of long *chibouques*. But, of course, all of this went unnoticed by Olga; in her horror she had been thinking to meet there the pallid, emaciated face of the dying Anatoly but encountered only the sleepy figure of the manservant and empty rooms. But where was he then? Or was everything that she had heard, that had rocked her being, was all of that merely a trick of the imagination? She takes her head in her hands, asks if she could have gone mad, if sleep could be confusing her with dreadful reveries?

Her legs give way; she sinks into an armchair. After some minutes, obeying an impulse that she was not herself aware

of, Olga caught up a pen, a sheet of paper! This sheet is covered in writing, she throws it aside, looks for another but in that instant the words 'Madam Holzberg' catch her eye. What is this? A letter about her? Will she read another's letter, she, accustomed as she was to hold such an act to be moral theft? But what did her name in another person's letter? Was it not to her that Anatoly was writing? That could be... and the fateful letter is once again in Olga's hands. It is an unfinished letter but not addressed to her, for a second time her own name catches her eye, and the demon temptation has conquered! She reads, she has read through but she cannot avert her gaze from these lines. Again she re-reads it slowly, pronouncing every word separately, as if her intellect cannot comprehend and weigh, what is written and suddenly the sheet falls out of her hands. Olga leaps up like one frenzied; the heart within her is beating; she reels and falls almost insensible into the armchair. This welcome oblivion was of short duration: with her first awakening to life Olga again stretches out her hand towards the fatal letter, again skims through it and at the first lines throws the sheet from her in horror. The torment of the poor creature finds its expression in bitter sobbing. Olga was sobbing like a child, as she had sobbed once in a distant country, when, orphaned, she stormed above an open grave, into which they were lowering the solitary link that bound her to the world and to people. Now for the second time she was standing above a grave and burying there her soul.

Would it not be diverting to read the letter? Here it is: 'How did you take it into your head, *mon cher*, at this time to go away to your regiment forty *versts* from the feasts and the

high life? I was utterly hoping to see you yesterday at the home of our Julia, she sang like an angel the final *trio* in the new opera and after the performance we most merrily took supper and drank off a celebratory goblet in honour of her musical abilities. *À propos*, do you know, in what an absurd situation I find myself? I dare not show myself in society and I only frequent the theatre in the closed box of the enchanting Countess Ombroso. My obliging friends, at my request, have put out a rumour of my being mortally ill. And for what reason? You may well laugh, Count; all for my pious, dull Holzberg; I must confess that I am sick of her already but I do not want, out of compassion, to leave unfinished a thing begun, I am bound to turn her to earthly thoughts. But let God attend to her; let us talk of my Neapolitan sorceress: she is making of my life a paradise, I did not think that I was still capable of falling in love to such a degree...'

At the gates there was the sound of an *équipage*. But is it he? Anatoly!

This thought returned Olga to herself. She rushes from the study, taking away with her the dreadful letter. The manservant opens the door for her, against her Anatoly is running in by the stairs, whistling a cheerful *aria*, for a moment all of the blood rushes towards Olga's heart... the carefree poet flies past, not noticing her in the feebly lit corridor.

"There was a woman here, Sir," muttered the sleepy servant to Anatoly, who had come through the door.

"A woman? What woman?"

"A stranger, sir!"

“Where is she then?”

“Well, right this very moment she ran off, like a madwoman, you probably ran into her on the stairs.”

“I did not, and it is a pity, I suppose, a new adventure; undress me.”

Anatoly, fatigued from a noisy feast, entered his study, on the floor lay a crumpled bouquet of flowers and a fan, which was familiar to him. In perplexity he lifted up the one and the other, a thought of the letter to his confrère flashed into his mind, on the tabletop he tosses around all his papers, the letter is not there and Anatoly guesses, what has come about. “So that is how the affair ended. Ha, ha, ha, well then, *addio, mia tortorella!* My platonic love! Now, I am yours, *bel idolo mio*, yours inseparably.”

And the poet calmly went to sleep and even in his sleep he did not dream of Olga’s torments; no, there appeared to him the splendid breast of an Italian countess and he did not hear the sobs of one deceived but rather the passionate babble of a triumphant lover.

Months passed; Olga slowly recovered from a nasty fever; together with life, the remembrance of the past was also restored. Awful recollections! How reluctant the heart was to believe them! But the letter is here, before her, she knows it by heart – and, in the ravings of the fever, how many times did she repeat with a wild guffaw: I am sick of her...

I saw a young little bird in the springtime of her life: for the first time she flitted from the dark nest; the sky, the red sun and God’s world were laid out before her: how joyously did her heart begin to beat, how her wings thrilled! In anticipation, she embraces the distance with them; in

anticipation, she is preparing herself to live and with this first attempt at flight she falls into the hands of the gamekeeper, who does not fetter her with chains, does not lock her in a cage; no, he picks out her eyes, clips her wings and the poor creature lives on in that same world, in which had been promised to her freedom and so many joys; she is warmed by the same sun, she breathes the same air but, bursting with longing, miserable and chained to the cold earth, she can only say over and over again: *not for me, not for me*. If she were locked up in an iron cage, she would peck her way out, fight her way through to liberty or, flying about, covered with wounds from the sharp edges of the iron, she would, without regret, part with the remaining half of her life, now that the better half had been taken away from her. But she is not in a cage; it is not hard walls that surround her, she is free, and at the same time everlasting darkness, everlasting idleness – that is the fate of my little bird! That is Olga's fate!

Holzberg finally did obtain a favourable posting. With the onset of the spring he left Petersburg and took up residence for a short time at *Tsarskoye Selo*, pending the full convalescence of his wife. The doctors were warning of a slow consumption and prescribing Icelandic moss, country air and frequent walks. Olga sadly shook her head, as she listened to these directions; to please her husband she complied with them but this miserable kind of existence wearied her and she would have kissed the hand, which, instead of Icelandic moss, had presented her with a glass of poison.

At last, a kind of insensitivity took possession of her. Slowly the days and nights flowed past: she did not number them!

Sometimes, coming out of this moral stupor for a moment, she would look around her – and in the entire Universe, there was not one single blade of grass, to which her glance could turn! Everything around her was empty; empty, as it also was in her soul.

By the clock, like a wound-up automaton, she rose, went to bed, took her walks. In an open carriage she was taken out to the gardens and there she would walk along deserted paths, in the shade of trees, that had barely begun to turn green. On one of the clear spring days Olga had been roaming for longer than was usual in the gardens and the fatigued woman sat herself on a stone, close by some man-made ruins. The wholesome air had enlivened her somewhat; she was awaking from her slumber, but not to joy: troubled memories, bitter feelings, crowded within her orphaned soul. The blue sky is beautiful, spread out above her, beautiful are the rose-coloured clouds in the west, drawn, as though with a net, by the boughs of the half-bare trees, God's creation is beautiful but – *not for me, not for me* – “Would you like to enter the chapel, Ma'am?” an unfamiliar voice asked her.

Olga raised up her eyes. In front of her stood an aged invalid, leaning on a crutch, who held in his hand a bunch of keys. He repeated his question. Olga rose and walked after him.

Through the dense bushes they climbed up by a stairs onto a platform. The invalid opened the door to a turret and moved off aside. Involuntarily Olga directed her gaze at the beautiful prospect, which unfolded before her. Magnificent palaces, the lovely cupolas of churches and golden crosses were silhouetted against the blue sky; lakes and canals, like mirrors, were reflecting on their surface the magical spectacle

and in the distance were heard the harmonious chords of wind instruments.

Olga enters the chapel. Here everything is quiet and tranquil; the high walls are not covered with any decorations, only on the marble pedestal stands a representation of our Saviour. A feeling of veneration took hold of Olga's soul. She leans against the wall and, having directed her eyes at the mild face of the Saviour, she sinks into profound reverie. For the first time after many days her soul is not poisoned with bitter thoughts, it is not of Anatoly, not of his base deception that she dreams: no, her thoughts strive to go further! Little by little, the silence of the place is communicated to her damaged feelings; before her, like shadows in a magic lantern, pass the scenes of long-past years: here is the shack, where her infancy passed so peacefully, where her notions of the world were developed, where she looked with such credulousness into the future and life seemed to her an uninterrupted chain of joys and delights. Here is her mother: she looks affectionately upon her child, it seems, blesses her infant-daughter for her long journey of life; here on the high cliff is the ancient Christian church and above it, high up in the heavens, burns the everlasting star, towards which so many times Olga's looks and thoughts have ascended. And everything had passed away, passed away irretrievably! Where was the innocence, where the freedom from care, where the belief in happiness? She did not know then that our dreams and bright hopes are as flowers in the sandy desert; that fate is a hurricane that will fall down, sweep everything away and the mound of the grave will rise up in the place, where the flowers of hope are showing in all their

glory. Now she had come to know this bitter truth and bleak anguish, like a serpent, stung her heart. Whither could she turn, wherein look for comfort and salvation? Who would extend a helping hand to her? With a despair beyond describing Olga clasps her hands to her breast; large tears flow along her pale cheeks: in this moment the invisible instruments began to play the evening prayer; the last rays of the sun broke through from behind the dark clouds. The light began to flow through the Gothic window of the chapel and illuminated in full radiance the celestial face of the Dannecker Saviour. Olga's melancholy gaze settles upon it; it seems to her, as though the marble is coming to life, that a divine radiance is surrounding the sacred countenance, that the finger of the God-incarnate is showing her the heavens, that his eyes are gazing with love upon the one suffering and that his mouth is uttering:

"Come unto me, ye that suffer and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

With trembling expectation Olga looked at the holy image and a ray of hope penetrated to her soul and, as though after a prolonged blindness, her eyes gradually saw the light. She suddenly throws herself face downward before the celestial Comforter. With heartfelt belief she prays, pouring out her soul before him; tears of repentance water the marble and the sense of heaviness has fallen away from her burdened breast. She breathes freely, with an infantile joy she looks at the sacred countenance: she has found her life's goal – has found her Friend, joy, consolation! From this moment her existence is filled.

I read her letter to Vera.

“My dear one, my last letter frightened you; but forget about it, Vera, forget about it! I am tranquil, I am happy, have I finally solved the mystery of life? O, why, why was I not shown in childhood that, which I have reached by way of a path of thorns? So many lost years and mental effort, so many doubts, fears, delusions! But the past is irretrievable; to forget about it, that is my one endeavour. Ah, Vera, it is more difficult than I supposed! But I will triumph over my weakness; I shall tear out from my heart that memory, even if it may explode at this exertion!

Now, looking back at my past life, I divide it into three periods. How beautiful was the first, when with a will to the good, with a readiness to love I entered the world! But that was only the daybreak and it soon disappeared behind dark clouds. The second period began with my marriage. I was condemned to live, to spend all the days, all the hours of my existence together with a person, whom I could not love; to suffer the coarse caresses of one, whose simple touch used to give me a shudder... How many times, meeting at every step a level of understanding that was completely contrary to my own, how many times did I sincerely wish to change my nature, to attach myself to society, to those bells, to those playthings, which occupy the existence of so many intelligent and nice women! Many of them would consider themselves to be happy in my position but that was beyond my strength. Looking closely into the mysteries of nature, seeing that everything has its destiny, a goal, towards which it strives incessantly, I called out in despair: ‘But where is my goal, oh Lord! Is it possible that only I have am thrown into this world alone, where everyone, everything has those like itself?’ I did

not know at that time that suffering also has its goal – redemption! Yes, my dear friend: God loves his children equally; sending us into a country of temporary banishment, he fixes for each of us an equal measure of joys and of sufferings.

Only not all souls are created with equal capacities to feel, not all equally take up their appointment! That, on account of which some are reduced to ashes, barely warms others. There are people, who, loving life, slowly, with caution drink now from the one, now from the other chalice by turns, sweetening grief with freedom from care, joy with forgetting of its fleetingness. Not becoming absorbed in any one feeling, they glide along the surface of life; is it not these ones that society calls happy? There are others: having received from Nature an ardent soul, an inexhaustible strength of feelings, not knowing moderation in anything, in a brief time they absorb all the pleasures and all the sorrows that have been allotted them on Earth. At that time I did not understand this: as a child, barely having discarded the leading-strings, I was measuring already in my thoughts and feelings the universe! I found it cramped and stuffy in our modest little corner; sometimes it seemed to me that there was insufficient air surrounding our earthly globe to fill my constricted chest. All the ordinary cares, minor sensations seemed to me to be colourless – and with all the strength of my soul, I fixed upon one dream; it became my predominant thought, my second life; I had to such an extent merged it and myself into one existence, that even after the fated meeting it did not at all enter my thoughts that I loved the young man, forgot the duty of a wife, made myself the victim of my own delusion.

He mercilessly tore away the binding from my eyes, with his own hand smashed my poor portion of happiness! I thank you, Anatoly, I thank you! But who will return me my unstained state, my tranquillity? It is awful to bear a reproach upon one's soul, hourly to hear the voice of the conscience and not dare to say to oneself: I am pure, I am sinless!

But now the third and final period has come; I look without fear into the distance; there is shining towards me the heavenly dawn of forgiveness. In faith and in hope I go my way; henceforth nothing will disturb my peace. I have scattered my dreams; passions and desires have vanished; my heart is calm, in it there remains only one feeling – divine hope! It will not part with it and when, submitting to the law of nature, it becomes one with the dust, a spark, surviving within it all the earthly feelings, perhaps, will grow up as a flower above its grave... But no, Vera, no, there is one other feeling that lives and will live within it to the grave – friendship for you!

My husband will be happy, as much as I can make him happy. And I, Vera, I shall also be happy, because I have grasped finally that if a woman, through a wicked caprice of fate or by a will incomprehensible to us, is born with a character that is not like the rules prevailing in our society, a burning imagination and a heart hungry for love, then it is in vain for her to begin looking about her for a return of affection or for aims in life worthy of her. Nothing will fill the emptiness of her being and she will be worn out with fruitless efforts to become attached to something in the world.

Otherworldly attachments can satisfy her thirst. Her love
should be our Saviour, her goal heaven!

Olga H.”

The Court of Society

*Er ist dahin, der süße Glaube
An Wesen, die mein Traum gebar,
Der rauhen Wirklichkeit zum Raube,
Was einst so schön, so göttlich war.*

Schiller¹

*Qual cor tradisti, qual cor perdesti
Quest'ora orrenda ti manifesti.*

Romani²

“I have the honour to present to your Worship the marching orders!” shouted the messenger, tapping his spurs and standing motionless close at hand.

1 It is lost, that sweet belief / in beings, born of my dream, / by a coarse reality taken as booty, / what was once so beautiful, so godlike (from *Die Ideale*)

2 What a heart you have betrayed, what a heart you have lost / this dreadful hour be it revealed to you (from *Norma*)

Marching orders! This bit of news took our little company unawares at the most poetic moment of military life – during peacetime, it stands to reason – in the December dusk, at the tea table, when the boiling samovar, warming with its vapours the frosty air of the peasant shack, draws into one close circle all those present, and the tea, spreading in a hot stream in stiffened limbs, clarifies thoughts, unties tongues, imbues conversations with liveliness and fluency. In just such moment the words ‘marching orders’ fell down upon us, as though from heaven, onto the tea-table, shook all hearts with an electrical force. Tea was forgotten, cigars and pipes abandoned – there were questions, sounds of voices, bustle, as though the departure had been fixed for the next day. It was only after the passing of one hour that the alarm was stilled, everyone settled down on their former places and began more coolly to discuss their future living circumstances.

A change of quarters is an epoch in military life but, then again, the march to the new location also takes up a good space of time – but they are not yet thinking of this in that moment. The officers are usually troubling themselves about whether there are many wealthy landowners around their future living quarters, if they are hospitable, if they are well-disposed to military-men? The commanding officer, arming

himself with invoices, lays out the profits and losses of being billeted in such-and-such province, while the wife of the commanding officer mentally packs into the supply convoy her caps and turbans, if she is infected with the fashionable mania, books and sheet music – if she makes claims to being enlightened – and beforehand, in thought, she assigns places in the enormous campaign carriage to her children, nursemaids, housemaids and Pomeranians.

Over two months they begin the preparations, the chores and now the awaited moment comes – trumpeters, bumping along on grey horses, give the signal, the mounted formations start, a bold song is struck up and, with God in their hearts, they step forward for a grand journey!

Halts, meals, overnight stops, rest-days follow in a long sequence, providing no variation even to the inactive time; the surroundings change slowly, like the sets in a provincial theatre... A pupil of Apollo, who skilfully wrings poetical similes from everything, perhaps, would liken even our procession to some kind of idyllic occurrence of human life but we, who are familiar with the campaign march, have no inclination towards the picturesque descriptions of the retired men of letters and, in the event, we are not able to find for it the most fitting comparison, except in dull, limp

prose: to be sure, even that is diversified with comma's and full-stops!

Here now is the final day's march; the promised land is close! We have arrived, settled in, you look around; new faces, customs, new attitudes, every step into the society is like a step over frozen ice, you feel and you test, where you can most securely put down your foot. However, young people are not long in making themselves at home: two or three *quadrilles* and they are acquainted, friendly, in love; all the difficulties are left to the share of the ladies, the wives of the officers and of those in command.

In social gathering dancers with shining epaulettes are so prized, that they are not subjected to a strict investigation; the ladies of the estates and of the town receive them with goodwill, the estate owners and the gentlemen of the town invite them to dinners and to soirées, in deference to their sovereign mistresses. But the wives of the military men – oh, that is another matter! The arbitrators of the female sex inspect their newly arrived rivals with a not all-too benevolent eye, strictly they analyse the costumes, the facial features, the characters. These are two nations, alien to one another, two heterogeneous elements – not easily and not quickly do they unite into one friendly whole.

But what then if, by misfortune, one of these in-flown ladies differs in some way from other people – in beauty, in talents, in wealth! If the villainess-rumour, coming in advance of her, brings word of her to the new quarters and even before her arrival excites curiosity, spurs to rivalry, wounds pride, conjures up the witch-envy – and this emaciated, jaundiced shrew sharpens her little teeth in advance for the unknown but already hated victim?

“But what could so strongly stir up the passions of women? What superiority, what distinction?” my dear lady-readers will say. Ah, my Lord! I repeat: a small deviation or advance from out of the general range of commonplace things; a relief upon the smooth wall of society. Imagine for yourselves a lieutenant’s wife of a marvellous, striking beauty, a captain’s wife, a native of North-America, carried off by chance from the banks of the Mississippi onto the banks of the Oka, together with a dowry of one million or merely having an attachment to some or other kind of profession, an authoress, that is a woman, who has written, at some time in a leisurely hour, two or three stories, which afterwards got themselves into a printing machine.

“What do you say? A captain’s or lieutenant’s wife an authoress? Why, what nonsense! There is not and cannot be such a thing!” Many and many is the person will object to

me. “It is true that de Genlis wrote, then she was a courtier, a countess! De Staël wrote, then her father was a minister – both of these had received a high level of education but a cap...” However though, let us suppose, if only as a joke, that, within the throng of newly arrived officers, there appears, hand in hand with one of them, a woman-writer. Everyone knows in advance of her coming, rumours are gathering around her, items of news, real and imaginary, are being told about her – at last she arrives, she is here...

Ah! How is she to be seen, one wonders! She probably wears upon her brow the stamp of genius; probably, she talks of nothing only of poetry and of literature; she expresses her opinions like an improvised text, uses technical terms, carries about with her a pencil and paper for the noting down of ideas that strike one in fortunate moments!

With suchlike prejudice they gather to inspect the authoress, who has arrived.

A week passes, two...

“*Ma chère*, do come and dine with me on Thursday.”

“What then, is it your name-day?”

“No, Madam *** will be dining with me – you know, the authoress.”

“Ah, most glad to, we shall see, what kind of an authoress.”

“And you, Avdotia Trifonovna, do you wish to make her acquaintance?”

“It is not in order to make her acquaintance but indeed in order to have a look that I shall come.”

“Have you read her compositions?”

“Decidedly not! There is yet time for me to read this dross.”

“Why, what has she written?”

“Some trifling things, probably, stolen out of the ‘*Revue Étrangère*’”

“Oh, no, Maisie dear, it is the purest imitation of Marlinsky.”

“Hee, hee, hee! A sandpiper is a long way from becoming an eagle!”

“Do permit also me to enjoy your dinner on Thursday!” exclaims the bard of all the festive happenings of ...y County. “Grant it, for the sake of your beauty! I have long been wishing to meet her, to form a judgement of her mind and of her gifts, to pose a few questions, to express candidly my opinion, as it touches her creations, hm... I think, she will receive with gratitude my counsels!” he adds with a saintly

self-belief, as he strokes the pink lapels of his sky-blue velvet waistcoat

“Ah, poor creature! I have heard that if the inspiration descends upon her, then, wherever she happens to be, at a ball, in a carriage, on the banks of the river, she immediately falls to declaiming loudly.”

“Oh, if next Thursday the inspiration might descend upon her!” exclaims a naïve young miss of the locality.

“And, you know, they do say that all the heroines of her romances are patterned from herself.”

“How is that?”

“Well, quite simply, whoever will take up the pen, then, mind you, it is oneself one will describe.”

“Well, how is this possible, for goodness’ sake? As you know, her heroines were not all baked in the one mould! This one is a young country girl, that a society lady, one is a rapturous thing, another colder than ice, the first is a Russian, the second a German, the third a nomadic woman – a Bashkir, is it?”

“Hey... but you are forgetting,” exclaims the inventive poet, “that she is not merely a woman but a woman-writer, that is a peculiar creation, an abnormal caprice of Nature, or more

correctly: a degenerate of the feminine sex. You know there are people born with the head of a bird and goat's feet, why not allow that her soul, created in the form and likeness of a chameleon, will take the guise of such a one, will copy out a portrait of itself and then turn into another form?"

"Ah... you see..."

"Well, is it really possible that..." say in a slow drawl two or three dames, who blindly believe all the legends of the great poet.

"So, tell me then, please," says an estimable old lady, who had turned grey in pious ignorance of the things of this world, "tell me, she does then really write the way words are printed in books? That is, so to speak, as she will write, then a word will be printed in accordance with it?"

And on receiving an affirmative answer, she expresses a desire to see the woman, who was able to write the way it was printed in books.

The fated Thursday arrived; the poor authoress, in the innocence of her soul, rides out to dine, not suspecting that she was invited to show her off, like a dancing ape, like a snake in a flannel blanket, that the gazes of the women, always sharp-sighted in the analysis of the qualities of their sisters, had equipped themselves for the meeting with her

with a hundred mental lorgnettes, in order to investigate her down to the last hair from her bonnet to her shoe; that they were expecting bolts of inspiration, bookish speeches, startling thoughts, a voice from the pulpit, something extraordinary in her gait and her greeting and even Latin phrases in a blend with Hebrew – because a woman-writer, by the generally accepted opinion, could not fail to be a scholar and a pedant, and why is this? On that I cannot report!

My Lord, just think, how many people there are, who all their lives compose and disperse tariff-free throughout society fables – and no one takes it into his head to issue them titles for learning, for the sole reason that they compose orally! Why then, as soon as a poor authoress has jotted down one of the above-mentioned fables on paper, does everyone unanimously promote her to the rank of scholar and pedant? Do say, why and for what is there such unsolicited reverence for talent?

And then, she cannot become friends with anyone. Some imagine, that she will immediately capture their counterfeit and ‘really’ reproduce it, living, in a magazine. Others always fancy that they see on her lips a satanic smile and in her eyes satirical powers of observation, treacherous spying – even there, where, truly, any spying would be a ladle

scooping water from the air – everything about her seems to be not the same, as it is with other women... well, I do not know what it is but truly it is somehow not the same!

Judge then by this pale sketch of one thousandth part of that, which falls to the lot of the poor authoress, how it is for her to roam through society, to be everywhere an uninvited guest, eternally familiarising herself. Hardly will they come to know her in one place, hardly will they get used to seeing in her the *woman* without the unyielding suffix ‘-writer’, hardly will kind people open their arms, when suddenly there are marching orders, a change of quarters – you begin again the acquaintanceships, learning the alphabet anew.

However, I was spared from the utmost discomfort in the New-Russian territory, where we were assigned quarters in a large administrative village, around which, for a distance of ten *versts*, there was nothing else besides the steppe, marshland, sands and of course similar administrative settlements.

Paying social calls on unknown persons over fifty *versts* away is difficult and tedious enough! But not finding one’s host at home, passing the night in their village, in the filthy cabin of a peasant alongside his natural progeny and his domestic animals – this is the height of unpleasantness. This was what I was reduced to one evening, this was what I was obliged to

do – the sweetest moments of my life. With such an awareness how can one not lay, if only in brackets: inscrutable are the ways of the Almighty!

Angered at my unsuccessful visit, I was sitting squeezed into a corner underneath the icons, awaiting some tea, for which my hostess was boiling the water in a greasy pot. All around, on the stove and under the stove, swarmed and squealed her family. A little further away, by the doorway, the man of the house was talking about something with another peasant, who was not of the locality. Involuntarily, to be sure, certainly not out of curiosity, I began to listen to their conversations: my host was complaining in the most amusing and irate terms about the miserliness of the landowner; his friend, on the contrary, was showering his owner with such blessings, was speaking of him with such warmth, so uncharacteristic of the phlegmatic Borderlander, that I entered in their conversation, wishing to know the name of this philanthropist-landowner.

“Dmitri Yegorovich Vlodinsky,” the serf answered me.

Vlodinsky? This surname seems to me familiar, I do not know, where, when I heard it, only that it was long, long ago. Conversing further I learned, that this Dmitri Yegorovich Vlodinsky was unmarried, had been very wealthy but already at a young age he had divided the entire estate among the

children of his sister, reserving for himself no more than fifty peasant souls; that one of his nieces, like him giving up all thought of marriage, had taken up residence with him, taken upon herself all the cares of managing the household, loved and cared for him, as for a father; and that these strange people lived like hermits, completely renouncing any communication with society.

This was what I had learned from the muddled speeches of the serf, when, taking the notion to ask him for the name of Vlodinsky's niece, I heard the name and the surname of a young girl I had known long ago, with whom I had grown up and been educated, up till the age of fourteen years.

That very evening my interlocutor was transformed into the god Mercury of a friendly correspondence and, since Vlodinsky was living about two *versts* from my night-lodgings, the very next day at daybreak I received an answer, an invitation and within half an hour found myself in the embrace of my greatest, much loved friend Elizaveta Nikolaevna Z.

Is it necessary to say, that our acquaintance, our friendship was renewed, that we saw one another often, though I was deprived of the pleasure of receiving her in my own home? For more than twenty years she had not stepped out across the boundary of her own estate, she would not leave even for

one hour her reclusive uncle. Even in my presence she would divide her time between me and him, because Vlodinsky was for me, as for the entire world, out of sight and during my visits over the course of two years I saw him in all two times and that in passing, by chance.

It should not be inferred from this that he was a misanthrope, a capricious cripple, a gout sufferer or, at least, a naturalist, who had turned his study into a graveyard of all genera of animals and insects. No, he did not suffer from any one of the chronic illnesses; the serfs, not only of his own holding but even of all the surrounding villages, spoke blessings on his generosity and customary readiness to serve his neighbour; his disposition was ever quiet, mild, without the least shade of whim or of caprices; and he did not have a particular passion for any one science, although he was very knowledgeable about many. He was not even very advanced in years – according to his niece he had hardly passed the age of forty – but passions or sorrow had aged him quite and, by his appearance, he could have been taken for seventy. His face was dried up and furrowed with wrinkles; the features, which were extraordinarily regular and fine, were made to seem even more delicate by the matt pallor and the silvery grey of the hair. In his eyes, which were without light or regard, there was reflected such a languor, such a mortal

inaction of all feelings, that upon the first glance at him was seen a denizen not of our world.

Eighteen years had passed since the time, that he, having resigned his commission in the first flower of his youth, had buried himself in seclusion, severed all relations with people, distanced from himself all acquaintances, all the pleasures of society and from that time had not once deviated from his hermit-like way of life.

But, while dying for himself, he, it seemed, lived a twofold life for others. The highest, the purest selflessness was the law of his existence; to throw himself into water or a fire for the saving of the lowest beggar, to deprive himself of the essentials for the enrichment of a pauper, to appear without summons, always and everywhere, to be hot on the heels of misfortune – all of this served as the sustenance and the air of his life. However many intellectual gifts, mental and physical strengths, earthly treasures our Lord had granted him, everything, without an exception, he dissipated for others, everything he devoted to others, as if nothing were necessary for his own self.

He had only the one sister, who had been dead for some time; all her children had been educated and settled by him and to what extent they idolised him the best proof was my friend, who had presented to him as a gift the entire span of her life.

At the age of seventeen this girl, who had been created in both body and mind to be an adornment to society, had renounced it and the happiness of family life, she had imposed upon herself the rule of the strictest monastic order, simply so that she could by tender care relieve her uncle of the anxieties about household life, by attention and preventative measures tend to his worn-out body and, at times, by her conversation chase from his mind remembrances that were full of suffering. Of the best and highest consolation – to minister to the soul of the mourner – she was deprived, neither knowing, nor even surmising as to the cause of the everlasting sorrow, which gnawed at him, like the worm in the grave and was just as deeply, just as far from reach buried within his breast.

She did not know, what storm it was had reduced his heart to ashes, had dried up the source of all his living energy; what had forced him out of the circle of people, their malice or his own offences, detestation of them or of himself; she did not see, whether it was some joy or forgiveness that he was begging of Heaven, and with the tears, of which she only saw the vestiges in the mornings, was he salving the sores on his heart or was he straining with them to wash away the bloody stain of an indelible sin... All was and remained for her a mystery; and, notwithstanding this, she surmounted all

obstacles, tore herself from the bosom of her family, disdained the enticements of society, through persistence she overcame the very opposition of her uncle, who long refused her sacrifice, and she shut herself away with him in his asylum to share with him the load of his mental burden.

In the surrounding area strange things were said of Vlodinsky, many romantic incidents were attributed to him, they spoke of some or other dreadful event, of a crime. Some related, that apparently, in the hotchpotch of tribes and of petty states, he had made the mistake of falling in love with some princess or other; that the sentimental maids of that country still tinkled the melancholy waltz, which, by this account of theirs, he had composed once in an access of lovelorn lunacy; others saw him as a copy of the character in Karamazin's story, a Bornholmian exile, and only fussed about the fact that his sister had been by far older than he. Had he renounced society a little later, when in the realm of poetry there appeared a new, brilliant meteor, astounding the world with the wild harmony of his songs, Vlodinsky would, without fail, have been raised to the rank of a *Childe Harold*, a *Lara* but, unfortunately, at that time neither Byron nor spleen were yet known to the landowning classes of the steppes and after a time everyone got used to the existence of

a neighbouring recluse and, as usually happens, forgot about him.

One day, knowing that at that time he was walking in the garden, I took the liberty of entering his study. Bare walls, tables, chairs placed in a disorder and also a huge library – that was all that was presented to my gaze. Books were lying everywhere, scattered about in a strange confusion: philosophers and rhetoricians, classical authors and romanticists, poets and prosaists lay about on the floor, on tables, on the long Turkish divan. It was evident that they were often given use but without aim, not with pleasure but for abbreviating the long, oppressive time; that the first, which happened to be at hand would be taken up and quite often discarded, without the page being completed, like a medicine that is too feeble for treating such great wounds. In the remaining rooms was noticeable the same carelessness of the proprietor towards all the comforts of life; in the house, as also in the garden were manifested the vestiges of a former splendour but everything was neglected, idle, wild. In short, in this dwelling every corner attested to the presence of a person, living without a purpose, without desires, a wretch, who encounters and passes a sequence of monotonous days, like a convict sentenced to drag with a tow-rope a heavily laden vessel and in the evening not to depart for his rest but

for the return journey to the very same place, where the next day he is to begin the very same labour.

Whose curiosity would not give way to compassion at the sight of so much disconsolate, bleak sorrow? And what compassion would not overflow into veneration in the presence of two creatures going in concert, hand in hand, not towards the banquet of life but towards the slumber of the grave; going together with equal steps but different in their souls, alien in their thoughts, in their tears, always with a ready smile, with an approving word for another, with a lonely, undivided woe for themselves?

My meetings with my friend were all of a kind, our conversations quiet and taciturn but I would not have forgone them for any of the pleasures of a crowded society. After a sojourn of two years in the county of ... family matters called me away to the other end of Russia and when about five months later I returned home, I was met with the news of Vlodinsky's death.

Then, more often than formerly, I began to visit his orphaned niece. Inconsolable on her own loss, she was grateful for the death, which had brought peace to the sufferer after so many long, unceasing torments. Her way of living did not in any wise change: she had become so estranged from people, that she could not again become close to them. Twelve years of

habit had made her come to like seclusion and the solitary life. For a few more years yet she fulfilled on this Earth the lofty destiny, begun by her uncle, being a benefactress to any and all. It seemed, she was completing his unlived existence, she walked the exact same path, to the exact same goal, which he had reached simply a little earlier; and, like him, she went down to her grave, taking away with her not the least part of regret over her departure from the world but with a difference: he longed to leave this life, he was calling on death, but in her neither life nor death aroused either desire or fear: both appeared to her as equally unexplored territories. She was in but did not live in the world. Her being was merely an addendum to another existence, a voluntary donation to one, from whom fate and people had taken away all.

After Vlodinsky's death, beneath the head of his bed was found a package with an inscription addressed to his niece. That was his deathbed confession – an account of his youth, his passions, a few moments, which had devoured the rest of his life, and the copy of the letter, which had always been kept upon the breast of the tormented man and, by his wish, had gone down with him into the grave.

Both of these items passed to me and were long secreted in my document case, hidden from all eyes. But now, when

there is no longer living in this world a person, intimate with the characters, who participated in this sad drama, when all those who witnessed it have disappeared from the circle of the living or, being dispersed throughout the world, have forgotten about an event commonplace in society, now I am resolved to present to my readers Vlodinsky's manuscript, as the study of a woman's twofold existence, the picture of a radiant and pure soul, triumphantly shining in her interior world, and of her false reflection in the opinions of people, in this treacherous mirror, which, like the kiss of Judas, flattering us to our face, is preparing persecution, disgrace and often even death behind our backs.

Here is a copy, written down by me, word for word from Vlodinsky's manuscript and from the cherished letter.

"The time of our parting has come. I feel that the blessed moment of my release from earthly bonds is close. An end to life, to sufferings! My soul is straining to reach the promised cloister of an eternal, joyful world.

But, leaving this earth, I do not want to remain your debtor, my one friend, my comfort; I do not want to go away from this world, without having shared with you everything, which gladdened, tore upon and tormented my soul. For a long time I have wanted to express to you the reason for my renunciation of society; more than once in your presence the

fatal secret was trembling upon my lips; your disinterested selflessness, your affecting devotion were as a reproach to me, your ignorance of him, for whom you had cast away in sacrifice the irretrievable time of amusement, love, enjoyment, for whom and with whom you had buried yourself alive in a grave... Forgive me, forgive me... I could not tell to you in spoken words the sad history of my errors, of my sin; I did not dare summon at once all the recollections of my youth. Sobs would have stifled my voice in my chest, blood and not tears would have poured from my eyes... Once again, forgive! I was afraid, that some time afterwards, if only involuntarily, compassion or pity might show in your looks: these are to me unbearable, I have for ever flung them from me...

I did not share my bliss with anyone; I did not look for anyone's hand for support in the season of calamities and of solitude; I never elicited from anyone a payment for the accomplishment of a black, dreadful crime. Shall I now relieve myself of the burden of my punishment onto another's shoulders? Shall I dissolve my own grief with another's tears? Shall I put the sting of conscience to sleep in another's breast, through another's sophistical consolations?

No, no! Fate, which made me an orphan in my infancy, clearly showed me my path. Alone in the games of boyhood,

alone in life, in love, in errors, in the very torment of repentance, I shall go down alone into the grave with the proud conviction that everything, with which Heaven rewarded me, everything, by which people wound, by which at times hell itself laid waste, everything I took upon my soul, everything I buried within it, in full, irrevocably.

There is something comforting in a voluntary, permanent solitude. While one single thought of ours is in communication with the thought of one other person, our connections with people are not ruptured: he holds the key to the expression of our face, he can foretell the movements of our heart, and there are moments, when it is as though you depend upon him. Only he may call himself fully his own master, who has been able to bury himself in his own self, on whose face a smile and a wrinkle remain hieroglyphs to all, whose tears at their greatest flood do not come outside the banks of his soul but rather flow back into it, still just as bitter, boiling, impenetrably profound.

And is it not easier to feel a tear that has dripped onto the heart, than to see it as frozen on the cold breast of one who is indifferent? I had become accustomed to my silence, before you extended a hand to me, in eternal union in sorrow and estrangement from society; my feelings had grown stronger within their shell, the memories had grown into my soul: was

I now to tear them out together with my own blood, so as to share them with you? Besides, sorrow, like an icon lamp, is used up in the light, which is spread around: I was maintaining mine in a funeral urn; it smouldered without sparks, without air, it was everlasting, because nothing was exhausting its fuel.

Yes! I guarded and was careful with my sorrow, I nourished myself, lived from it, as at one time that wandering king lived by feeding himself on poisons... Do forgive me, that I never invited you to my lonely feast, that I did not present you with chalices of my drink. Now, that I have drunk up all, down to the final drop, take the drained vessel, the measure of my sufferings; take the final powers of my memory, feelings and life... From these sheets you will learn everything and will rejoice in my going from the world...

Known to you are the details of my childhood, upbringing, early orphanhood; you know that your mother, older than I by ten years, had long been married and was living in a distant province, at the time when I, hardly released from leading-strings, rushed headlong into the field, at that time noisy and formidable, of military action.

The revolutions that had rocked a Europe grown senile, the fall of kingdoms, the incredible rise of Napoleon, his gigantic feats, never-ceasing thirst of glory, his heroism, genius,

haughty conceit and continual successes in all undertakings brought the spirit of the young to the highest degree of tension. It seemed as though the warlike times of Greece and Rome had risen again; all that could bear arms fell in behind fluttering banners; no rise seemed impossible, no degree of greatness unattainable.

Distracted by the general enthusiasm I also gave myself up to ambition, dreams of glory and my mind closed itself to all that was not extolled by trumpet sounds, that was not held up to renown by the cries of nations.

Thus passed the first six years of my entry into the service up to the year of 1815, and it is only from that time that it is possible to reckon my entry into society, for up to that time life in camp would not permit me to become acquainted with the life of society; I saw it from afar, in snatches, carried over from the hospitable mansions of the Russian landowners to the hostile company of their Polish counterparts, from the *boudoir* of the *parisienne* to the tidy, privately-owned country homes of Germany.

In this active life, full of fears and of revelry, between yesterday's orgy in the tent and the preparations for tomorrow's battle, there was no time to philosophise, to interrogate anatomically people and society, to verify their habitual doings against the theories of the great truths, of

which there are as many in the intellectual world, as there are few followers of them in essence. In my mind and heart there was nothing fixed, nothing original; from my youthful, enthusiastic notions, muddled together with the cold patterns of actual life, from the anecdotes and opinions of my comrades, from reading of the first book that fell into my hand was formed within my reason the most variegated chaos. I was walking with my eyes bound; I was acting without being aware of even one of my deeds; I thought to myself and aloud, never investigating, why a thing was so and not otherwise. I considered a keen wit to be the highest level of intellect; a readiness to quarrel with my friend, even to kill him on account of a frivolous misunderstanding – a demonstration of chivalric courage and nobility. With women I was almost unacquainted but, thanks to the vaunting of companions and to a few French novels, I had of them a not very favourable conception. Man was, in my opinion, the crown of the entire visible chain of creation; woman I held to be a secondary link, a transition from man to the dumb creatures: she seemed to me beautiful but not worthy of greater attention than a flower, which grows for the momentary amusement of a man in the hours of his leisure-time. As far as love is concerned, that I did not place higher than an anecdote told over a glass of champagne, the firing of a pistol at a target and the reading of a dull epigram... Such

were my ideas and my character in the twenty-second year of my life; such a one had my degeneration made of me.

At a time of a general movement of our troops, which were going in part to take up quarters in France, in part back to Russia, our regiment made a halt in Germany, in a medium-sized town overlooking the Rhine. There I fell ill with a powerful nervous fever and when the regiment received the command to resume its march I was unable to raise my head from the pillow. Having mustered the evidence of the entire medical department, my commanding officer took the decision to leave me at the location until I should be recovered and entrusted me to the care of his friend, Baron Horch, a man in his declining years, now without family, who was sincerely devoted to Russian interests. Immediately after the departure of the regiment the baron had me transported, lying in a state of unconsciousness, to his country residence and there, no earlier than before a month had passed, I began slowly to return to life. The spring was only just beginning. Baron Horch's estate, laid out in a kind of ravine between hills, was surrounded on all sides by forest and by dense parkland; the wind was howling night and day between the denuded trees, a fog was constantly covering the environs, all was cheerless and savage. The house of the baron, one of those buildings that went back to feudal times,

was itself dilapidated. A good half of it stood uninhabited and was supported only by the pride of the owner, who honoured the decrepit walls of his castle as the witnesses of the past greatness of his forebears. Even the room, in which a wicked physician had condemned me to a prolonged captivity, could have stood for the type of rooms of knightly times: high-ceilinged, with a vault, with cornices, in which weapons and oak leaves were intertwined with the coats of arms of the barons Horsch, with a window of Gothic architecture, facing the garden; with massive, awkward furniture and with a series of full-length portraits, which time and again, during attacks of my morbid irritability maddened me with their pompous, haughty bearing, most especially the women, in the affectedness, with which they stood, drawn up straight, tight corseted, like wasps, with bouquets of enormous roses in their hands. All of these objects were deeply engraved into my memory, became confused with recollections of a lullaby, about games with my nanny; it seemed as though, in returning to life, I was for a second time beginning my existence from the age of childhood; I was weak, capricious, like an infant and, just like one, I would not in any way submit to the voice of reason.

When I was told for the first time about all that had happened during the time of my illness, I well nigh fell once

more into a fever. The thought that I was left alone, like a shot down crane, in a foreign country, when all my friends and comrades had gone home, threw me into a despair. I implored any and all to release me, I wanted to mount a horse, gallop day and night to catch up with the regiment, when I could not yet raise myself from the bed without the help of another. The baron and his personal physician visited me regularly twice a day, would each pass half an hour in my room and, on going away, would leave me alone with an old servant, who most painstakingly tended to me. Apart from these three persons, I did not see a single living soul in the entire castle.

Need one say that I grew sad and was inexpressibly melancholy? The days dragged on in a tedious file, endless, like minutes of passionate expectation. Alone, abandoned by all, nailed to a bed, time and again I tossed upon it, cursing my infirmity and, in vexation, with impatience, thirsting for a change, if only in that, which surrounded me, I tried to catch the smallest rustle, I listened attentively to any creaking of doors, I invented for myself a thousand pursuits, in order to shorten the time, if only by a little: now I summoned from my memory verses, long ago learned by heart, now I counted the swords in the cornice and the ringlets of the venerable grandmamma's and aunties of the baron but oftenest of all I

sat supported by cushions opposite the window, gazed at the swaying of branches that were just barely turning green and, if it happened that an early little bird, circling and floating in the air, flew with a cry into the heavens, then I followed it with sad looks and envied the freedom of this air-dweller.

It was in such a posture that the dusk took me by surprise one evening. It was becoming dark; with long-drawn-out tolling the bell was announcing seven o'clock; my elderly servant, Christian, had left me, as was his habit, alone, supposing that at this time I certainly ought to sleep. Then, gazing absently upon the garden path, which, beginning beneath my window, disappeared in the distance amongst dense trees, I noticed a human figure. This occurrence was exceptional enough in the castle, that I turned upon it all my attention. The figure was drawing closer rapidly enough; I was already able to distinguish the dark colour of its clothes; in a few moments more I clearly saw a woman, wrapped in a cloak, with a veil, carelessly thrown up on her head.

A woman? Here? Alone? Within the walls of the Carthusian monastery her appearance would not have astounded me more. I looked upon her with strained attention, in vain trying to guess at the enigma of her presence. She walked along the path for a long time. In the failing light of the day I was not able to make out her face, especially as my bed was

placed quite far from the window; but by her gait, by the speed of her movements, I concluded that she was young and, in my imagination, I was already finding for her a likeness to the features of beautiful women I had known before. It grew dark; she vanished into the thicket of the park; I was once more left alone with my conjectures and assumptions.

To this very day I cannot explain the reasons for the strange aversion, which I felt against putting questions about this apparition to my servant. He returned, I did not say a single word to him and preferred to lose myself in the labyrinth of my fancies. During the night, in a feverish delirium, more than once it seemed to me, as though one of the pretty grandmothers of my host had detached herself from the canvas, descended through the window into the garden, strolled along the path and then, putting herself into the frame, once more took on an inanimate state...

Of course, the strange impression produced upon me by the appearance of the woman in the garden should be attributed to my enfeeblement and abnormal irritability of the nerves. In the languor of inactivity my mind, avidly throwing itself upon everything that could bring it the least amount of amusement, clung with all the power of the imagination to the sole point, striking it as something new and unexpected.

In the morning I awoke with the thought of the strolling beauty: thus did I picture her to myself; and I confess that, if beneath the dark cloak and cover an ugly, old woman were presented to me, I would have counted myself, at least for a while, truly unhappy.

The baron and the doctor visited me at the usual time; the day passed in its set order; it began to get dark and I was waiting with impatience for the moment, when the servant would leave me in solitude. He went off and the awaited one appeared shortly after on the very same path, in the very same apparel. She walked, as on the previous day, with rapid steps, now coming towards me, now moving away but it was in vain that I fatigued my eyesight with trying to discern her features: she appeared to me obscure, through the twofold haze of distance and dusk, like a spectre from a dream long past. One time only did the wind, having pulled off her cover, throw it up on the bough of a tree; then she threw aside her shawl and, jumping up, bent down to herself the branch, upon which the muslin was billowing. This movement, light, quick, leaving me in no more doubt as to her youth, all the more strongly aroused my curiosity. As on the previous day she went away with the onset of darkness; I long followed her with my gaze: I wanted to guess by the direction of her steps, where the mysterious one was stealing away to, where she

was appearing from; but in vain. Going deep into the thicket of trees in the glimmering light of the dusk, she, it seemed, sank into the streams of eventide mist, flowed together with it, like an incorporeal apparition, and disappeared, leaving only a trace of unaccountable sadness in my soul.

The night hour breathed upon me new reveries, inspired my imagination with a new vigour and through its play was the revived the ancient fantasy by a Teutonic poet, which had at one time charmed me, of a woodland sylph, made human by the chosen lover... Art not thou that tender vision, a creation of purest particles of air and of the fragrance of flowers, a sensation without flesh, a thought, barely clothed in transparent forms – is it not thou, who appearest to the wanderer, cast away in the realm of thine oaken forests, that thou mayest blow from his heart the woe, that thou mayest soften the for him hard air of a foreign clime? Long was I occupied with these childish daydreams; at the sight of the unknown one I loved to lose myself, to give myself up to them, loved to coddle with them an imagination that had been coarsened by manhood. Daily I saw her, my strolling sylph, in the park; sometimes, if towards evening it was getting warm, the cloak was replaced by a shawl, the veil would be folded back and the breeze would raise and toss up

in the air her long locks, but the time and the place of her stroll never altered.

I cannot express, how attached I became, what a passion I developed for my unknown one; with how much longing did I await the evening, I would purposely feign sleep and, after the withdrawal of the old Christian, with what excitement would I pull from myself the coverlet, raise myself a little from the pillows and, leaning my back against the wall, I would fasten my gaze upon the distance, remain motionless until she would appear. *She!* This appellation pleased me and I was content with it, not being curious to learn the true one, for names were devised for the distinction of persons, one from another, and at that time she was alone in populating my entire world. From her departure I would count the hours of the night and the day until her renewed appearance; her alone did I await, in her rejoice, her I used greet in thought and caressing her with my eyes; of her I thought; of her I dreamt in moments of sickly sleep.

Formerly, once I had cooled from the ardour of youth, I was not at all a dreamer but now illness and loneliness were making me afresh. Torn away from all substantial benefits, I was creating for myself a delight in my daydreams; I comforted myself on my poverty in what is necessary to life with the riches and wealth of colour of my fancies and this is

why I fell in love with the mystery, which surrounded the unknown woman, like a field, where my dreams could freely play.

In this uneasy and at the same time sweet state I spent more than ten days; my vigour was increasing but the doctor still would not allow me to quit my bed. One day the springtime sun shone in its full glory; I had received post from Russia: I was as at ease, in as good spirits, as I had not been for a long time. At the customary hour she appeared: the light blue dress was fluttering from afar, her cover had fallen down onto the shoulders and her face was completely open. An invincible desire to look upon the features of the unknown one was drawing me to the window: I stood up, swaying and leaning upon the furniture, I got as far as the opposite wall and there, having bowed my head to the cold glass, concealing my breath, I awaited her approach. She came: I saw a young woman of a sweet but commonplace outward appearance, with a physiognomy, which within a crowd would flash by unnoticed by anyone. In that first instant, when my avid gaze fell upon her face, I was almost disappointed but at the second glance she appeared to me all the more attractive. I followed her in thought and with my eyes and each time, when, having reached the end of the avenue, the unknown one returned in my direction, I

discovered in her new charms, a feverish trembling was running through my body, my hand was growing numb upon the gilded head of the nail, by which the curtain was supported, my knees were giving way under me and more than once even my vision grew dim and I could not tear myself away from the window: I stood, like a prisoner, chained to the grill of a dungeon by a spectacle long not seen, the magnificent sun, I stood and did not take my eyes from her. After the expiry of one hour I found her to be almost a beauty: my imagination created in her a beauty that was invisible to the indifferent glance, a beauty, which only one person sees and brings to fruition, while other people, walking past, leave her disregarded or say: 'Yes, she is not plain!'

Finally she vanished, then did I plod to my bed and, weakened, barely able to breathe, but still full of the fascination, I threw myself onto my pillow. In that night the portraits of the beauties no longer came to life in my dreams, sylphs did not hover in the air, my thoughts and even my feelings received more substance, more definition. I saw her, discerned her features; it seemed as though I saw into her soul, now I knew her, the unknown one was known to me. But after one satisfied desire a hundred others began to swarm upon me: to be noticed by her, to converse with her,

to say... so say what? And again my head turned and again my ideas became muddled, darkened...

The following morning I awoke late, the sun was already shining, Nature was as though celebrating the advent of spring: I sat in the bed and, while Christian was tidying the room, I was pensively looking out the window and, in thought, drawing her portrait in the streams of air, when suddenly, quite unexpectedly, I saw before me the original. An exclamation involuntarily broke from my breast and, in the same instant, I felt a vexation with myself for having drawn the servant's attention to her: I wished to hide her from him, for all, to make her an invisible being, so as to appropriate her to myself only but it was too late! Christian cast a glance out of the window, uttered an extended 'o-o' and, again taking a hold of the brush, with which he was sweeping away dust, he said with a complacent air:

"Nothing to worry about! This is our *Frau Generalin*..."

"How is she a *Frau Generalin*?" I asked with considerable indignation and after my question was obliged to listen to a long story of how, at one time the baron had given his daughter in marriage to a Russian nobleman, who had a posting at the embassy, how she had gone off to his homeland and had died and how then her daughter, the baron's grand-daughter, having contracted a marriage to

some general, whose surname he could in no wise articulate, had come with him to Germany and for two weeks now had been living thus in the castle, as the guest of her grandfather. Must I state it? It was with a melancholy feeling that I heard all these details: they pitilessly plucked the flowers of mystery, with which my imagination had garlanded the unknown one! I had given scope to daydreams, given my fancy free rein; old Christian, unbeknownst to himself, had scattered them and, in the place of all the poetry that so sweetly caressed my soul, had placed a cold, ponderous '*Frau Generalin*'. Immediately there came before my vision the spouses of the many regimental or brigade commanders, with whom I am acquainted, in bonnets, in paid-for chignons, dancing, as they had been ordered to, the *matradur* with officers under the command of their husbands, and I became annoyed with innocent Christian. He had so thoroughly disillusioned me that, in the evening, before the agreed time, I ordered him to draw the curtains across the window and I lay until nightfall with my face turned to the wall, not rising from the pillows. The day following, even the weather, favouring me, became hazy: it was pouring rain and I, deprived of my reveries, once more with an idle mind and an empty heart lapsed into my former tedium.

Meanwhile my health had grown perceptibly stronger; I was rising, walking about the room and, in despite of all the objections of the physician, I was talking of my departure for Russia.

On one of these days, in the evening, the baron came in to me with a bright face and, rubbing his hands, said:

“Well, my amiable captive,” so did he name me in jest, “would you not like to quit your cage for an hour or two? The doctor gives his permission, let us go; only do you give some attention to your attire: you are to meet a lady... I am preparing for you a splendid surprise.”

My heart began to beat strongly; I asked to be excused from the surprise but the stubborn, old man insisently demanded that I go with him and I obeyed reluctantly, foreseeing that the matter entailed a meeting with the *Frau Generalin*.

I was not deceived. We entered the drawing room and I saw her... She was standing by the *fortepiano* and conversing with the doctor. I was introduced; to her greeting I responded with a single bow, I wished to but could not recover from the confusion, which was mastering me, I made slips in my speech, was either silent or answered *malapropos*. I was terrified to look her directly in the face, it seemed to me, she would guess by my eyes that this was one, who had spied

after her walks; finally the baron, probably taking pity on me, said to his grand-daughter:

“Well, Zenaïda, do entertain our captive, I promised him a surprise...”

She sat down at the *fortepiano*, played through a prelude, familiar to me, and began to sing one of the plaintive songs of our native land. It had been long since I had heard either a single Russian word or the sounds of a Russian voice; my heart began to leap within me. The baron with his coats of arms and castle, the unknown one and the *Frau Generalin* – all of it disappeared from my memory... I lunged towards the *fortepiano*, with a craving I became intoxicated on the languid modulation of our native melody... Zenaïda read the rapture in my eyes, in my uneven breathing. She understood, what was happening in my soul and, whether she felt sympathy for me or simply out of indulgence, she long did not break my fascination. Songs followed upon songs, only now and then interrupted by variations, which, like the echo from a mountain, played seconds to those same tunes. At last she began to sing Merzlyakov’s *Amid the Valley’s Plain*, at that time known and loved by all. In it there was so much that was similar to my state, to my feelings, that every word of it shook all the fibres of my heart. When, imbued with this

simple but deeply moving poetry, she sang with inexpressible feeling the words:

*Take back all honours, have again your gold,
That loving homeland, her let me behold...*

the blood surged towards my breast, even tears forced themselves to my eyes. Embarrassed, excited, all social proprieties forgotten, I ran out of the drawing-room and rushed to my room... The baron and the doctor came after me, trying to learn, what had befallen me. When I had made known the cause of my agitation, the good-hearted baron took hold of my hand and, giving it a friendly squeeze, he said:

“Well, this is very understandable. This is *Heimweh*, a longing for your native place.” However, the doctor, having felt my pulse, at once ordered me to lie down on the bed.

From that time I saw Zenaïda each day. Soon the *Frau Generalin* and along with her all the fabulous visions were completely effaced from my memory: in her I came to know a woman with a radiant, beautiful soul, with a high mind, enriched with knowledge, with a heart that was pure, sensitive, easily inflamed to all that was noble, great and virtuous, in short, I came to know one of those rarely

encountered creatures, who, simply by their approach, spread peace and happiness about them.

A month flew past imperceptibly; I entirely recovered from my illness but I had already ceased to think of departure for Russia. The kind baron had grown fond of me and was glad that I was no longer bored in his castle; the doctor promised to furnish me with all possible proofs, attesting to the duration of my illness: I remained. Day after day passed; I no longer counted them. In the presence of Zenaïda, time somehow wonderfully flowed together into a single, full, exalted delight. I did not divide the day into hours, did not think, did not live; I simply felt, felt unconsciously, instinctively, as though all my forces, vital and mental, had coalesced, disappeared into one sense and that sense was open only to delight.

The spring had come out in all its glory; everything bloomed and began to turn green. Oh, how many unforgettable hours did I spend at Zenaïda's side! Always and everywhere together with her, in the drawing-room at her work-table, in the hall at the *fortepiano*, in the garden beneath an awning of sweet-scented trees... How many times, running about the environs of the castle, did we clamber up into the hills, descend into ravines and when she would halt and become entranced, delighting in Nature, I would delight in her alone!

In our prolonged conversations Zenaïda seldom referred to her husband and never spoke of herself; I knew nothing of her childhood, family, marriage, of her lot in life but I suspected that she was not a happy woman. In her view upon life, in all her judgements, there spoke a constant sorrow, which cast a dark shadow upon all surrounding objects. In her speech there was not that bitterness, with which so many, in a fit of misanthropy, will pour out over everything and everyone: she did not curse either society or people, looked with indulgence upon their weaknesses, sometimes, in short bursts, she was even merry, loved to laugh but these were only the chance rays of a natural, cheerful character, suppressed and almost annihilated by that, which fate and circumstances had created for her in the second instance. In her laughter, at times, was heard something unhealthy; and time and again, while her lips were smiling, her eyes preserved their usual shade of sadness...

Yes! I understood that happiness was not the lot of her, who was most of all deserving of happiness; I understood, not from her words, not from the discernment of the intellect but by an inner comprehension, that her radiant soul, exhausted by the battle with fate, consumed in the sacred fire of sufferings, could not be content with that crude, vulgar

condition, which in society we have agreed to name happiness. Delicate and deeply impressionable, she demanded just a little joy, so as to fill herself with it, but she required a joy that was unsullied, elevated, like she herself was. This was that, with which neither society nor people could provide her!

And my first feeling towards Zenaïda, the first clear and definite sense that manifested itself in the anxiety of my feelings at that time, was – compassion.

We were seldom just the two of us alone: the baron, the doctor or an old confessor would accompany us on walks and were present during discussions; however, I did not even look for occasions to be in private with her: for what could I express to her? What secret make known? I found myself to be in that happy time, when reason does not yet dare to call the heart to account for all its impulses, when a feeling is born, grows and ripens, before the mind will have seen it; and, although I already loved, loved ardently, passionately, for me, however, the moment of inner recognition had not yet come, I was not saying to myself: 'I love this woman!' Therefore, I was fully content with her presence, her attention; in conversations with her I listened, from time to time I would object, more frequently I was imbued with her opinions... Besides, this was the first time that I loved, in the

highest sense, truly, with all the force of my revitalised being: consequently, my passion was devoid of all calculation. It did not proceed according to the systems of theories of love, it did not nourish any hopes whatever, it did not watch for a moment to declare itself; no, it was hiding from itself, was in fear of betraying itself and, like the ancient sorcerers, it loved to surround its idol and the serving of it with ceremonial mystification.

But the time was flying: the first moment of intoxication had passed, the second epoch of love had begun, the age of my regeneration. From the frequent discussions with Zenaïda was dispersed the fog, which hitherto had hung over my reason; my ideas became clear under the influence of her pure, youthful, warm, powerful soul; I saw the light, as does one born blind, when the doctor tears away the film coating his eyes; little by little there opened before me a new, unexpected world – a world not of fabrications, not of fantasies, but of beautiful truths, lofty passions, a world of grace, of poetry, of everything that ennoble, gladdens the soul of man... With what reverence did I penetrate its mysteries! With what pride was I rising out of the non-being, which was oppressing me and, finally, as one re-created, did I look upon God's world! Everything, then, was transformed in me and about me. For the first time I sensed in myself the

virtuous and active thought, strength of will, the feeling of the sublime and in rapture I fell in the dust before the power of the All-Creator, grasping the wondrous perfection of creation, the riddle of our existence, the high destiny of man. I became better, more elevated, kinder to people, more content in myself... With each breath I absorbed new life into myself, I was animated with a new sympathy for all that surrounded me and this sympathy, being communicated to all Nature, called forth an echo. Everything breathing and non-breathing received my greeting, everything answered in a language that I could understand... It seemed, my soul, only just born to life, was illuminating the whole world with the rays of its beauty and the world, warmed by this heat, like the statue of Memnon, responded to that first ray with a celestial harmony.

Formerly I had not known, how gratifying is the just pride of self-awareness and, in spite of my self-esteem and complete independence, I slavishly depended upon the opinion of people; time and again, I acted against my own conviction out of a wretched contest with my comrades in a wretched philosophy, distorted or, it were better to say, remade in the bivouacs by dashing horsemen and skilful blades. Formerly I did not suspect even those comforts, which the Lord has granted us in our intrinsic, vigilant self, are not in that vain

panderer of human passions, the indefatigable glorifier of our real and imaginary doings, which in an everlasting discord with the conscience lives in the tongue and blares out into everyone's ears fabrications, as gratifications only of its own self, but in the strict *Argus* and judge, which does not submit either to the laws of society or before the behests of fate, in the unbending, incorruptible custodian of the heavenly seed, that confused gift of the Divinity upon our entry into life, which, not being choked among the thorns and escaping the predatory birds, ripens within the breast of man as a support for him in oppression, for joy and tranquillity in the bitterest of calamities.

From time to time, already in my earliest youth, at the sight of the harmonious grandeur of Nature or when in sympathy with the works of the great poets, I felt within myself a mysterious unrest, a longing for something in-born. There would come over me the desire to shake off the yoke of substantial life and seek a refuge in spheres less subject to calculations, to obsequious behaviour, in spheres free from tyranny, fashions and the proprieties, from their dunce-lawgivers, from the slavish punctiliousness of their sage-executors; but that was a vague, fleeting desire, similar to that instinctive feeling, which I experienced in Switzerland, when, roaming in the mountains, tired and alone, I happened

to lean from a height beyond the clouds over a chasm and, surrounded by a sepulchral silence, by the gloom of the bottomless deep, not explored since the day of creation, I thought of casting myself to its depths, with a strange dying feeling in my breast, with a trembling, as though heralding bliss. That desire, barely twinkling in a idea without form and without the strength for execution, flew apart at its very birth; the second thought, which captivated me afresh, was the maelstrom, no less dangerous but not so clearly visible, of life and society.

Subsequently even these breaches abated within my soul; the feeling for the beautiful cooled within it from the incessant collisions with people, deaf and blind to all that was sublime and graceful; my noble notions were blunted, my ideas became narrow and, finally, entirely limited themselves to the cramped circle of camp life.

Now in the presence Zenaïda the feelings killed by society rose again in me, the power of the will was revived; the thought, so long slumbering beneath the bushel of the wretched quotidian, awoke, flared up with new force, but I was not already straining at the future, was not wearying myself with a passionate, agitated curiosity, the aim of which we cannot ourselves interpret; in her orbit the striving towards the unattainable abated within me, there was no

room for longing and impulses, I found everything, comprehended everything, was at rest, was intoxicated by the present, the present filled every moment of my existence, every element of my being with unearthly pleasures.

And yet, the passion, which absorbed my memory and also my reason, having embraced it with a power that was for myself incomprehensible, as before, concealed itself within me in a strange cordoned off place. For Zenaïda I forgot friends, relations, responsibilities, forgot my very self, I saw and understood only her, everywhere, always only her but, as a child, which has badly scratched its face, will squeeze shut its eyes in running past a mirror, so as not to see its own scars and blood, I also feared to glance into my own soul, evaded all reflections, all settling of accounts with myself, it was as though I was afraid to reinforce my passion through a recognition of it, having a presentiment that its awakening would be frightful...

Before long an event overthrew all my precautions.

General N***, Zenaïda's husband, came to the castle for a few days. He unexpectedly entered the drawing-room, embraced his wife equally as merrily and indifferently, as he squeezed the hand of her grandfather, exchanged bows with the doctor and me: that was a most cold, spousal kiss; however, in my breast it had the effect of a dagger-blow. I flinched, my

feelings awoke; in one moment love for her and hatred of her husband ignited in my heart and overflowed as fiery lava through all my veins. I stood immobile, as though rooted to the one spot, did not dare look about me and, probably, upon my face was expressed the internal suffering, because the doctor, approaching me, said:

“Are you not well?”

The entire evening I passed morosely, sitting in the corner between two columns, taking no part at all in the conversations, almost not hearing what it was they spoke of. Only each time, when the general drew near to his wife and, not interrupting his political debates with the baron, smoothed her locks, laid his hand on her shoulder, petted her with one of those caresses that one bestows equally upon a Pomeranian, a tomcat and a pretty child, each time, I say, my chest would convulsively tighten and I felt, how a cold sweat appeared on my forehead. After the supper, when all were beginning to disperse, it appeared to me that the general had gone after his wife into her room... there was a moment – a dreadful moment – when I nearly stooped to the rôle of spy, in order to satisfy myself as to my supposition; I was in a fever, a frenzy.

However, my good genius held me back from a lunatic act. And, beside myself, I rushed into my own room. There, for

the first time, were clearly presented to me her and my situation, our mutual responsibilities, the futility of my love, the impossibility of even one minute of complete bliss and at the same time the happiness of him, who possessed her by all rights and laws, who made bold to walk hand in hand with her in society, priding himself on her love and his own happiness, who could say to himself each minute of his life: 'she is mine!'

Before, when Zenaïda appeared to me, as one surrounded by a sort of radiance beyond the clouds, when I considered her to be to such an extent higher than all things earthly, that even the thought of one minute in possession of her did not dare spring up in my mind, I was content with my secret adoration, was happy to kiss mentally the traces of her... Now I was taking the liberty to see in her a woman, equal to myself, created of the same dust as I was, created, perhaps, for me and flung into the embrace of another only through the whim of a Fate that has no understanding. Together with my former, respectful love for her were mixed the stormy intentions of earthly enjoyment, I saw her in the embrace of an outmoded husband, who had long ago squandered his life, I saw her forced endearments, for which I would have given a thousand lives, endured the most intense torments – I saw, felt and, in despair at my impotence, in a rabid fit of

jealousy and indignation, I tore my breast, with scalding tears I fell down at the head of my bed, so as to smother, if only there, my loud sobbing and, time and again, in a state of distraction, kissing a pillow that was wet with tears, I murmured: “Zenaïda! Zenaïda!...”

Towards morning a troubled sleep closed my eyes; I fell asleep, without undressing, in the easy-chair and I awoke before anyone else. The sun was barely rising; through the opened window a fresh breeze was blowing upon me, reason had overcome the night-time riots of the imagination, calmed a little my agitated soul. I wrote to the baron that, before my departure for Russia, it was absolutely necessary that I pay a call to a nearby town, I gave as an excuse for my sudden leaving some news I claimed to have received the day before, promised to return soon and, entrusting a servant with the letter, I rushed to a horse and galloped away to S***.

I shall not set about describing, how I passed the three days of unbearable separation from Zenaïda: to live in the castle, the sad witness of another’s happiness was for me hundred times more agonising. During all the time of my voluntary banishment I sat, keeping to my room, in an inn and ten times a day I would enquire, whether a Russian general had not returned by this way. On the fourth day I was gladdened with an affirmative answer and I returned to the castle but I

returned not as him, I had been previously. My bright love had darkened in the whirlwind of passion, as the light of a star will fade in the glow of a blazing fire. The happiness, in which recently I was contented, finding such delight, could not now any longer satisfy me, my feelings had travelled beyond the boundaries of obedience, audacious schemes, unrealisable desires nested in my soul; I was at one time afraid that through a glance I would offend Zenaïda, at another looking to demand an account of her for the ruin of my previous carefree state; I pitied her, pitied myself, watched over every step I took, in all faces I read suspicion; in a word, my days and nights were passed in the cruellest conflict: everything that had been for me a source of bliss was turned into poison, into torment.

Sometimes, Zenaïda would tenderly enquire after my health, ask, whether I might not have received disagreeable news from Russia. Her concern and calm friendship moved me to tears but I did not wish to deceive her, I answered negatively, in embarrassment. Time and again she directed upon me a profound, searching look, from which a heat and trembling would run through my body; at those times I would hastily bring the conversation onto trivial matters or under some or other pretext I would leave the room.

One day, before evening, we were sitting, the two of us, at a window that opened onto the garden; Zenaïda was busy with needlework; in silence I looked on the path, upon which she had for the first time appeared to me and I felt sad, weighted down, as though a cliff had fallen upon my breast. Finally Zenaïda asked in an undertone, what I was thinking about and I, taken unawares in my daydreams, not contemplating the consequences of such carelessness, I told her in detail, how I saw her for the first time from the windows of my dungeon, what impression she had made upon me, with what longing I would then wait for the twilight, watch for her approach, with what joy I would greet her from afar. My heart was so full that I ought to have poured out only a small portion of that, which was devouring my existence. Carried away by the sweet recollection, I did not omit a single feeling, not one detail up to the fateful evening, on which the baron did me the happiness of making us acquainted. Zenaïda had laid down her needlework on her knees and was listening to me, without interrupting, in a profound state of pensiveness. I fell silent, the word 'love' had not once escaped from my mouth but, unbeknownst to myself, against all my intentions, I had revealed to her the secret, so long and so painstakingly preserved in the depths of my heart... Then, in her turn, she rose in great agitation, her face was pale but her eyes were blazing; having taken a few steps along the

room, she went up to the doorway and walked into the baron. The old man was carrying an enormous parcel. "Just now received from the post," he said, smiling and, breaking the seal, he poured out onto the table a pile of journals, newspapers and letters: among these were a few addressed to me. While I was reading them, having moved off to the side, the baron had also busied himself with the analysis of the news received and suddenly, turning to me, he said:

"Well then, my dear captive, apparently, we must render you your freedom; here is a letter from your commanding officer: he is reproving me as well as you. Here, take it and read for yourself."

In the letters directed at me my return to Russia was urgently required, there was even the threat of dismissal from the service. I cast a glance at Zenaïda: she was again sitting by the window, holding before her face some journal or other.

My head was spinning; I ran out of the room.

Half an hour later, returning to the drawing-room, I found Zenaïda still in the same place, only the journal and the needlework were thrown aside; she was sitting, leaning with her elbows on the window and supporting her head in her hands. I came nearer; hearing the noise of footsteps, she gave

a start, glanced at me and again turned away towards the window.

“You must travel to Russia?” she asked after a brief silence in a quiet and, as it seemed to me, timorous voice.

“Yes!” replied I, not feeling in myself either the desire or the strength to fulfil that, which I confirmed with this word.

“Leave! Leave!” she said with an animation. “Hurry back to our dear homeland... There are waiting for you friends, relations... You are still so young! The whole of God’s world stands before you... Leave and be happy!”

I could not see her face, which was turned to the garden and hidden from me by waves of her hanging locks but I heard, how jerkily her voice tore itself from her breast, I felt her trembling and, for the first time, the thought of a return of my affections broke through like a joyous sunbeam into my soul.

“Happiness is a sport of chance!” I answered quickly. “Chance took away from me the Earth upon which I lived and was content, grovelling in the dust but, having shown me the sky, it did not provide me with wings and the sky will remain for ever inaccessible to me. Where then, wherein am I to look for happiness?”

Zenaïda shook her head and after about two minutes she said quietly, as though pondering aloud:

“Happiness... is only a word, a sound without sense and without significance. A person, who is easily attracted by the clang of an empty bell, might pursue it; but for him, who in his life thinks and feels, believe me, it is an impossibility.”

“No, no!” cried I with ardour, still in the charm of the hope that had so recently twinkled. “Do not speak slanderously of Providence, do not take away from man his best, sweetest comfort – the belief in happiness! It is possible, if we do not fear the phantoms, with which we are encircled by a society, which is jealous of every crumb of joy that is hidden from it. It is possible if, not tempting Fate with cares about the future, we are content with the momentary but quite incomparable bliss of the present... Oh! What a happiness would be possible, for us... for me... but only here, right now or never! Above my future I am menaced by the inscription of Dante’s hell: *‘Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate’*.”

I came to a stop, fearing, whether I might not have said too much; and yet, there remained still so much more that I had to express! My primitive, miserable existence, the bliss on meeting her, my ambitions, the struggle, sufferings and first ray of hope, flashing out to me in a gloom of despair – all of it at once came to life in my memory, surged towards my

breast, stormed within it, sought liberty... I awaited one look, one wave of the hand, so that I could pour out before her everything, everything and then amid sobbing at her feet to beg for forgiveness, to earn it by suffering over years of separation... But she was silent; not a sigh, not the least motion betrayed her feelings.

I stood before her trembling, lacerated by a thousand excruciating sensations; I looked upon her like criminal, who in the anguish of uncertainty awaits from the judge's lips a pardon or an ignominious execution; but she was silent and sat immoveable, with her face turned towards the window... In another moment I would not have been able to endure my torment, my heart would have exploded in sobbing, in supplications... But Zenaïda, bowing to the flowers, standing in a glass before her, began to inhale their scent and seemed to have forgotten my presence. I was rooted to the spot.

I feared her anger, her reproaches; I was perishing in the hope, she would return my affections... But this calm, this devastating indifference found no place in my expectations! Amazed, almost offended, I was ready to break out in reproaches, with bitter irony. Zenaïda bowed her head still lower and a large tear, which had rolled down onto the twig of the lily-of-the-valley, hung down on the white calyx of the flower. In one instant my indignation vanished: this secret,

involuntary tear dripped, like a life-giving dewdrop, onto my heart, revealed to me Zenaïda's soul and I understood without any explanations, by fellow-feeling, as a child understands the tears of its mother, before its feeble understanding has come to know the words sorrow and joy.

"Forgive me! Forgive me!" cried I, ardently kissing her hand. "I have offended you, forgive me!"

She quickly rose from the chair, turned upon me eyes that were full of tears and, as though she wanted to pour out all of her soul in one speech, she said quickly in a gentle but firm voice:

"No, Vlodinsky, no, you have not offended me. But for God's sake and for the sake of your and my peace, leave soon! We should not see one another any more... Forget this moment, forget all that it falsely promised you, as you forget the reveries of an unrealisable dream. Do not despair as to the future: at your age, in the place of one crushed hope, ten others, far finer, will be revived... In your soul there is a noble aspiration towards all that is elevated, there is much energy, there are many aptitudes: you can be of use to humanity; do not allow so many excellent gifts of heaven to lie idle! And yet one more thing I ask of you: in Russia do not seek to meet me for a second time; never speak my name; if it

be possible, efface me from your memory... Promise this! Give your word that you will fulfil my first, my last request of you!"

I stood before her, annihilated and did not dare to touch the hand that was held out to me.

"You will not? You are refusing me?" she said with a voice, in which the tears could be heard.

"Do not demand of me that, which exceeds the strength of man," I answered. "I give my word not to seek meetings with you and that is all that I can promise and fulfil..."

"I thank you, thank you! Time will complete the rest... Farewell!"

She squeezed my hand and vanished into an adjoining room.

I did not meet her again.

I returned to Russia; my life began to flow after the usual pattern: *manège*, exercises, reviews, comrades surrounded me, as before; the five months passed in the castle of Baron Horch seemed to me some kind of magical fragment – out of my existence, an enchanted dream, of which there remained only the anguish of recollections and a repugnance towards a world, in which I found nothing that resembled it.

My condition was a burden to myself: I would either avoid people or voluntarily throw myself into the wildest of

company, participate in all orgies; but neither seclusion nor the hum of banquets provided me with even a momentary forgetting. The concern of kind friends provoked my grief: their jests infuriated me. Sometimes, tempted vicariously by the happiness of a number of my comrades, I reproached myself for what was past, abused myself for my rôle as one passive and pining, when with greater courage and persistence – who knows – might not I also have drunk a draught of such happiness? Why was I long-fingering, what did I hope for from time, when, in the present, life was holding out to me a cup, full of joy?

In suchlike meditations I cursed myself, Zenaïda, the whole world; but one minute later I would be ashamed of my fits, suppress within me the murmur of wild passion and mentally implore the pardon of her, who ought never again to hear me. Sometimes I was afraid but even more frequently I wished to lose my reason. Had I not been restrained by the religion, which in childhood was sown in my soul and later ripened in the discussions with Zenaïda, I, without wavering, would have rid myself of this hated life.

A year went by; a second winter set in; time had given me back the outward control over myself but the memory of Zenaïda, the passions that maddened my being, all that lived on in me just as powerfully, as in the first moment of parting

from her. My comrades, having exhausted all efforts to guess out the cause of my alteration, my ailment, as they expressed it, left me in peace, declaring it incurable. I fulfilled all the military duties to the letter but the rest of the time I passed alone, locked away in my quarters, having surrounded myself with books, studies. It was sweet for me to think that some day news of me, at least, would reach Zenaïda's hearing and she would learn, how our meeting had not been in vain and what fruits had arisen from the seeds sown by her.

At that time we were stationed the wilds of Lithuania; and, in part to see my sister, in part for my own amusement, I requested my annual leave and along the way I called in on relations of my mother, who made up an entire colony around a medium-sized town of the ***sky province. The aunts, uncles and cousins received me with open arms and, as the time was approaching Christmas, they forced from me the promise to stop with them until the new year. I was conveyed from village to village, from one set of relations to another; for me were organised feasts, dinners, soirée's. Grown more fond of me than any was an aunt of my mother with seven daughters, who had all long ago reached the marriageable age but not one had landed a match. This entire family of vestals was attached to me through the twofold bonds of birth and an affectionate liking; I was

constrained to hear out their confidences, secret aspirations and bits of gossip about the neighbouring landowners. On Christmas day one of the village balls was enlivened by the arrival of a few young officers. Not taking part in the dances, I, as usual, made up one of the party for my aunt's game of *Boston*. Before dinner the crowd of ladies and men entered the gaming room and my aunt questioned one of the officers:

"Well then, my dear fellow, will your Zenaïda Petrovna soon favour us?"

"What Zenaïda Petrovna is this?" I exclaimed, interrupting that officer's answer.

"The wife of General N***, the commanding officer of their division," Aunty answered quietly, with her eyes indicating the officers.

"Where is she then? How can she be expected and for what reason?" I asked again, forgetting the game and the company.

"She went off to visit her father and is returning to her husband. You see, the headquarters of the division is stationed in the town, about seven *versts* from here. Well, do you know her then?"

“I saw... I met her abroad...” I muttered, absolutely bewildered, I made a mess of my game and was glad, when the hostess asked her guests to come to supper.

On the return-journey, sitting squeezed into the corner of the enormous coach, in which were accommodated the entire family of my aunt, I was once more aroused my pensiveness by a familiar name, so dear to me.

“I wonder if Zenaïda Petrovna,” one of my cousins was saying, “will begin showing herself in company somewhat more frequently this winter?”

“Well, it has been a year now that there has been something or other new about her,” remarked another.

“God help us! Perhaps in the winter, as in the summer, she will begin to wander around the hills and the valleys, astride a horse, alone with a crowd of men...”

“Or roam in the woods with a book in her hands...”

“Sleep at balls, when everyone is dancing or talk incessantly, hiding out in corner with some chosen one.”

“Consider all of us so many stuffed dummies, talk pedantically, expound on Greek sages and about metaphysics.”

“Or make witticisms, which cause even the menfolk to blush out to their ears...”

Thus twittered my cousins, vying with one another, while I sat, listened and could not believe my ears.

“Who is this, you are speaking of?” I asked finally in my perplexity.

“Well, you did say that you know Mrs. General N***,” answered my Aunty, “about whom else could one allow oneself such talk? To be sure, such oddities, thank the Lord, are not often encountered in the land of Rus.”

“Zenaïda?” I exclaimed. “Zenaïda Petrovna N***? It is to her that you are applying these offensive jibes and epithets? Her you are naming a philosopher, a pedant, an oddity? And you wish to persuade me that you know Zenaïda, this angel in the body of a woman...”

The windows of the coach were set vibrating by the outburst of guffawing of my cousins.

“An angel! Zenaïda, an angel!” cried they, not ceasing to laugh. “You have lost your head! You have gone mad! You are in love!”

“Yes, I am in love with her!” I answered with vexation.

“Accept our congratulations!”

“I worship her!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“I revere her.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“But you do not know, you do not know her!” I repeated, trying to shout down the chorus.

“Whatever next!” they sang out with one accord. “We not know Zenaïda? Since her marriage... since childhood... from the cradle! Her father and mother all their lives were said to be eccentrics but the daughter has even surpassed them...”

And the thunder of fresh mockery, backbiting and guffawing deafened me anew.

Fortunately, the coach had come to a halt by the porch, I sprang out and, like one breaking free of a chain, I ran to my room. The entire night I spent in severe agitation, raging at the blackness of people, at the malice of my cousins, at the whole world, which, not knowing either how to understand or to appreciate such an angel, hissed among the filth and covered her name with venom. A few times I stopped myself from leaving that very night a house, in which the very air, so it seemed to me, was pestiferous with slander; but *she* was here, at a distance of seven *versts*, I could see her, without

breaking the promise given her; for I was not seeking the meeting, forbidden me: fate itself had brought us together... I would see her! Zenaïda! And I renounced the sudden departure, found it to be unseemly, insulting to my relatives, I practised sophistry with my own conscience, which was loudly reminding me of Zenaïda's final words. I remained and in the morning I came down to breakfast, arming myself with patience and all the pride of disdain for popular slanders.

Hardly had I shown myself in the tea-room, when my relatives beset me with questions, as to where and how I had made the acquaintance of Zenaïda.

"This is most interesting!" twittered they. "Can it be that to her many other merits she also adds the ability to change her exterior, as a snake changes its skin? Can it be that in foreign parts she was playing the rôle of sentimental Penelope? Can it be that you were taken in by such a gross deceit?"

With difficulty I restrained my indignation, I answered curtly, briefly, interrupted their speech with questions about matters that did not at all relate to Zenaïda. They fell silent but continually winked at one another with ironical smiles.

Having finished the breakfast, Aunty took my arm, led me away to her room and, after a long preface about how she

had loved my mother and what a friendship she nourished for me, she set to discussing the perilous condition of youths, who lightly place their trust in a deceptive outward appearance; of the craft of some women, who know how to set their traps expertly for young people... I listened to her without paying any heed, looking out the window at how a murder of crows was harrying a frightened dove. The old lady, noticing my indifference to her parental admonitions, rose and with unfeigned concern said:

“I pity you, really, I do! If you do not want to hear our truth, find out for yourself: you will be wiping away tears with your fist but then it will be too late!”

“But this is impossible, Aunty, impossible! You are either deceiving yourself or me... I repeat, you do not know Zenaïda...”

“You do not believe me? Then believe all of society! Ask about her whomever you wish, old and young, men and women, civil and military; all of them will tell you the same thing: she is a coquette, a woman of very ambiguous behaviour, pretentious regarding her intellect, capricious, proud, wilful...”

“Enough, enough! You will drive me out of my senses!”

“On the contrary, I wish to bring you to your senses. I know your nature: you are a dreamy one, prone to enthusiasms and when you are seduced by a mirage of something distinguished, pure, angelic, you are prepared to sacrifice everything for it, even to perform for it the greatest follies, without investigating, whether or not you are having the wool pulled over your eyes. I fear for you: this woman is a mistress of turning the heads of young persons with high-flown phrases about her purity, her virtue, her grandeur, by which she is only endeavouring to screen her secret weaknesses...”

“She has no weaknesses, Aunty!”

“With the exception of the one, which she has for... for...”

“For whom then? Speak!”

“Well, at least for you!”

I reddened and Aunty noticed this. In vain did I assure her that she was mistaken, that Zenaïda had not given me any grounds to consider myself happier than other admirers of her beautiful soul, that our relations had been of the purest and devoid of wanton thought. Aunty continued with a smirk:

“I do know, dear one, the women of this sort, I know: do not lose your time telling me about them; I have seen many of

them in my life. I cannot abide women, who deliberately take measures towards assuring any and all that they are free from the weaknesses of their sex, for that alone is already a proof to the contrary; who wish take the pleasures of the heart, like other sinners, and at the same time enjoy a reputation for being sinless, they pass themselves off as being incomprehensible, whereas they are only half-baked, they pretend to be *femmes supérieures*, creatures of a higher rank, put their hand into the fire and then display to the whole world that they have not burned their fingers. I believe that it is better flee the fire and not get oneself involved in such conjuring tricks, which are always dangerous, if not for the virtue, then for the reputation. If you are a woman, who is pure, virtuous, free of sin, then love, as was the way of old in Holy Russia, love, my dear, only your husband and occupy yourself only with him and the young admirers of incomprehensible, female virtue are absolutely none of your affair; do not begin delicious conversations with them, do not dupe them, Madam, do not turn their heads for amusement, do not carry them off on the train of your dress into a world of splendid reveries, in order to leave them between heaven and earth, as ones eternally thirsting; do not inflame their imaginations with your mental delights on account of a want of bodily delights: this is also coquetry and it is still more dangerous, more immoral than the ordinary sort, which from

a vanity tries to trouble the calm of a man by way of the enticement of an outward beauty. As far as outward beauty goes, you men do not spend long calculating but with spiritual beauty, especially if it is counterfeit, as always happens with these ladies, who attempt to shine by it, there is no end to the torments, tortures, sorrow. This kind of coquetry is the surest means to kill a man for all life, to make him unfit for all legitimate enjoyment, to engender in him a repugnance for the accessible sources of genuine, practical happiness. The poor worshipper of the invisible treasures of the soul always exaggerates them in his imagination, takes fire, falls into enthusiasm, becomes dissatisfied with all other women and with himself: and if he were allowed to discern properly these treasures, then, perhaps, it would turn out that they are worth a copper kopeck. But that is exactly the power of it: these sham *femmes supérieures* only display the most brilliant particles of their meagre spiritual wealth, skilfully shutting off the main emptiness of the treasure-house with puffed-up phrases about the sanctity of the responsibilities assumed, about the injustice of fate, about the malice of people. Believe me, dear one, for married women with a modicum of intellect, nothing is easier, than to trifle with the treasures of the mind and heart, pretend to be the sacrificial victims of marriage, which will immediately arouse compassion, and never permitting the affected

admirers, out of feigned esteem for one's duties, to reckon up a clear and true sum-total of these inner riches, such as, for example, you could draw up of the outer charms of a woman. And such coquetry is the usual weapon of women, who have already ceased to be beauties or to whom beauty was not granted, as with your Zenaïda Petrovna. This woman complains without ceasing that she is not understood: well, what is there to understand? A woman full of caprice, ambitious, vainglorious, desiring to appear to all and in every way exalted above her friends, even higher than her sex; a woman in an unequal battle with her own passions, who thirsts after enjoyment and skilfully overturns the bowl containing it in calculated fright as soon as the beverage touches her lips, who, by every means, lures towards herself men, who differ from the crowd in whatever that might be: intellect, gifts, fame, beauty, distinction, even wild behaviour, just in order to seem herself uncommon among uncommon people and so that all will talk of her. She bamboozles them with her supposed grandeur, dazzles with tags from the latest book she has read, dupes with unattainable feelings, requires that she be interpreted up there in the expanses beyond the clouds, she inspires a hope in them, she amuses herself with the spectacle of their odd rapture and when the last one of them considers himself already close to the goal of all of the manly sighs – why lo and behold! – she is already

withdrawing to the mountains and the valleys with a new book and a new enthusiast for comprehending incomprehensible women, whom she will within a month also make a fool of, having commanded him never to make mention of her name, never to meet...”

I flinched. Aunty, without having noticed my motion, was continuing:

“The predecessors of the one duped, it goes without saying, receive with open arms into their circle this new comrade-in-woe, but the seal of secrecy does not always remain unbroken between them: a one begins to complain, another to ridicule, a third will wish to exact vengeance for himself and for his fraternity. Hence the ill fame. This woman does everything that she possibly can, so that people will speak of her and then complains that she is spoken of! A strange requirement! Each person has the right to speak of that which they see and hear: and it is indeed the business of those who will give occasion for rumour about themselves to make efforts to the end that there be nothing ambiguous in their behaviour, nothing of the kind that could be misinterpreted in a foul direction. What need has the court of society to enter into an investigation of a secret purity, when the exterior is not pure? And if these women have been punished beyond their sins by the court of society, then they

are themselves to blame for this. But the court of society is rarely mistaken.”

In the course of this dreadful monologue by my eloquent Aunt, a cold perspiration was flowing down my face. Against my will, I felt the justice of many of her sarcasms: some of them, if you were to judge simply and alone on outward appearance, fitted the unfortunate Zenaïda surprisingly well. From every quarter doubt penetrated my heart. I was silent. But when Aunt began to summon to the aid of her ingenuity the court of society, to glean proofs from the filthy opinion of the mob, indignation seized hold of me. I could not contain myself.

“The court! The court of society?” I exclaimed in a rage. “What is this you name a court of society?”

“Well then, at least my court,” she answered coolly. “I am that very society! Zenaïda Petrovna has no right at all to evade my supreme court, as I do not avoid the supreme court of Zenaïda Petrovna. The matter is decided by the majority of votes. When a hundred, a thousand such societies, as I am one, are agreed upon their opinion with me, then our sentence has been properly arrived at and the guilty party ought to subject herself to its legitimate force. And it may be that my opinion is much more temperate and merciful than many other opinions. I am basing it solely upon that, which I

have seen myself but there are people, who maintain that they have seen far more!”

“They are slanderers!”

“And they perform an office. Why does Zenaïda Petrovna give cause for slander?”

“Give cause? She? This angel of purity?”

Aunty shrugged her shoulders and walked out of the room.

From that day the name of Zenaïda never ceased to sound in my ears: the news of my love for her spread about the entire county and in my presence it was only her name that was on every tongue: it was dragged into all conversations and all references to her were contaminated with the opinions of my relatives. On a few occasions it came about that I met in company individuals, who had ties of kinship with her, with whom she had grown up and been schooled, but even these could not or would not advance anything in justification of her; on the contrary, the doleful faces they made in conversations about Zenaïda, their endeavouring to change the topic of the conversation were more caustic than any back-biting.

A very few people, worthy of esteem, excused her on the grounds that in her childhood she had received the most

perverse notions of the responsibilities of a woman with respect to society; that she was early orphaned and landed in the home of an aunt unfit to reform the character of a young, inexperienced girl. They did justice to her intellect, kindness of heart; a number spoke of some or other magnanimous act to do with her marriage; but a thousand voices were raised against her and I could not even get to the root of what her magnanimity consisted in.

The court of society had sat. Its unappealable sentence had fallen upon the head of poor Zenaïda. She was even forbidden from defending herself. It is true that some of the members presiding over the dread mock trial, one thousand times more terrible than all Spanish Inquisitions, did not countersign its implacable resolution: more than once I happened to hear two or three voices which, in defiance of the talk, fervently defended Zenaïda, showered her with loud praise, named her an exemplary woman. But these unsolicited advocates were either young, empty-headed people or *Don Juans* of a bygone age, whom any smile from a young woman will bind to eternal gratitude. Just as the most powerful and dangerous poisons are hidden beneath the leaves of beautiful flowers, so also the most wicked slander quite often lies in the inflated praises of certain people. While extolling a woman, with every word they subtly hint that they

have been afforded the right, that they are obliged to defend her; and, in order to show their eloquence, shine with banal ideas filched from books, they fabricate a justification of her in opposition to all the laws of morality and do not consider that they are staining her with their wretched opinions, which many people will take up and give out as being her own. But at that time I was not able either to analyse or to judge in a composed manner and, I confess it, the self-promotion of these people paved the way more surely than all slanders towards the eclipse of my reason.

The awful poison of doubt began to leak into my soul; agitated by malevolent calumnies it gave a more troubled reflection of the image of a previously pure, virtuous Zenaïda. I still did not believe the slanders; my love was stronger than these: but I had been placing this woman so high above the whole world! I had encircled her beloved head with such a magical radiance that even the vulgar looks and speech that did reach her, seemed to me a defilement of this brilliance! For almost two years Zenaïda had illuminated upon my horizon, like a bright, magnificent sun; for two years not a single cloud, not even for a moment, obscured it; how was it then for me, impotent witness, to see, how the toxic vapours of the opinion of the crowd dimmed its rays, how the court of

society lowered upon this wonderful head the ignominious axe of vengeance for the breach of its ill-fortuned laws!

It was not suspicion that wore me down: I would still with loathing push away all the fabled charges of society: but I felt aggrieved, agonisingly vexed! I was not suffering for myself but for her, not suffering brokenly but proudly, loftily, with disdain for the accusers. But yet their words were incessantly assailing my ears, my memory would obstinately preserve the smallest details of the tales, and time and again, even at night, their serpentine hissing would awaken me: I would spring up with a curse and a threat upon my lips, with a gnawing anguish in my heart. There was a single thought that would at times comfort me: it might be that my Zenaïda and that one, about whom ***ski county was so exercising itself, were two wholly separate individuals: it might be that an entirely chance similarity of name, status and a few details of life had led me into an error, which would be dispelled at the first meeting with a Mrs. General N*** who was unknown to me. And I clung to that thought as to a plank keeping me afloat and with gladness I renounced the hope of seeing Zenaïda, preferring eternal separation to the sorrow of seeing her unworthy of my love.

“Finally Mrs. General N*** has returned to her husband,” my aunt said to me one morning. “Now you can assure yourself

of the truth of what I said. She arrived today and this very day there is a ball for her at the administrator's residence; there you will be sure to meet her. Would you like that? Let us go: in about two hours we shall be in the town..."

A tremor ran through my body, in that same instant my head and my breast were aflame. 'I shall see you, Zenaïda! With one word, with one glance, you will alleviate the impression left inside me by the hostile incantations! As before, you will extend your hand to me, one wavering in his confidence in you, and again there will arise before me the object of my worship and again I, loving and happy, shall fall down at your feet!'

Having thanked my aunt for the notification I followed her suggestion and in about two hours we were in the town. My relatives at once set out for the shops to garner supplies for their evening costumes; I was left alone.

The thought of the approaching presence of Zenaïda was intoxicating for me, the hope of a meeting with her was joyous but my heart was in a certain way beating abnormally in my breast, it ached, it missed beats, as if it had a presentiment of misfortune. I awaited and at the same time feared the evening. Two times I stopped myself from running to Zenaïda. To know that she was here, at one hundred paces from me, and not to see her, this was the torment of

Tantalus! And I seized my hat, stepped to the threshold... But what of her prohibition? And my word of honour? This evening a lie might conceal the breach: a meeting at the ball could be put down to chance but to go to her at home! Such was her influence over me that I, seething in impatience, suffering, tormented, both times flung my hat aside and was left with the solitary hope of the evening.

Finally my anguish and impatience intensified to the level of torture: I could not rest for a minute in one place, I could not concentrate either thought or gaze upon a single object; I passed from room to room, measured time by the movements of the pendulum; finally, tired in mind and in body, I came to a stop by the window.

The street was filled with people, the crowds were all colour and movement; I was looking through glass, patterned by the frost, not thinking, not seeing. Now a sleigh flew past: in it sat a lady in a white hat, on the footboard stood an officer. Faster than lightning they flashed by and disappeared but I, like one rabid, dashed to the doors, pronouncing the name of Zenaïda. I run out onto the street: the sleigh has disappeared; then, forgetting her request and my word, I threw myself into the first sleigh I came across and galloped off to General N***'s apartments.

“Is the general’s wife at home?” I asked, running into the servants’ room.

“She is, sir,” replied one of the servants, “how shall I announce you?”

Having given my surname, I walked after him into the hall, the drawing-room; the door to a third room was locked.

“Permit me to announce you first, sir,” the servant said to me, probably fearing lest I should in his wake burst into the bedroom.

I stood still; but, in the time that he was entering and shutting the door behind himself, my gaze fell first upon a service cap, which lay beside the white hat, then on its proprietor himself, that officer, whom I had seen riding upon the footboard of the sleigh. He was walking about the room, his frock-coat opened wide, and humming a French romance, as if he were in his own apartment. Standing at two paces from the door, I heard how the servant announced my arrival.

“Who?” responded a quiet and, as it seemed to me, trembling voice, at which my every fibre began to quiver.

“Lieutenant Vlodinsky,” repeated the footman.

In that very moment a male voice was heard in the room, with an accent of fear and of entreaty; he spoke quickly:

“Dear Heart, it is he! Refuse him! Do not receive him!”

Beside myself I took a step towards the doors: they opened and the servant, again shutting them behind himself, flung me these words:

“I am asked to beg your pardon, today no one is being received.”

I looked at him, as though not understanding. I think, there was a madness reflected in my eyes, for he looked at me in astonishment, repeated his words and did not take his hands from the lock of the door until I had turned and slowly, mechanically had gone out into the servants’ room.

I do not know, how I came to be at the inn, in my room. I was in a state of distraction, a delirium; feelings within me were frozen still, my reason had fallen dumb; not a single thought would arise in my mind, not one throb would demonstrate the life of my heart. Almost at that very time my cousins returned from their outing and, not giving themselves time to take off their outer clothes, they surrounded me, peppered me with questions:

“Well, what then, did you go to the madam general’s rooms? Were you gently received? Were they glad to see you?”

“Today no one is being received,” I answered, unintentionally repeating the the words of the lackey, which were still banging inside my head like the blows of a heavy hammer.

“How not being received! What nonsense, I just now saw three carriages at their entrance.”

“I saw, how the prince came out from her residence.”

“And did you see him, while you were there? She had been out for a drive with him... She drove past these very windows in a little white hat; the prince was behind on the footboard...”

“Bah, no, that was no prince! I tell you, that was Vsevolod,” objected the youngest sister.

“Not again, not still!” cried out all six with one accord. “You are wrong. It was the prince. We saw him very clearly...”

“What prince is this?” I exclaimed, awaking from my stupor.

“Prince Svegorsky, *aide-de-camp* to the husband and friend to her.” And some demon whispered into my ear: ‘The lucky fellow, who is received into the bedroom, while for you the door is bolted,’ and its infernal laughter pierced my heart like a poisoned arrow.

“A prince! Lucky fellow!” I said over and over under my breath. “Zenaïda! A prince! But who is he?” I again shouted in despair. “You saw, you know him: tell me then, who he is, what he is for her... For the sake of God above, speak just this once in your lives clearly and sensibly. Have pity, do not torment me!”

Evidently, I was indeed deserving of pity: the sisters exchanged glances and the eldest of them, who had always shown me the greatest friendliness, said, as she sat me down with her on the divan:

“Listen to me, dear one. In the winter your Zenaïda Petrovna was in Petersburg and, hardly had she returned, when after her came Prince Svegorsky, appointed, in accordance with his own wish, *aide-de-camp* to her husband. She met him, as if he were a friend of long standing and since that time they have been inseparable; at gatherings, on walks, even at church the prince is always accompanying her. This is known to all. When she recently departed for some time to her father’s, the faithful *aide-de-camp* did not appear anywhere in society. It is said, she forbade him. He is young, delightfully handsome; they say, given to gambling; and, my word, how far! The general is so tolerant, the prince is so courteous: whether it is odd, that they say... Well, what does

it matter, what they say about her... Do not pine, my good dear!”

“All right! Very well! Describe to me the appearance of the prince.”

“Tall, well-formed, fair-haired, with marvellous curls, somewhat round-shouldered but that suits his height.”

“That is he! And always with her? In her bedroom... Oh, Zenaïda!”

Forcing my way through the ranks of my cousins, I ran to the furthest room and shut myself in there under lock and key.

Now Zenaïda’s breach of faith seemed beyond doubt: everything was so plainly, so loudly bearing witness against her! The court of society had been justified, my own eyes had certified for me that, which so long and so stubbornly my heart had rejected... He! In her dressing room! Alone with her! A man reputed to be her lover... he beseeches her: “Dear Heart, refuse him, do not receive him!” Dear Heart? Infernal powers! And at that moment I was standing humiliated outside the door! I was pushed away with scorn! I was being sacrificed to the whim of a new chosen one! And I did not throw myself upon him, did not strangle, did not tear him to pieces...

So this was why she forbade me a second meeting! This was why she asked me not to speak her name in Russia! To what end all of these precautions and forestalling measures? Evidently, her conscience was crying out against the mask of virtue and she was hoping out of my ignorance to make a shield against her hypocrisy. And I, one blinded, I called people slanderers, I cursed, I traduced them! Were she as pure and as saintly as she had been mirrored in my soul, then no jealousy, no malice would have dared raise against her its poison sting: what spirit of darkness would not have hung its head before her radiance? No, the fascination had vanished! The dreams, love, everything had vanished! There remained only a terrifying essence, which killed all that had brightened my poor existence and, having made a nest within my wasted sanctuary hissed like a Fury, inflating my passions.

Once only there arose in me a comforting doubt: a familiar feeling began to speak in defence of Zenaïda. There appeared to me her shape, her eyes, full of feeling and a reflection of sadness, I became as though sorry for her. That was the final appeal of a reason, which was being eclipsed. Perhaps it would have battled with the slander and the wicked calumnies of people but within me was raging another feeling, suppressing all, overcoming all, jealousy blazed

within me with a dreadful flame and, in face of that, all sensations submitted, the final sparks of intellect grew dark.

The court of society is right! The woman, for whom I had erected an altar in my soul, was simply a cunning, treacherous coquette! She, who had remoulded me, who had instilled in me another way of being, she now, in saccharine conversation with others, is laughing at me, as at a novice, a schoolboy, who, clothing himself for her pleasure in fool's motley, blissfully believes that this is the mantle of wisdom... Damnation!

The month before, pining in the anguish of rapturous love, I thought myself the most unfortunate among mortals; now I would give back all that I possess, all that I might one day own in this life, in order to retrieve my bitter past, with its torments, with its anguish but also with its blind belief in Zenaïda's purity... I lived free of care before meeting her, I was happy with my crude, material life: why had she to seduce me with her deceitful splendour of illusory virtues? Why had she to open before me a paradise of high sensations, which she herself knew only by name? The world, into which she had introduced me, lay now in fragments, destroyed by her own hand, and what about me? I, who had torn from my soul all feelings, who had damned all thoughts, which did not breathe in her, her alone; I, who had thrown

down at her feet all the enjoyments of my youth without the slightest claims to hope for a recompense; I, who in her alone worshipped all that is sublime, adored all that is graceful, with the thought of her only thirsted for a future, suffered for her, prayed for her, believed in her and lived and was happy solely through my hope – I saw now my idol thrown down, trampled in the dust by people's feet and in a frenzy, with bloody tears I saw for myself that it was nothing more than an effigy, cast from a base metal and, what is worse, a woman without a conscience, without a heart, without a soul!

I tore my hair, raged, now cursing the whole world, now in exhaustion sobbing like a child. But soon there took flame a passion, unknown to me up till then; a passion, which, spreading like fire, dried my tears and stifled all sensations: this was a thirst for revenge!

Shaking from myself all principles and opinions, by which I had governed myself during the last two years of my life, I summoned from my memory the long forgotten philosophy regarding women; I armed myself with all the mettle, upon which even recently I had looked with contempt and, cold-bloodedly, quietly I began to conceive means towards the slaking of my vengeance.

The demon of spiteful-invention did not delay in appearing to me: I drew up a full plan of operation and, hoping that very evening to meet Zenaïda at the ball, I mustered all my forces for the assault.

When I came down to the common room for tea and my cousins, half dressed for the ball and half for the home, received me, as was their habit, in ironic fashion, I answered them in like manner; I was calm, even cheerful, chatted incessantly, in advance engaged them for the *contredanses*, made witticisms regarding the other ladies. My gaiety glowed, as the colour on the face of a consumptive will glow, the brighter it is, the nearer is the end. Its final minute was also not far off! My cousins could not admire enough the sudden change in my disposition and were glad that I, as they put it, was finally arrived to sense. But was this sense or total insanity? I did not know, either what I did, nor what I said and there was only one thing that I remembered, only one thing that I constantly thought of: the revenge I was preparing for Zenaïda. The eagerly awaited time arrived: I hurried my cousins along, hurried the coachman; all the impatience of a lover was again revived in me. At last we entered the hall. Zenaïda was not yet there. I placed myself opposite the doorway, looked upon it with trembling anticipation, was on the watch for all entering and all

leaving; the ball commenced, a *polonaise* stretched out in its long file around the room; Zenaïda was not appearing... For more than two hours I did quit my position, did not let the doorway out of my sight: there flashed the familiar face of the general; a joyful quivering enveloped me, I advanced towards the doorway but after the general there entered only the *aide-de-camp* and a few officers.

“But where is Zenaïda Petrovna?” asked the hostess of the ball.

“She sends you her apologies; a powerful migraine...”

I heard nothing more. The light began to flicker in my eyes: it seemed to me, that most foul spirit had informed her of the revenge, contemplated by me. In my calculations and assumptions I omitted from view the most central circumstance: Zenaïda, steadfast in her intention never to see me, would probably renounce society for all the period of my sojourn in the town. In a fury at this new failure I went from room to room, racking my brains anew, as to how I would meet Zenaïda in a large company... No baseness seemed to me unworthy of myself, if only it provided the means to wreak vengeance on this woman. In this humour I came to enter a separate suite, in which a crowd of men surrounded the gaming table.

As I was coming near to the doorway I heard in among the general talk the words:

“What, gentlemen, whose luck is in?”

“Whose, only Prince Svegorsky’s! Lucky chap! He is decidedly favoured both by ladies and by cards...”

This hated name made me flinch; in an instant I found myself in the gaming room and the first thing to present itself to my gaze was the face of the banker, in which I could not fail to recognise that young officer, whom I saw in the morning on the footboard of the sleigh and in Zenaïda’s bedroom. My heart was roused with a malicious joy, a sudden thought flashed across my mind, I approached the table and joined myself to those punting.

The prince was a gambler, as my cousin had been saying, consequently, suffering a loss should present me with no difficulty, in that hope I staked a large sum. But as *Fortuna* always appears unlooked for, so she also favoured me to begin with, in spite of my intentional mistakes and inattention to my play. At last my persistence wore her down: I began to lose; in half an hour my wallet and my purse were emptied, this was just what I had been aiming for.

Then, making the pretence of being an irascible gambler, annoyed at a sizeable loss, I opened out the tunic of my

uniform and tore from my chest a locket with a golden frame. It contained within it on the one side a very faithful portrait of Zenaïda, which I had had copied while still in Germany, and on the other the dried lily-of-the-valley, which she had watered with a farewell tear; the day before both of these still could not have been torn from me otherwise than together with my life; now I made of them instruments of my vengeance.

“Here is a trifle,” said I, addressing the banker, “which will, perhaps, today have for you that value that it had for me one year ago. This woman made me happy for a time, mayhap, even now she will bring me happiness. And then, the golden frame is, of course, also worth something; gentlemen, would any of you like to put a value on it?” I added, designedly passing the locket to my nearest neighbour at table.

My words had attracted general interest to the portrait of Zenaïda; players and spectators crowded about it but no one spoke the name of this person, known to all of them; only that many faces were distorted by malicious smiles.

“Well then, dear sir, are you in agreement to accept this bagatelle for, shall we say, about a hundred roubles?” I asked the banker and with these words, having once more taken possession of the portrait, I tossed it onto the table covered with cards and chalk scribbles.

The banker squinted. In one instant his face had turned crimson, he caught up the representation of Zenaïda, leapt up and, having flung at me a one-hundred-rouble assignat, shouted:

“You petty merchant! There are your hundred roubles, the portrait belongs to me!”

In the room there was much commotion; intercessors crowded in around us, spoke of apology, of peaceful settlement but I, drawing the prince to one side, whispered a few words in his ear, to which he, in place of a reply, gave me a nod of the head and we parted at once.

Having returned to the inn, I inspected my pistols, wrote one letter to my sister, another to Zenaïda, in which I stated not only everything that was boiling in my soul but even the entire proceedings of the court of society, all of its charges; then, having sealed them, I presented both letters to my man with the instruction to deliver them to their addresses in the event of my death or dangerous wounding.

It seemed as though my rage, having found expression in the scene at the ball and in the letter to Zenaïda, had subsided. I had attained my goal: her name thrown down, disgraced to be gnawed at by the mob and he, her lover, he was the sacrifice, condemned to face my lead! Tomorrow would be

settled my accounts with her and, perhaps, with the world... So be it! Life had never been a treasure for me and now, beyond the bounds of my vengeance, it did not even exist for me without it! Live as whom? For whom? For what?

Zenaïda alone filled my soul, my existence. Always, everywhere with me, day and night, in my sleep and waking, she, it seemed, had grown to be one with my heart, flowed in my blood. In her were contained the beginning and the aim of my being: what then would it be without her?

And for the first time, directing my gaze into the future, I shuddered! Dark, empty, cold, dreadful!

I felt the loss of my dream, my apparition, false, but so pleasingly comforting, so sublimely beautiful...

And who then had destroyed the charm I was under? Was it just of me to charge Zenaïda with this? No! Foreseeing the future, she had shown me the path going above the abyss, I had turned away from it, I had voluntarily killed my sole, paltry happiness; now there was nothing that could resurrect it!

And a desire for death gave answer from my deserted heart!

A solitary citizen of the world, a stranger in the enormous family of humanity, beloved of no one, attached to no one,

was I not superfluous upon Earth? I do have a sister: I am almost unacquainted with her; there are many boon companions and not one friend... A guest, against my will, at the celebration of life, I had feasted my portion, been young, been happy, tasted sorrow and gladness; the banquet was finished, time to go home! The only pity was that I had not left it sooner, in that moment, when, in the fascination of the first entry into society, I looked upon everything through the prism of the charm, took tinsel for gold, words for the echo of feelings. A pity that I did not succeed in carrying away with me its beautiful booty. Now the sun of truth had ascended, illuminated the *rouge* on the faces, the putrefaction beneath the artificial life, the deception in a smile, slyness in a glance, in costumes, in colours. Accursèd sun! Time to go home!

I avidly clung to the thought of my destruction and soon, taking the ardent desire for a presentiment of its fulfilment, I cast a tranquil glance on the past, like one who has lived past his time, already struck off the list of people.

I had existed for twenty-three years; but it was only from the meeting with Zenaïda that I counted the beginning of my life. She called me forth from non-being, fanned the divine spark that had been smouldering to no purpose within me; with love for her I sensed within myself the feelings of Man, the likeness of the Living God on Earth, in her I savoured

existence, through her I took delight in it, not for long but, in recompense, powerfully, boundlessly... She had been everything for me; to her I was indebted for all... A tear of gratitude and tenderness dropped from my eyelashes onto my breast and told as a reproach within it. How had I shown her my gratitude?

For happiness I returned her defamation, for life a torment, worse than a thousand deaths.

I, a proud, strong, powerful man, had joined battle with a weak creature, debilitated by the torments of fate, the persecutions of people; I had crushed it and I celebrated my victory... An odd victory! The wolf and wild boar could do the same and even better; they would emerge from the combat unscathed; but I, having chained Zenaïda to the pillory post, had also enmeshed myself in her chains; I had fettered myself together with my victim, having taken up the post of her executioner...

A feeling of shame, abasement, contempt for myself gushed in a seething wave to my heart, flooded, submerged it.

But if my presentiment was not deceptive, if tomorrow was fixed for me to step over the border of life and death, if there my mother would meet her child, her beloved child, to whom through her milk she had transferred the final strength of her

extinguishing life, if she would require from him an account of what he made of the existence granted him? I loafed through society of no use to myself or to others; I met a woman, wholeheartedly I threw my entire being at her feet and then, when she rejected the unsolicited, to her useless gift, I attacked her, one defenceless, tore at her, stained the honour of her husband, I ordered, without leave, my neighbour's life as well as my own... The noble, exemplary account of a swine, holding the rank a man possessed of reason and with an immortal soul!

I was dispirited, annihilated by the weight of these reflections and for a long, long time I sat as though nailed to the chair. It was in this attitude that the daylight found me. 'Time!' said then an inner voice, giving me back my strength and an awareness of the present.

"It is time!" I repeated aloud and, reproaching myself with faint-heartedness, I leapt up and departed for the location of the duel.

My adversary was already there with another young officer who, at my request, took upon himself the office of second to us both; while he was examining and loading the pistols, I cast a curious glance at my lucky rival, whom the day previous, in the heat of passion, I had not been able to look over thoroughly. He was still in the first flower of spring; a

youthful flush glowed upon his cheeks; he seemed to me so good, in his features was reflected such a straightforwardness that I understood, how greatly he could be loved by a woman and in what a despair his death would cause the creature who loved him to fall. I understood and, boiling with renewed vengeance, like a savage beast, I measured him with my eyes, already directing towards him the bullet, which was to pierce two hearts; in thought I was already becoming drunk on his blood and her tears.

Our second, having measured off the distance, presented us the pistols; we began slowly to converge, at the signal two shots rang out: I felt a blow on my leg, my opponent toppled over backwards.

“Vsevolod! Killed!” cried the second, tearing open his clothes and attempting to staunch the blood, which was running down in a hot stream onto the snow.

A minute before I was cold-bloodedly directing a pistol at the youth’s heart, thirsting for his blood but the word ‘killed!’ had made me flinch. In one moment my hatred had vanished; I forgot he was my rival, saw only the man, killed by me; conscience cried out loudly against the murderer and, despite my own wound, I rushed to the dying man.

At the sound of my voice, he opened his eyes, directed upon me a gaze, already covered by the shroud of death, made a final effort and with an indistinct, barely audible voice, groaned:

“You have killed honour... of innocent... and killed... brother... In society... clear her name...”

“Brother? Brother?” cried I in horror.

But already before me lay a corpse. His lips were pressed together; his eyes had rolled up; the life, which so recently had played upon the face in a strong flush, had given way to a deathly pallor; the passions, which had moved the features, had ceded their place to an unfeeling calm; and in this pallor, in this calm, I caught the resemblance... The awful truth struck me like the curse of God. The light in my eyes grew dim; the killer fell insensible upon the corpse of the one killed...

I do not remember, how I was brought home and how long I lay in a delirium: a powerful fever had taken hold of me; for more than a month death hovered above my bedhead and I called to it, begged for it, as a mark of heavenly mercy, but life and youth conquered. I recovered.

With the renewal of my strength the sense of my sin also increased within me. For what had I destroyed an innocent

man? For what deprived a sister of her brother, a brother devoted to her, perhaps her only friend in the world? And at the same time, the people, who with such fury had cried against Zenaïda, now pitied her, sought every means to tear at me. From them I learned, as though unintentionally, by the way, that Zenaïda, having returned from her father's home on the eve of the ball that was to be given for her, brought with her her brother as a guest to her husband's home; she and the youth I had killed were the only children of a meritorious old nobleman; that after the awful event a slander with fatal speed reported to the father of his daughter's dishonour and his son's death; that the old man could not withstand this double-blow and when his daughter, who apparently knew nothing of my base deed at the ball, flew to her father, in order to inform him delicately of their mutual misfortune, the old man did not even want to see her and died in the hands of strangers; that after this Zenaïda had renounced society, confined herself alone in her village and there, refusing all the comforts of relatives, all the benefits of medicine, was dying, like a used candle. Too late also I learned that Prince Svegor'sky and her brother were both *aide-de-camps* and that a chance similarity in stature and physiognomy had more than once in society caused the one to be taken for the other.

For several months I was in custody; I was tried; leniency reduced my guilt; in society I was even more quickly pardoned but I was carrying the punishment in my own breast, a punishment, against which all human retributions and all the opinions of society would seem to me insignificant. My imagination was troubled by awful spectres: in my sleep and waking I dreamt of the faces of the murdered youth and the dying father, the despair of the sister and daughter and continually were heard the words cut short by a mortal wheezing: "You have killed the honour of an innocent and killed her brother!" And, in addition to the torments, all my former love for Zenaïda flared up with redoubled force. Even if she had been guilty before the laws of society and also of morality; even if she had cunningly seduced me and others with a sheen of sham merits; her frivolous thoughtlessness, perfidy – everything would disappear when compared with the baseness and blackness of my action, everything would be lost in the enormity of my offence.

Yes! At that time I forgave her all and loved her beyond expression! It seemed as though all my senses, which were now divorced from society, my murdered ambition, the desire for glory, conceit, pride in an irreproachable life, my annihilated past and future, in short, my entire life was now

concentrated into one feeling and this feeling was love for her. Judge then, what came upon me, what I must have felt, when, after a lapse of several months, I was presented with a letter – a letter from Zenaïda – and when from the first lines I learned that her voice was descending to me from the heights of the other world, that Zenaïda no longer existed and that in the final minute of life, reconciling herself with Heaven and with people, she had sent me forgiveness, to me – the killer of everything that was dear to her on this Earth!

And I in a madness of love had been still hoping to obtain through begging, through suffering, a meeting with Zenaïda, in order to hear words of forgiveness from her lips... I had lived on and for this hope! Now everything, everything was finished for me! Now life was for me the most frightful of torments. The thought of self-murder began to tempt me; I made myself glad, soothed myself with it. But no! Not so should I meet Zenaïda in the everlasting, still with the warm blood of her brother on my hands, with the seal of the outcast and of damnation upon my brow; no! Death was for me a delight and an escape but I merited punishment; let life be a punishment for me!

And I lived! Repentance gnawed away my heart, grief wasted my body, not for one moment would sleep within me the

memory of the past, slowly, endlessly it tore at my intestines, drained my blood. But I lived and lived twenty years!

Zenaïda's letter, that sacred token of our reconciliation, has been preserved and is now upon my breast and daily it receives my scalding tears, my undying anguish. I leave you a copy of it but, I beseech you, do not part me and the original even after death. Let it go down with me into the grave and there, before the throne of the Almighty, it will supplicate for a pardon for the sinner, testifying to his torments upon Earth..."

COPY OF THE LETTER FROM ZENAÏDA N***

"Vlodinsky, you killed my brother, my father, you have killed me but I do not write, in order to reproach but to forgive – forgive out of the fullness of my soul, reserving no hard word for an unfortunate.

Yes, Vlodinsky, I pardon you. You are one blind and not a criminal; you are merely the same kind of person as are all people: more weak and thoughtless than wicked; you became enamoured of a false outward appearance: may God pardon you in His heaven and your conscience here on Earth, as I pardon you!

When your gaze falls upon these lines, my clay will already lie with the clay of my family, our souls will flow together into

one prayer before the Lord and He, the Merciful One, will send down to you that peace, which will no longer be given you by either the noise of society or the world of solitude.

That is all that I wished to say, that I would have desired to engrave upon your soul, when people will have swept my dust from the Earth and my name from your memory; this is what I inscribed already in that time, when the death of my father and brother fell as an accusation upon my head and I, feeling how all the vital sources within my heart were stopped up, did not think I would live beyond this blow of fate... Providence decreed otherwise. While my body, obeying the law of Nature, stubbornly struggled with the decay, all the power of my memory and feeling blazed up in me for the last time. I understood, how difficult it is for the soul, even in separating from the body, to tear itself away from all things earthly, to cleanse itself of everything, which was the life of its life. Yes, Vlodynsky! On the brink of the grave I still burn with the desire to justify myself in the opinion of the one person, who was able to understand me, with the desire to keep my name stainless, if only in one noble soul.

Moreover, it seems to me, when your youth will have passed, when the passions will have subsided, then even for you my justification will be pleasing. You loved me: I saw and felt this. You devoted to me everything, which was fine in your

heart and in your being: will it not then be sweet for you to bless the memory of your first, pure love with the consciousness of my innocence?

Here is what induced me to direct at you the final sound of my voice: to ask of you respect, if only for the dust, of her, who was so proud that she could not justify herself, while she lived and beg for the feelings that had been deflected from her by slander.

In these lines is contained the confession of the most cherished secrets of my soul. Now I can pass judgement on myself with all the impartiality of an extraneous person, for my past life is already detached, has moved away from me, who is ready to sink into the grave. Do believe my words, Vlodinsky, hear me out patiently, with indulgence for the request of a woman, who will ask nothing of anyone any more.

There were two of us; we grew up in profound seclusion. I do not know, what was the cause of estrangement of our parents from society and from people; I think that it was their happiness. There was nothing wanting to them outside of the circle of family life. Our first years passed beneath their supervision, guarded by the love of our mother. O! What a love! If I say to you that she was our wet-nurse, child-minder, teacher, our good angel on this Earth, then I shall still not

have expressed that infinite, disinterested, all-sacrificing affection, by which she made happy our childhood. For me in particular, her endearments were the more precious, as the tenderness of our father was wholly directed at my brother. However, I knew no envy, on the contrary, when my understanding had begun to develop, I grew fond of my brother with a twofold love, with the love of a sister and from adoration for my father; for I did adore him; because the esteem of all about us, his lofty nobleness, truthfulness inspired me with a veneration, while his strict, unsmiling face and continuing taciturnity made me tremble in his presence.

My mother was in character the precise opposite of our father. A young woman with a trustful, loving heart, with a lively and active mind, she imparted to everything the character of her purity, in everyone she saw the reflection of her own goodness; the whole world seemed to her as bright and beautiful as her own soul. Beneath the rays of this warm, wholesome soul my feelings developed and my mind ripened, under her influence my whole life has been passed.

I began to live early, as if I had a presentiment that I had been allotted a brief lifetime; I was making haste to enjoy life, guessing by instinct that my fine daybreak would be troubled by the storms of midday. I was not yet thirteen years of age, when our mother passed away; with her my joys came to an

end... Before her death she entrusted me with the care of my brother, far younger than I, from birth weak and sickly, and left me the charge of my father's tranquillity. From that moment I was left to full, wild freedom. Our father, crushed by grief, devoted himself exclusively to the upbringing of my brother: I voluntarily attended during all his lessons, and his strict opinions upon the duties of a citizen, on honour, nobility, willingness for self-sacrifice sank deeply into my soul. In the remaining time I read indiscriminately everything that was contained in our library, roamed in the groves, in the fields or, sharing the games and the exercises of my brother, travelled together with him on horseback throughout the surrounding areas.

My mind enriched itself with knowledge, my imagination burned with the study of heroic times: I was accustomed to look upon the world in vast scales, I familiarised myself the great events of history, with the passions and doings of the people, who ennobled humanity and remained a stranger only to the pale mosaics of everyday life, it was only the legends and customs of our polite ant-hills that I did not know.

Imperceptibly my character was formed according to the impressions of my mind, hardening to pride, to a firmness, to love of Nature and taking on all shades of the masculine

virtues. In our doll's society, so crude for all its refinement, my mind and heart ripened under the influence of the concepts of the Golden Age; in them they matured and grew stronger. At fifteen years I understood everything with the intellect, comprehended everything with the heart; at that time my opinions and feelings were already higher than all outside influences; to change them was possible in no other way, than having smelted them in the fire of one of the powerful passions; then might they not yield to a new impression, accept a different form?

A sister of my father resettled from Moscow to a town, distant by about fifty *versts* from where we lived. She visited us and, amazed at my uncivilised ways and clumsiness, she began to reproach my father, represented to him the entire importance for girls of an education in deportment, she spoke so much and so eloquently, that she persuaded him to entrust her with my reform. I was moved into her family.

She was a woman of the world, cold, indifferent to everything, without any fixed attributes to her character, without freedom, without an opinion and applying all her intelligence and all her merits to the fulfilment of the most trifling matters of the regulations of society. Every thought that had not been herded through the censorship of society, which had not been given that varnishing, seemed to her an offence;

every original feeling, a mortal sin. By such principles had she raised her own daughters and into precisely this maelstrom did I fall from out of my peaceful seclusion; for a long time, however, I did not yet notice its chasms and whirlpools. Out of shyness, I was frightened by the thought of entering society but in my imagination it appeared to me a magnificent stage, on which the splendid roles, known to me through history and novels, were performed. All the characters, in my opinion, moved upon it harmoniously, agreeably; all happenings were leading to a glorious denouement. And into this world I brought with me a pure heart, filled with love and warm hopes for the benevolence of people, pious notions of their virtues and an ardent faith in my however small portion of happiness on Earth.

Not even a year had passed, before my innocent beliefs, my feelings, which were apparent to all, had been crumpled, crushed by the unfriendliness of people, by their backbiting and rancour, their persistent striving always to discover the gold in the pocket of their neighbour and black anger at his most innocent deeds. 'Whence this, why that?' I would repeat in bewilderment, comparing the essence with the tales of my mother, with the judgements of my father and I crossed from one extreme to another. I was becoming embittered against everyone and everything. Poor people! I blamed them for

being people and not citizens of heaven, as my imagination painted them. I could not believe, however, that all of society could be similar to the arena, in which the career of my life began; in the crowd of people, who surrounded me, I did not wish to acknowledge the humanity and with all the fullness of my soul I gave that over to my contempt.

This was the foundation stone of all my errors.

In the home of my aunt I lived under oppression and totally alienated from everyone. No one either could or wanted to understand me; I, for my part, also could not reconcile myself to their mode of thinking and behaviour: I was persecuted, showered with jibes, at every step my self-esteem was wounded; and, finally, my bashfulness, firmness of character, which they named obstinacy, the abruptness of my opinions, my unsociability – everything was attributed to a defect of my mind and they defined me with the words: ‘she is stupid, consequently, incurable’. I coldly accepted their verdict and in my pride rejected all means of remedy.

When my brother had reached the age of fifteen, our father, wishing to look to the first steps of his entry into society, secured him a place as a cadet in the regiment, which had shortly before taken up quarters in our town. Then was the childhood affection between my brother and myself renewed and tightened by the ties, which his precious blood

represented. Upon him I joined all the tenderness of a sister, all the solicitude of a mother and, still not healed from the wounds received in my battle with society, I mustered all my strength, so as to show him the concealed stones, against which I had injured myself in the blindness of my inexperience, so as to protect his beloved head from the storm that had shrivelled my soul.

Now begins a time, of which it is difficult, painful for me to speak. On the edge of the grave I have reconciled myself with everyone: I do not wish to load accusations upon anyone; but I cannot pass over in silence the principal epoch of my life.

My brother's senior officer was General-Major N***, he was seeking my hand in marriage; but I knew him so little, it seemed to me so impossible to give myself to a person, whom I did not love and almost did not know, that I, without wavering, refused the honour that was being proposed to me, regardless of all the cries of my aunt. But shortly after the circumstances changed. My brother committed one of those acts of mischief, regarding which military discipline is implacable. The general had the right and wished to demonstrate upon him a ceremonial example of his rigour. All efforts on the part of our relatives remained unsuccessful. And, concealing my pride, I myself decided to resort to the general with our suit. The occasion soon presented itself; at

the first mention of my brother, he took on a cold appearance; to all my supplications, entreaties he answered with a shrug of the shoulders or a drawn-out: 'one deeply regrets', alluding to the duties of a commanding officer, finally, when, having exhausted all my eloquence, I stood before him in tears, with despair in my heart, the general, suddenly changing his tone and his voice, began to speak to me of his love and ended it all with the words: "A commanding officer cannot pardon a subordinate but will easily forgive a brother all insults!" and, making a low bow, he left me. The fate of my brother lay in my hands, how could I hesitate?

But, pondering over the behaviour of the general, I supposed him to be under a delusion with regard to me and I considered it a duty to discover to him the truth. 'He loves me,' so thought I, 'the wish to possess me has forced him to be unscrupulous in the means towards the achievement of his goal.' But, in insisting so stubbornly upon his desire, he was probably considering me a child with a mild character, obedient to all new impressions.

Having been once refused by me, N*** might still be hoping that habit would change a feeling, that with time his love would arouse a reciprocal feeling from me, without which he, it must be so, would not seek to gain my hand. But I, even

for the rescue of my brother, was I then obliged, forgetting honour and conscience, to leave him in this delusion? Should I not uncover to him my soul, convince him of the hopelessness of his proposals? I could dispose of my own freedom and joyfully sacrifice it for the tranquillity of my family; but to deceive a human being, in making use of his blind passion, that I could not and would not do, even if the life of my brother depended upon it.

I had hardly entered society, when there were already many seeking my hand but I refused all proposals, leaving no one in any shade of hope. Accustomed to considering love and wedlock indivisible, I looked upon them from a particular point of view. Amid the general collapse of my ideas of society, there was only one that had remained intact in its full force – the idea of the possibility of a true, eternal love. I placed my trust in it, believed in the realisation of my utopia, as in my own life and, bearing in my breast the germ of this sacred feeling, I would not expend it upon trifling attachments, I took care of it as of a gift from the heavens, which had the power to make me happy but once in my life. All the expositions in the prose and verse of my authors seemed to me pitifully poor, not worthy of one spark of my beautiful flame. Feeling how much energy there lay hidden in my breast, what a paradise of love I could bestow upon the

one I loved, I did not wish sell my treasure for the poor mite of an indigent; I considered it an offence to mix together the pure flame with the flash of the fireworks, flung about at every crossroads and I wished rather to smother unexplored within myself this vain gift, which was not able either to give nor to ransom happiness, than hypocritically to promise it to a credulous seeker and then bury it in my breast, so as to provide him with no more than the meagre crumbs of a cold, part-return of affection.

This was how I understood matrimony, this was how I desired to depict it to the general and leave to his judgement, whether he could seek happiness in a union, where there was not even the hope of inspiring sympathy, not to speak of love. I did not even think of my own well-being, since it had been thrown onto the scales along with the pardon of my brother.

The next morning the general came – I had prepared myself for his visit – at his request, just the two of us were present; then, carrying out my intention, I revealed to him my feelings, the shape of my thoughts, every part of that sacred place in my soul, till then forbidden to all mortals and I awaited his sentence.

N*** heard me out, not interrupting, with the indulgent smile of experience, then he advanced his chair towards me and said:

“At seventeen years we all amuse ourselves with such daydreams; in my years we look upon them as crystal playthings: beautiful but not durable!”

After this he repeated his proposal, I accepted it; my brother received a pardon, not suspecting, at what a price his entire future was purchased. N*** required only that Vsevolod not serve under his command and took it upon himself to see about his transfer to the Guards. Vsevolod left at once for Petersburg with letters of recommendation from the general; our father approved of my choice; I was married, excusing the resoluteness of the experienced N*** with his passion for me; but shortly after that his solicitude about the earliest issue of my sizeable dowry also dispelled that consoling daydream.

My destiny was completed! There remained nothing more for me to wish for, nothing for which to hope; what could time bring me? Meanwhile, the shrewd, merry intellect of my husband, seasoned with all the pungency of irony, daily stole from me some or other sweet hope, innocent feeling. Everything, which from childhood I had worshipped, was ridiculed by his cold intellect; everything, which I honoured

as a thing sacred, was held up as something pathetic and vulgar. Imperceptibly, together with my faith in the sublime, the refinement and the scrupulousness of my understanding disappeared. Jokes, which previously would have reduced me to tears, now did not bring a blush to my cheeks. I got used to my husband's favourite reading matter, to his judgements, even to the coarse puns of outside guests, who, endeavouring to fit in with the tone of the master of the house, vied with one another in pouring forth witticisms, that did not even have his acuity to relieve them.

Long ago, even before my marriage, having noticed that my good motives were misinterpreted towards something malign, that from every action, every word of mine, people would find a means to wring out a ludicrous essence, I had cast off from myself the yoke of their opinion. Now it seemed to me even more contemptible, when persons, who had been calling me a silly, little girl, began to hail me as an intelligent and courteous woman for the simple reason, that chance had thrown upon me the rank of General's wife.

Not attached either through a respect for the company, nor by a fear of its verdicts, I lived in society as in a wilderness, where only stones and passing clouds were my witnesses; I lived under the influence of my own respect for myself and the example of my mother, but people's opinions I considered

to be a mirage, which which will give no one shade, will satisfy no one's thirst and will deceive only those, who look upon things from afar, through this mendacious vapour. Never did a criminal thought defile me but I did not compel myself to comply strictly with the generally accepted customs, I did not disguise myself before the crowd, did not strive for their praises, did not fear their censures: in short, in all feelings and actions, I rendered account only to the Supreme Judge and to His representative on Earth – my conscience.

As usually happens, the less I worried about people, the more they troubled about me. The eyes and ears of this omnipresent Areopagus carefully followed me; my manifest disregard for its determinations hardened the company against me and finally sowed in it that opinion, which afterwards made itself the *court of society* and the cause of my ruin. But at that time I did not yet foresee anything menacing, perhaps, it is on account of this that, anticipating nothing, I took no care at all about it.

Society had pitilessly mocked me, ridiculed all the notions of my childhood, shattered all the treasures of my hopes. Not one thought of mine about it had proved true, not one expectation been realised. The sole object, in which I had not found deception, was the human intellect – the creative

mind, playful, varied, which I had for a long time worshipped in its works.

In society at large, where the essential education and the continual influx of foreign ideas imparts a kind of shine to the most insignificant, little intellects, even a truly brilliant mind does not so much make an impact with its resplendence, as it does in the absolute gloom of the small society. There it communicates to others its life-giving strength, illuminates the minds of others and by its light they also stand out, reflecting the radiance borrowed from it. And moreover, in the first case the attention of the company is so diverted by the diversity of colours of the surrounding objects, that thousands will go past the genius and not even notice him. Contrary to this, in a way of life that is narrowly hemmed in by inveterate habits and a meagre everyday being, which weigh upon and not infrequently crush all talents in their buds, in wild parts, where only with difficulty will even an advance ray of enlightenment break through, a person of high intellect and knowledge shines like a wondrous meteor. In such a life was I dragging out a miserable existence and only these seldom encountered meteors attracted my attention, aroused in me a genuine amazement. It is true that, now and again, made happy by a meeting with an intelligent person, charmed by the power

and brilliance of his intellect, I was glad of the new acquaintance and the opportunity to pour my own ideas into a bright imagination, was even not strictly discriminating in the topics of our conversations; but, having become accustomed against my will to the uninhibited exposition of thoughts that were trivial and vulgar, how could I not pardon in an intelligent person a free expression, garlanded with all the flowers of a keen wit?

Then, involuntarily searching in myself for that, which I prized so highly in others, I could not fail to notice the inconsistency and uncertainty of my knowledge and that is why, with a new ardour, I began to read, to study, to reflect. In gatherings they began to surround me with much attention and with words of approval; I would have rejected with scorn flattery concerning my outward appearance, my coiffure but, long oppressed formerly by the non-being that had been determined for me, I was not immune to the choruses of praises, glorifying my intellect, the praises of people, who had already earned my esteem. Intellect had become my consolation, pride, my property; and only tribute presented to it would I accept vainly, even with delight.

And, however then, was I happy? Was I content with this poor triumph? No! One hundred times no! The rapture of flattery had its effect only for a moment and had the effect

only upon the head. The heart was asking for complicity and not compliments; friendship and not loud praises.

Intellect can fill the existence of a man: he lives more an external life; and the society, which is circulating about itself the produce of his intellectual abilities, may be reflected back on him as fame, wealth, respect, even the blessings of people. The intellect of a woman is like the tiny light of a distant beacon, it shines but it does not dispel the surrounding darkness; and if life blows cold around her, then it is not the head can warm the heart!

Oh, how many times, returning from noisy gatherings, where the attention of the idle, the flattery of verbiage and even the peevish murmur of the envious offered abundant nourishment to my self-esteem, how many times, casting off along with my ball-garland everything that for a while had made intoxicated my head, then weakened, profoundly losing heart, did I spend the remainder of a sleepless night in tears, in thoughts that gnawed at the soul! God conferred upon Woman a most beautiful destiny, however, not so glorious, not so grand as that, which He had shown to Man – the destiny of being the household *penate*, the comforter of the select mate, mother to his children, to live the life of favourites and walk in procession with haughty brow and joyous soul to the end of a useful existence. Is not such a fate

deserving of jealousy and of blessings? But to live as an orphan, in a monotony that is broken by nothing, in a haze, through which neither a sunbeam, nor a drop of morning dew can force a path; but to feel that the sole happiness possible in the life of a woman was not and would never be my lot; but not to have even a single desire, not to cherish even a single hope; not to cling with one's soul even to a single tomorrow and, having senselessly wasted one's days, to render to the grave the sum of a useless life, like capital lent to no purpose to a man, cast in the wilderness, where it was not gold but a piece of bread that he needed – this is the condition, cooling the soul, suppressing within it all capacity for action, all the resources of energy!

And in these secret discussions with myself I could not but feel that Nature had created me for a quiet, obscure life; that only in the domestic circle would I be able to know and distinguish around myself happiness: the splendour, games, festive noise of society glided above me not seducing the soul within me. What were the praises and astonishment of people to me? What were my intellect and my talents to me? The former is gifted by chance, the latter is acquired through patience: anyone can possess them. But my heart was given to me alone! In it is preserved the source of good, the source of happiness; in it were hidden the treasures of feelings, a

paradise of friendship and of love and no one was seeing it, noticing it, no one wanted either to acknowledge or to appreciate: what were to me greetings, spicy smiles without fellow-feeling? And not once did a vain thought spring into my head, not once did a smile liven up my face, when in the same moment my heart was not flooded with sorrow, did not pay for the instant of vainglorious joy with a melancholy holiday of loneliness!

In the presence of my father and brother I laughed amid the brambles, fearing that with a single complaint I would disturb the tranquillity redeemed at the price of my life; but I could not, did not find in myself the strength to dry up the tear at its source, to suppress the sigh that was just then arising. This is the single feeling that had conquered within me all the warring of reason and will; the feeling, with which I was bitterly reproaching myself, ardently wishing to bear my cross not only uncomplainingly but brightly with a cheerfulness. God knows that no one was ever witness to my faint-heartedness but from you I do not wish to conceal it; having elected you as my posthumous judge, I wish to make confession before you of everything, down to a single trepidation, down to the least thought...

Throughout the continual movement of troops I followed my husband everywhere; everywhere, always I was the same, I

did not change either my opinions or my behaviour. People of intellect everywhere favoured me with their attention; the stupid wove ridiculous fabrications about me. But there is a third variety of people, the most dangerous for everything, which goes outside the round of the ordinary. Often these people possess intellect and many merits but their intellect is neither sufficiently strong to curb the self-esteem that holds sway over them, nor sufficiently weak to place themselves, blinded by bold self-assurance, higher than another visible being. They feel their own defects and any superiority on the part of their neighbour they take as a personal insult; they cannot pardon another even a shade of perfection. Oh, these people are more terrible than carriers of the plague! The banal slander of the fool is laughed at but their careful calumnies, their well-considered, plausible slander cannot but be believed. It is just these self-appointed candidates for genius, who make up the supreme circus-court: it was they, who were the most hardened against me and from them were dispersed the most venomous news items.

There came a time, when these stories reached my hearing; as always happens, they gushed in on me suddenly, from every quarter, they stunned me, made my head giddy. While the slander was hissing at my feet, while it was cringing in the dust, I looked upon it with indifference; but to touch on

my name, on my heart, ascribing to me actions that were alien even to my thought, but to charge me with a total retreat from my duties, from the ordinances of faith and of honour – that was what so painfully affected me, what poured bile into many a minute of my life...

From that time I, as much as was possible, withdrew from society: I began more than ever to stand aloof from people; I substituted reflection for my cares about brilliance of intellect; I subjected my former life to strict judgement; I considered society, not through the prism of previous bitterness but with all the impartiality of a reason cooled off from the first fever. And everything was altered in my eyes! I saw that same society, those same people but already from a different angle and, the judge of society and of people, in my turn, I found for them in many respects.

People are children, eternally anxious, forever fussing. Hurrying after an elusive tomorrow, do they have the leisure to investigate and resolve the essence of a thing, which is striking their gaze? In passing they throw a fleeting glance upon its external appearance and it is only of this exterior that they bear away with them recollections. It is not their fault that the glance often does not fall upon the object from the genuine point of view: that was how they saw it, how they judged and condemned it. They are right!

Woe betide the woman, whom circumstances or her own inexperienced freedom have placed upon a pedestal, standing at the crossroads of nations chasing after vanity! Woe, if the attention of people will settle on her, if they will turn their thoughtlessness upon her, will elect her as the target of their glances and judgements. And woe, a hundred times woe unto her, if, being under a delusion as to her dangerously elevated position, she will look contemptuously upon the crowd, which is undulating at her feet, if she will not share with it its games and fancies and will not bow her head before its idols!

I finally understood this great truth and with all my heart made peace with my persecutors.

Being freed from the temporary delusion, having purified my mind of proud and vain thoughts, having banished from my heart everything, which made it tremble with hostile feelings, I migrated in spirit to the years of my earliest youth, resurrected in my soul the commandments of my mother, I wished sincerely, with all my heart to grow to love those close to me with her unquenchable love, to look upon the world with her eyes. If life is so barren in its essence that a person cannot live without a dream, then it is better, if the Lord allow, to be deceived through an ignorance of evil in the very throng of vices, than through the suspicion of vice in simple

weakness! This was what I prayed for with faith, with tears, ardently wishing, if only in others, to spread that happiness, which I had known only through its absence... The All-merciful heard my prayer: the spirit of my mother stood over me, I found peace in the quiet of solitude and comfort within my own soul.

But to efface the traces of my former errors in people's memory and to make them forget the past was impossible. Apparently the seed of evil is more fruitful than the seed of good, for the latter will, as a rule, die away and become forgotten, whereas the shoots of the former will outlive the person, who sowed them.

That is all of my life, Vlodinsky; the social and the intellectual life. I have presented it to you from both sides; and now, when you know all my faults, all my errors, compare them with the monstrous exaggeration of the 'Court of Society' and form an opinion, by how many multiples did the accusations exceed the faults.

Now it still remains for me to refer to the one, single, joyous epoch of my existence, which illuminated me not long before my departure from the world, as if in recompense for my past sufferings, as an atonement for all that awaited me in the future. That was life's parting gift a token of my full reconciliation with Heaven and with people.

Vlodinsky, do you remember the time, when fate so strangely brought us together on alien soil, beneath another's roof? Resurrect it in your memory, take yourself back to the hours, when, forgetting the disquiet of society, we so serenely gave ourselves up to the mutual delight of reading in one another's souls; when, underneath the mildew of fashionable habits and impressions, I discovered in you so many beautiful gifts, such an amount of preparedness for greatness and this secret feeling, often unknown to the person themselves, of something high, graceful, this longing for an unearthly perfection, which taking the form of a word or a shape in the the souls of a few select ones and being reflected in their works, astounds the world with marvels of poetry, harmony, painting, with the accomplishment of the divine, now in marble, now on perishable canvas...

I began to see you clearly with my inner eye, understood you by fellow-feeling; and now, when all my ties with the world are ruptured, all relations destroyed, now I can confess, without offending either Heaven or honour, I – fell in love with you! Yes, Vlodinsky, fell in love, with the full power of my first, girlish love; I clung to you with all the feelings that are outcast, deceived, ridiculed by everything, whatever they adhere to in society. In the refuge, created for me by your love, my soul took rest and was refreshed, burnt as it was in

the torrid desert of society, worn out by the hateful wandering, dying off and not coming to know even a single minute of full life. Your pure, timid love did not frighten but caressed it, did not alarm my virtue, on the contrary, it reinforced, elevated it with a new aspiration towards the heavenly. Passion makes reason intoxicated, seizes feelings, kneads and burns them, as an Arabian whirlwind burns a delicate flower, which happens to grow up on a stone. Passion can neither give nor strengthen happiness. Your beautiful soul rejected it, having comprehended the true bliss of the meek love of heaven-dwellers. And I gave myself up to it trustingly, I did not summon for a battle with it either duty or conscience: its sacred fire was its best custodian, my truest bulwark against vice.

In the course of four months you did not by a word or by a look betray my trust; did not for one moment outrage my paradise, in which I breathed so full a life, forgetting the world with its shallowness and hostility, forgetting all the scarcity and meanness of my existence... I thank you, Vlodinsky! I thank you for the realisation of my most beautiful dream! I thank you for your love, for my feelings, for the tears of joy, the one and only joy that was granted to me by Heaven on Earth!

Be not mistaken, in regarding as hypocrisy the refined severity of my treatment of you; do not accuse me of counterfeiting a character, if at that time I was not such a one, as society saw me previously: I repeat, my mind was corrupted but my heart all the time remained in its original purity. With the others I lived solely by the mind and they saw its impure reflections but with you, but together with you were resurrected the saintly ideas of my childhood and the fire of my heart purified, enlightened the mind, which had already been transformed by experience; in your presence I could not be the fashionable and vain woman: I was trying to smooth out in my soul the traces of grievances, doubts, bitterness, to banish from it the very reminder of a life that was sinless but had been too much tested. I would have liked to recreate myself, clothe myself in the purity of infantile ignorance, begin to shine with the brilliance of an angelic innocence, so as to enter proudly and dauntlessly in a paradise, the gates of which had for the first time opened wide for me.

Our mutual love, deeply hidden from ourselves, I honoured as a sacred object; I protected it, as does a mother the chastity of her beloved daughter. The least joke, blowing upon it with the heavy air of society, a slightly familiar witticism frightened me, as much as a crime. Even for our

everyday communications, for the expression of thoughts and feelings I would have liked to discover a new language, not defiled by vulgar use...

Do you know that if at that time some chance or other, having returned me my freedom, had permitted us to reveal our feelings before the eyes of the whole society, I would have rejected the union with you out of apprehension over the public exposure of my love, from the simple dread that people's double-meaning talk, their envious gaze might profane it, that their indecent smiles, even casual carelessness might offend its purity?

This was how high I raised up the feeling of this love, with how much reverence I surrounded it! And in that moment, when I noticed that earthly thoughts were forcing their way through into your soul on the golden wings of youth, I, unhesitatingly, preferred eternal parting to the lightest shadow, which the passion that was springing up in you might cast upon the pure dawn of the our first relations. I wished to bring away with me a feeling of love in all its power, in all its fullness, a feeling, not agitated by passion, not creased by a single tear of repentance! I wished that the thought of me would glimmer in your memory like a celestial spark, that the brief encounter with me would be imprinted upon the entirety of your life like a bright period, separate

from all thoughts of past and future delights of love – the love that so quickly fades before that for other women...

Do not fear to resurrect within your soul feelings dedicated to me. Expel rather from it the bogeys created by the court of society around my figure; love me with the former, reverential love: I did not for one instant cease to be worthy of it! And let the memory of me, let my forgiveness, let your constant striving towards the easing of others' sorrows, towards making happy all that surrounds you, remove from your conscience the burden of the sin that aggravates it, reconcile you with the Lord, light upon your life with a ray of heavenly grace...

The court of society is now gravitating towards us both: me, a weak woman, it has smashed, like a brittle cane; you, oh, you, a strong man, created to fight with society, with fate and with the passions of people, it will not only acquit, it will even extol, because the members of this dread tribunal are all faint-hearted people. From off this shameful executioner's block, on which the court of society has placed my head, with the fateful implement of death already raised above my innocent neck, I still cry out to you with the last words from my lips: "Fear it not! It is the slave of the strong and destroys only the weak..."