

**ANNIE
VIVANTI**

MARIE
TARNOWSKA

Annie Vivanti
Marie Tarnowska

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Annie Vivanti

Marie Tarnowska

PREFATORY NOTE

On the morning of September 3rd, 1907, Count Paul Kamarowsky, a wealthy Russian nobleman, was fatally shot in his apartments on the Lido in Venice by an intimate friend, Nicolas Naumoff, son of the governor of Orel. The crime was at first believed to be political. The wounded man refused to make any statement against his assailant, whom he himself had assisted to escape from the balcony to a gondola in waiting below.

Count Kamarowsky was taken to a hospital, and for three days his recovery seemed assured; but the chief surgeon, in a sudden mental collapse—he has since died in an insane asylum—ordered the stitches to be removed from the fast-healing wounds, and Count Kamarowsky died in great agony a few hours later. His last words were a message of love to his betrothed at Kieff, a beautiful Russian woman, Countess Marie Tarnowska.

In her favor Count Kamarowsky had, shortly before his death, made a will and also insured his life for the sum of £20,000.

A number of telegrams from this lady were found addressed to a Russian lawyer, Donat Prilukoff, who had been staying at the Hotel Danieli in Venice until the day of the murder. Both this man and the Countess Tarnowska were arrested.

After a sensational trial they were found guilty of instigating the young Nicolas Naumoff to commit the murder. Countess Tarnowska was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in the penitentiary of Trani; Prilukoff was condemned to ten years' penal servitude; while Naumoff himself was liberated in view of his having undergone two years' incarceration while awaiting his trial.

TO THE AUTHOR

Signora:

Not only as the medical expert for the defense at the trial of the Countess Tarnowska, but as one who has made it his life-work to investigate the relation in women between criminal impulse and morbid physical condition, I cannot but feel the keenest interest in this book, in which you set forth the problem of wide human interest presented by the case of the prisoner of Trani.

When first I suggested to you that you should write this book—which (apart from its interest as dealing with a cause célèbre whose protagonists are still living and well known in European society) might bring into wider knowledge doctrines that modern physiologists and psychologists are endeavoring to diffuse—you reminded me that the medical elements of the problem could not in such a work be discussed or even clearly stated. This, of course, is true, and the significance of certain indications scattered through these pages will doubtless be lost upon those who are not familiar with such matters. Nevertheless, it was important that the book should be written, for if after her release and appropriate medical treatment the Countess Tarnowska is restored, as many of us confidently anticipate, to the complete sanity of moral well-being, your book in the light of that essential fact will have fulfilled a notable mission.

It will have helped to bring home to the general consciousness the knowledge, hitherto confined to the scientific few, that moral obliquity in women is in most cases due to pathological causes comparatively easy of diagnosis and of cure; that a woman-criminal may be morally redeemed by being physically healed; and that just as alcoholism, typhus, pyemia or other modes of toxic infection may result in delirium and irresponsibility, so certain forms of disease in women, by setting up a condition of persistent organic poisoning, may and very often do conduce to mental and moral aberration and consequent crime.

Your book, Signora, contains a truthful exposition of a group of psychic values with which physicians and psychopaths are concerned, and I believe that eventually it will promote the realization that even in the darkest regions of moral degradation it is possible for science to raise the torch of hope. Thus, though appealing for the moment to the interest of the general reader, it will ultimately constitute a significant document in the history of the evolution of pathological science.

Genoa,

January 12th, 1915.

TO THE READER

This book is not written to plead Marie Tarnowska's cause. The strange Russian woman whose hand slew no man, but whose beauty drove those who loved her to commit murder for her sake, will soon have ended her eight years' captivity and will come forth into the world once more.

I have not sought in any way to minimize her guilt, or attenuate her responsibility for the sin and death that followed in her train. Though she must be held blameless for the boy Peter Tarnowsky's tragic fate and even for Dr. Stahl's suicide, yet Bozevsky's death, Naumoff's downfall and the murder of Count Kamarowsky will forever be laid at her door.

I have tried to convey to the cool, sober mind of the Anglo-Saxon reader—to whom much of this amazing story of passion and crime may appear almost incredible—that sequence of tragic events which brought Marie Nicolaevna to her ruin.

Weighted by a heritage of disease (her mother was a neurasthenic invalid and two of her aunts are even now confined in an insane asylum in Russia), she was married when still on the threshold of girlhood and swept into the maelstrom of a wild life—a frenzied, almost hallucinated, existence such as is led by a certain section of the Russian aristocracy, whom self-indulgence drives to depths of degeneracy hardly to be realized by the outside world.

With the birth of her child, Tania, Marie Tarnowska's fragile health broke down completely, and the few years preceding the tragedy which led to her arrest were spent traveling through Europe in a feverish quest of health or at least of oblivion of her sufferings. According to such medical authorities as Redlich, Fenomenof, Rhein, Bossi, and many other eminent gynecologists and alienists, she is, and has been for some years past, suffering from a slow form of blood poisoning which affects the nervous centers and the brain, and which—as I myself had a painful opportunity of witnessing when I saw her in prison—causes periodic cataleptic seizures that imperil her life.

It was by one of her medical advisers, Professor Luigi Bossi, of the University of Genoa, that the idea of this book was first given to me.

“I was called as an expert for the defense at the Venice trial,” said the Professor, “and I was grieved and indignant at the heavy sentence inflicted upon this unhappy woman. Marie Tarnowska is not delinquent, but diseased; not a criminal, but an invalid; and her case, like that of many other female transgressors, is one for the surgeon's skill and the physician's compassionate care, not for the ruthless hand of the law. Indeed,” the illustrious Professor continued, “it is becoming more and more a recognized fact that many cases of criminality in woman have a physical, not a moral origin. By her very mission—maternity—woman is consecrated to pain; and whereas by nature she is a creature of gentleness and goodness, the effect of physical suffering, of ailments often unconfessed—nay, often unrealized by herself—is to transform her into a virago, a hypochondriac, or a criminal. Then our duty is to cure her, not to punish her.

“It may be merely a question,” he explained, “of a slight surgical intervention; sometimes even brief medical treatment is sufficient to save a woman's life and reason. The wider knowledge of this simple scientific fact in the social life of our time would redeem and rehabilitate thousands of unfortunate women who people the prisons and the madhouses of the world.

“As for the unhappy Countess Tarnowska,” added Professor Bossi, “the Venetian tribunal refused to regard her as a suffering human being, but flung her out of society like some venomous reptile. Read these notes that she wrote in prison,” he said, placing in my hand a book of almost illegible memoranda. “If they touch your heart, then do a deed of justice and generosity. Go to the penitentiary of Trani, see the prisoner yourself, and give her story to the world. So will you perform an act of humanity and beneficence by helping to diffuse a scientific truth in favor, not of this one woman alone, but of all women.”

After glancing through the strange human document he had given me I decided to do what he asked; for, indeed, from those poor, incoherent pages there seemed to rise the eternal cry of suffering womanhood—the anguished cry of those that perpetuate the gift of life—which no sister-soul can hear unmoved.

Thus it was that my mind was first directed to the theme of this book and that I undertook the task—fraught with almost insuperable difficulties—of breaking down official prohibitions and reaching the Russian captive in her distant Italian prison.

And now that I have been brought face to face with that strange and mournful figure, now that I have heard her story from her own pale lips, I am moved by the puissant impulse of art, which takes no heed of learned theory or ethical code, to narrate in these pages the profound impression made upon me by that tragic personality, by the story of that broken life.

I have endeavored to do so with faithfulness, exaggerating nothing, coloring nothing, extenuating nothing. It will be for the pontiffs of science and morals to achieve the more complex task of drawing conclusions and establishing theories that may one day diminish injustice and suffering in the world.

A. Vivanti Chartres.

I

Ed or, che Dio mi tolga la memoria.
Contessa Lara.

The verdant landscape of Tuscany swung past the train that carried me southward. The looped vineyards—like slim, green dancers holding hands—fled backwards as we passed, and the rays of the March sun pursued us, beating hotly through the open windows on the dusty red velvet cushions of the carriage.

Soon the train was throbbing and panting out of Pisa, and the barefooted children of the Roman Campagna stood to gaze after us, with eyes soft and wild under their sullen hair.

Since leaving the station of Genoa I had seen nothing of the fleeting springtide landscape; my gaze and thoughts were riveted on the pages of a copy-book which lay open on my knee—a simple school copy-book with innocent blue-lined sheets originally intended to contain the carefully labored scrawls of some childish hand. A blue ornamental flourish decked the front; and under the printed title, “Program of Lessons,” the words “History,” “Geography,” “Arithmetic,” were followed by a series of blank spaces for the hours to be filled in. Alas, for the tragic pupil to whom this book belonged, in what school of horror had she learned the lesson traced on these pages by her slim, white hand—the fair patrician hand which had known the weight of many jewels, the thrill of many caresses, and was now held fast in the merciless grip of captivity.

I turned the page: before me lay a flow of pale penciled words in a sloping handwriting. At every turn the flourish of some strange seignorial name met my eye: long Russian names of prince, of lover or of murderer. On every page was the convulsion of death or the paroxysm of passion; wine and morphia, chloral and cocaine surged across the pallid sheets, like the wash of a nightmare sea.

From the midst of those turbid billows—like some ineffable modern Aphrodite—rose the pale figure of Marie Nicolaevna Tarnowska.

The first words—traced by her trembling hand in the prison at Venice—are almost childish in their simplicity.

“When I was eight years old, I fell ill with measles and almost lost my eyesight. I wore blue spectacles. I was very happy. My mother loved me very much; so did my father. So did the servants. Everybody loved me very much.”

I pause in my reading, loth to proceed. I wish I could stop here with the little girl whom every one loved and who gazed out through her blue spectacles at a rose-colored world.

Ah! Marie Nicolaevna, had your luminous eyes remained for all time hidden behind those dim blue glasses, no one to-day would raise his voice in execration of you, nor call anathema upon your fair bowed head.

But when the little Russian countess was twelve years old an oculist from Kieff ordered that her eyes should be uncovered, and “Mura,” as her parents fondly called her, looked out upon the world with those clear light eyes that were one day to penetrate the darkest depths of crime.

I continue to read without stopping. The serried pages, scrawled feverishly and hurriedly in the cells of La Giudecca in defiance of prison rules, are in thin handwriting, with names and dates harshly underlined; but here and there whole sentences are struck out, as if the writer's memory wavered, or her feelings altered as she wrote.

Immediately, on the very first page, the bold figure of young Vassili Tarnowsky confronts us: the radiant, temerarious lover, who came to woo her in her marveling adolescence.

“His voice thrilled the heart like the tones of a violoncello; in his eyes were the lights of heaven, in his smile all the promises of love. I was already seventeen years old, and wise beyond my years. But, sagacious as I thought myself, I could never believe anything that was told me against Vassili.

My eyes saw nothing but his beauty. On the twelfth day of April I ran away from home with him; and we were married in a little church far away on the desolate steppes. I never thought that life could hold such joy.”

But on the very next page we come face to face with the astounding list of Vassili's perfidies: a musical enumeration of feminine names which rings the knell of his child-wife's happiness. “I never thought,” writes Marie Tarnowska simply, “that life could hold such sorrow.”

Further on there are gaps and incoherences; here and there a passing efflorescence of literary phrase, or a sudden lapse into curt narrative, as if a wave of apathy had suddenly submerged the tragic heroine and left in her place only a passive narrator of fearful events. Now and then even a note of strident humor is struck, more poignant, more painful than pathos.

Ever and anon there appears throughout the funereal story—as if smiling out through the window of a charnel-house—the innocent face of a child: Tioka. He is all bright curls and laughter. Unaware of the carnage that surrounds him, he runs with light, quick feet through pools of blood to nestle in the gentle maternal breast which for him is all purity and tenderness.

.....

As I read on and on the writing trembles and wavers, as if the hand and the heart of the writer wearied of their task. With a sudden break the sad story closes, unfinished, incomplete.

“If I could tell of the tears I have shed, if I could describe the anguish I have suffered, I am sure that pity would be shown to me. Surely if the world knew of my torment and my sufferings—”

Nothing more. Thus abruptly the tragic manuscript ends.

The train slackens speed, falters, shivers—stops. I am at Trani; at the furthest end of Italy; almost beyond civilization; almost out of the world.

Soon I shall see before me the woman I have come so far to seek: the woman who never gave the gift of love without the gift of death.

The high white walls of the penitentiary glared down in the blazing southern sun. The languid Adriatic trailed its blue silken waters past the barred windows. I raised the heavy knocker; it fell from my hand with a reverberating clang, and the massive prison-door opened slowly before me.

The Mother Superior and two gentle-looking Sisters fluttered—black and white and timid as swallows—across the sunlit courtyard. They were expecting me.

“She whom you seek is in the chapel,” said the Mother Superior, in a low voice. “I will call her!” She left us. The two Sisters accompanied me up a broad stone staircase to a small waiting-room. Then they stood quietly beside me; and when I looked at them, they smiled.

In the silence that followed I could hear women's voices singing in the prison chapel, simple, untutored voices, clear and shrill:

“Kyrie eleison
Christe eleison...”

and the low notes of the organ rolled beneath the treble voices, full and deep;

“Mater purissima
Mater inviolata...”

“Number 315—that is the Countess Marie,” said one of the two Sisters, “plays the organ for the other prisoners. She plays every day at noon and evensong.”

“And at four o'clock in the morning,” added the other Sister.

(How far, how far away, Marie Nicolaevna, are the passionate days of Moscow, the glowing, unslept nights of Venice!)

“Rosa mystica
Stella matutina...”

Suddenly the music ceased and we stood waiting in the hot, white silence. Then the door opened, and on the threshold stood Marie Tarnowska—the murderess, the devastating spirit, the Erinnys.

II

Tall and motionless in her fearful striped dress she stood, gazing at me with proud clear eyes; her brow was calm and imperious under the humiliating prisoner's coif, and her long hands—those delicate hands whose caresses have driven men to commit murder for her sake—hung loosely at her side. Her mouth, curving and disdainful, trembled slightly.

“Signora,” I began. Her lips wavered into a faint smile as with a quick downward sweep of her eyelashes she indicated her dress of shame.

“Signora,” I repeated, “I have come here neither out of compassion nor curiosity.”

She was silent, waiting for me to proceed. The three nuns had seated themselves quietly near the wall, with eyes cast down and meek hands folded in their laps.

“I have come,” I continued, “to vindicate my sisters in your eyes. I know you think that all women are ruthless and unkind.”

Another smile, fleeting, vivid and intelligent, lit up her eyes. Then the narrow face closed and darkened again.

“For two years,” I proceeded, “I have been haunted by the thought that you, shut in this place, must be saying to yourself that all men are base and all women pitiless. As to the men—I cannot say. But I wish you to know that not all women are without pity.”

She was silent a few moments. Then in a weak voice she spoke:

“In the name of how many women do you bring this message to me?”

I smiled in my turn. “There are four of us,” I said, cheerfully. “Two Englishwomen, a Norwegian, who is deaf and dumb—and myself. The deaf and dumb one,” I added, “is really very intelligent.”

Marie Tarnowska laughed! It was a low, sudden trill of laughter, and she herself seemed startled at the unaccustomed sound. The Sisters turned to look at her with an air of gentle amazement.

But in my eyes Marie Tarnowska had ceased to be the murderess, the Erinnyes. Through the criminal in her dress of shame I had caught a glimpse of the little girl in the blue spectacles, the happy little girl who felt that every one loved her. That lonely, tremulous trill of laughter astray on the tragic lips stirred me to the depths; and sudden tears filled my eyes.

Marie Tarnowska saw this, and turned pale. Then she sat down, unconsciously assuming the same chastened attitude as the Sisters, her hands submissively folded, her dark lashes cast down over her long light eyes. For some time there was silence.

“I have read your notes,” I said at last.

“My notes? I do not remember writing them.” Suddenly her voice sounded harsh and her glance flashed at me keen as a blade of steel.

“You wrote them in the prison at Venice, in pencil, in a child's exercise book.”

“It may be so.” Marie Tarnowska breathed a long sigh. “That was a time of dreams,” she said, raising her stricken eyes to mine. “I sometimes dream that this is all a dream. I think I must have fallen asleep one day when I was a little child, at home in Otrada—perhaps in our garden on the swing. I used often to fall asleep on that creaky old swing, reading a book, or looking at the sky. Perhaps I shall wake up soon, and find that none of all these dreadful things are true.” She fingered the broad brown-and-white stripes of her prison-garb and gazed round the dreary room. Then her eyes strayed from the whitewashed walls, bare except for a large ebony crucifix, to the narrow iron-barred window, and back to the Sisters sitting along the wall like a triptych of Renunciation, with folded hands and lips moving silently in their habitual prayer. “Yes, I shall wake up soon and find myself in our old garden again. My mother will come down the path and across the lawn, with her little white shawl on her head; she will call me: 'Mura! Mura! Where are you? Come, child, it is time for tea; and Vassili is asking for you.' Then I shall jump from the swing and run to her and hide

my face on her breast. 'Mother, if you knew what a dream I have had—a terrible dream, all about deaths and murders! I thought I had married Vassili, and he was unkind to me—as if Vassili could be unkind!—and I was locked in a prison in Italy—imagine, mother, to be imprisoned in Italy, where people only go for their honeymoon!' And mother will kiss me and laugh at the crazy dream as we go across the lawn together, happily, arm in arm."

I found no word to say, though her eyes seemed to question me; and her fragile voice spoke again: "Surely, this cannot all be true? It cannot be true that they are all dead. My mother? And little Peter? And Bozevsky? And Stahl? And Kamarowsky? Why, it is like—like 'Hamlet.'" She broke into strident laughter. "Do you remember how they all die in 'Hamlet'? One here, one there, one in the stream, one behind the curtain, drowned, stabbed, strangled—" Suddenly she was silent, looking straight before her with startled eyes.

"Poor Mura!" I murmured, and lightly touched her hand.

At the sound of the tender Russian appellation she turned to me quickly. Then she began speaking under her breath in hurried whispers.

"Who told you my name? Who are you? Are you my sister Olga? Do you remember the merry-go-round at the school-feast in Kieff? How we cried when it swung us round and round and round and would not stop? I seem to be still on the merry-go-round, rushing along, hastening, hurrying with the loud music pealing in my head."

The Mother Superior rose and approached her. "Hush," she spoke in soothing tones. "You will soon be quiet and at rest."

But Marie Tarnowska paid no heed. Her eyes were still fixed on mine with a despairing gaze. "Wake me, wake me!" she cried. "And let me tell you my dream."

And during those long mild April days she told it to me as follows.

Where shall I begin? Wait, let me think—ah, yes! Where I fell asleep that day in the garden, on the swing. I remember it was a hot day even in Otrada; almost as hot as it is here. And it was my birthday; I was sixteen years old. My mother herself, with great solemnity, in the presence of my father and sisters, had twisted up my long curling hair and pinned it in great waves and coils on the top of my head. There were to be no more long plaits hanging down my back!

"Your childhood is over, Mura," said my mother. "At sixteen one has to look and behave like a grown-up young lady."

"That is exactly what I am, mother dear," I replied with great self-assurance.

My mother smiled and sighed and kissed me. "You are such a child—such a child still, my little snowdrop," she said, and her eyes were tender and anxious.

But I ran gaily out into the garden, feeling very proud of my red-gold helmet of curls. I sprang fearlessly on the swing, tossing my head from side to side, delighted to feel the back of my neck cool and uncovered to the breeze. What would Vassili say to see me like this! But soon the hairpins felt heavy; they pulled a hair or two here, and a hair or two there, and hurt me. I stopped the swing, and with my head bent forward I quickly drew all the hairpins out and threw them on the ground.

The heavy coils of hair loosened, untwisted like a glittering snake, and fell all about me like a cloak of gold. I leaped upon the swing again and, standing, swung myself in wide flights through the clear air. What joy it was! As I flew forward my hair streamed out behind me like a flag, and in the backward sweep it floated all about my head in a whirling canopy of light.

I laughed and sang out loud to myself. How delightful was the world! How blissful to be alive and in the sunshine!

Suddenly Vassili appeared at the end of the path with my cousin, Prince Troubetzkoi. They were coming towards me arm in arm, smoking cigarettes and gazing at me. I felt shy of my loosened hair; I should have liked to jump down and run away, but the swing was flying too high and I could not stop it.

The two men looked at me with strange intent eyes, as no one had ever looked at me before. I felt a hot blush rise to my cheeks like a flame. Obeying a sudden, overmastering impulse I let go the ropes and covered my face with my hands. I heard a cry—did it come from me?—then everything whirled round me.... For an instant I saw the gravel path rise straight in front of me as if to strike me on the forehead. I threw myself back, something seemed to crash into the nape of my neck—and I remember no more.

III

I see the ensuing days as through a vague blue mist. I see myself reclining in an armchair, and my mother sitting beside me with her crochet-work. She is crocheting something of yellow wool. It is strange how the sight of that yellow wool hurts and repels me, but I cannot find words in which to express it, I seem unable to speak; and mother crochets on calmly, with quick white hands. I am conscious of a dull pain in the nape of my neck. Then I see Vassili come in; he is carrying an enormous cage in his hand; and Olga follows him, laughing and radiant. "Here he is! here he is!" cries Vassili triumphantly, putting the cage down beside me; and in it, to my horror, I see a parrot, a huge gray and scarlet creature, twisting a hard black tongue round and round as he clammers about the cage. I cry out in terror: "Why—why do they bring me things that frighten me?" And I burst into tears. Every one gazes at me in amazement; my mother bends tenderly over me: "But, my own darling, yesterday you said you wanted to have a parrot. Vassili has been all the way to Moscow to buy it for you."

"No, no! it is not true! I never said I wanted a parrot! Take it away! It frightens me. And so does the yellow wool." I hear myself weeping loudly; then everything is blotted out and vanishes—parrot, Vassili, yellow wool, Olga—nothing remains but my mother's sad and anxious face bending above me, dim and constant as the light of a lamp in a shadowy chapel.

When I was able to come down to breakfast for the first time, my father stood waiting for me, straight and solemn at the foot of the great staircase. He gave me his arm with much ceremony and led me to my place, where flowers lay in fragrant heaps round my plate. Every one embraced and complimented me and I was very happy.

"I feel as if I were a princess!" I cried, clapping my hands; and they all laughed except my father, who answered gravely:

"If it is your wish, you may become one. Prince Ivan has asked for your hand."

"Ivan? Ivan Troubetzkoi?" All the gladness went out of my heart.

"Yes. And so has Katerinowitch," exclaimed Olga, with a bitter smile; and I noticed that she looked pale and sad.

"Both Ivan and Katerinowitch? How extraordinary!" Then glancing at my mother, whose eyes were fixed upon her plate, I added jestingly, "Is that all? No one else?"

My pleasantry fell flat, for no one answered, and I saw my father knitting his brows. But my mother lifted her eyes for an instant and looked at me. In the blue light of that dear gaze I read my happiness!

But Olga was speaking. "Yes," she said, "there is some one else. Vassili Tarnowsky has asked to marry you." And she added, with a touch of bitterness: "I wonder what has possessed all three of them!"

Vassili! Vassili! Vassili! The name rang like a clarion in my ears. I should be Vassili's wife! I should be the Countess Tarnowska—the happiest woman in all this happy world. Every other girl on earth—poor luckless girls who could not marry Vassili—would envy me. On his arm I should pass proudly and serenely through life, rejoicing in his beauty, protected by his strength. Sheltered on his breast the storms would pass over my head, nor could sorrow ever touch me.

"I trust that your choice will fall on Troubetzkoi," said my father.

"Or on Vassili," cried Olga quickly.

I jumped up and embraced her. "It shall not be Katerinowitch, that I promise," I whispered, kissing the little pink ear that nestled under her fair curls. "He is to be for you!"

Time was to fulfil this prophecy.

As I went round the table, and passed my mother—poor little nervous mother!—I laid my hand on her arm. I noticed that she was trembling all over. Then I summoned up courage and approached my father.

“Father, dear, if you want your little Mura to be happy, you must let her marry Vassili.”

“Never,” cried my father, striking the table with his fist. The soul of the ancient O'Rourke—a demoniacal Irish ancestor of ours whose memory always struck terror to our souls—had awakened in him. I saw Olga and my mother turn pale. Nevertheless I laughed and kissed him again. “If I do not marry Vassili, I shall die! And please, father, do not be the Terrible O'Rourke, for you are frightening mother!”

But papa, dominated by the atavistic influence of the O'Rourke, grew even more terrible; and mother was greatly frightened. She sat white and rigid, with scarcely fluttering breath; suddenly in her transparent eyes the pupils floated upward like two misty pale-blue half-moons; she was in the throes of one of her dreaded epileptic seizures.

Then they were all around her, helping her, loosening her dress, fanning her; while I stood aside trembling and weebegone, and the pains in the nape of my neck racked me anew.

I said to myself that my father was hard and wicked, that I should marry Vassili and carry mother off with me, ever so far away!

As for papa, he should only be allowed to see us once a year. At Christmas.

I have married Vassili.

.....

I pretended to be seized with such convulsions that my poor dear mother, being at her wits' end, at last allowed me to run away with him.

Do I say “I pretended”? I am not sure that that is correct. At first the convulsions were certainly a mere pretense. I would say to myself: “Now I shall make myself have convulsions.” But as soon as I had begun I could not stop. After I had voluntarily gnashed my teeth they seemed to become locked as in a vice; my fists that I had purposely clenched would not reopen. My nails dug into the palms of my hands, and I could see the blood flowing down my wrists without being able to unclasp or relax my fingers.

Doctor Orlof, summoned in haste from Kieff, shook his head gravely.

“There are indications of epilepsy, due to the fall from the swing.”

“No, no, no!” I cried. “Not the swing! It is because of Vassili!”

My mother trembled and wept.

How cruel we are in our childhood! How we torture the mothers that adore us, even though we love them with all our hearts. And oh! the tragedy of not understanding this until it is too late, when we can never, never ask for their forgiveness, nor console them or atone to them again.

I married Vassili.

My father, more the Terrible O'Rourke than ever, at once refused to have anything to do with me. He denied me his kiss and his forgiveness. I was very unhappy.

“Oh, don't bother your head about that tiresome old man,” said Vassili, much annoyed by my tears.

As for my mother, she could only entreat Vassili to be kind and gentle with me.

“Take care of her, Vassili,” she implored. “I have given her to you lest she should die of a broken heart: but she is really too young to be any one's wife—she is but a child! I do not know whether you understand me. Remember she is not yet a woman. She is a child.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Vassili, without paying much attention. “That's all right. I shall tweak her nose if she is naughty.”

“And if I am good?” I asked, lifting ecstatic eyes to his handsome nonchalant face.

“If you are good you shall have sweets and kisses!” and he laughed, showing all his white teeth.

“Promise me, Vassili, that you will always sing my favorite song: 'Oh distant steppes, oh savage plains,' to me, and to no one else.”

“To you and to no one else,” said Vassili with mock solemnity. “Come then, Marie Tarnowska!” and he drew my arm under his, patting my hand on which the new nuptial ring shone in all its brightness.

“*Marie Tarnowska!*” What a beautiful name! I could have wished the whole world to know that name; I could have wished that every one seeing me should say: “Behold, behold Marie Tarnowska, happiest and most blessed among women.”

IV

On my wedding night, in the hotel at Kharkoff, I summoned the chambermaid. She knocked and entered. She was a pert, pretty creature, and after surveying me from head to foot she threw a rapid glance at Vassili. He was seated in an armchair, lighting a cigarette.

“What is your name?” he asked the girl.

“Rosalia, at your service, sir,” she replied.

“Very good, Rosalia,” said my husband. “This evening we shall do without you. Possibly in a day or two I may wish to see you again.”

The girl laughed, made a slight curtsy, and went out, closing the door behind her.

“But who is going to do my hair?” I asked, feeling very much out of countenance and shy at remaining alone with him.

“Never mind about your hair,” said Vassili. “Don't be so tedious. You're a little bore.” And he kissed me.

Then he sat down and smoked his cigarette, watching me out of narrowed eyelids as I wandered about the room in great trepidation and embarrassment. I was about to kneel down by the bedside to say my prayers, when he suddenly grasped my wrist and held it tightly.

“What are you doing now?” he inquired.

“I am going to say my prayers,” I replied.

“Don't bother about your prayers,” he said. “Try not to be such an awful little bore. Really you are quite insufferable.”

But I would not have missed my prayers for the world. At home prayers had always been a matter of great importance. Olga and I used to say them aloud in unison morning and evening. And now that Olga was far away I must say them alone. I buried my face in my hands and said them devoutly, with all my heart.

They were, I admit, numerous and long; and they were in many languages, for every nurse or governess that came to us in Otrada had taught us new ones; and Olga and I were afraid to leave any out, lest God should be offended; we were also rather doubtful as to which language He understood the best.

I had just come to an English prayer—

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake...

(Here Olga and I used always to interpolate a short prayer of our own invention: “Please, dear God, do not on any account let us die to-night. Amen.”)—when Vassili interrupted me.

“Haven't you finished?” he cried, putting his arm round my neck. “You are very tiresome. You bore me to extinction.”

“You bore me!” That was the perpetual refrain of all his days. I always bored him. Perhaps it was not surprising. At seventeen one is not always clever and entertaining, especially outside the family circle. At home I had always been considered rather witty and intelligent, but to Vassili I was never anything but “a dreadful bore.”

When I caught sight of him pinching Rosalia's cheek and I burst into tears: “You are a fearful bore,” he said crossly. If I noticed the scent of musk or patchouli on his coat and ventured to question him about it—“You are an insufferable little bore,” would be all the answer I got. When he went out (taking the music of “My Savage Plains” with him) and stayed away all night, on his return next morning I sobbed out my anguish on his breast. “I must say you bore me to death,” he yawned.

And one day I heard that he had had a child by a German baroness.

At the sight of my paroxysm of despair he grew angry. "What does it matter to you, silly creature, since you have not got one yourself?" he exclaimed. "Wearisome little bore that you are; you can't even have a child."

I was aghast. What—what did he mean? Why could I not—?

"No! no!" he shouted, with his handsome mouth rounded and open like those of the stone cherubs on the walls of his castle, "you will never have any children. You are not a woman. Your mother herself said so." And the look which he flashed across my frail body cut me like a sword.

I fell fainting to the ground.

Then he became alarmed. He called everybody. He summoned the whole staff of the hotel. He sent for all the ladies he knew in Kharkoff (and they were many) imploring them all to save me, to recall me to life. When I came to myself the room was filled with women: there was Rosalia, and two Hungarian girls from the adjoining apartment, and there was also the German baroness, and little Julia Terlezkaja, the latest and fairest of my husband's conquests. All these graceful creatures were bending over my couch, while Vassili on his knees with his head buried in the coverlet was sobbing: "Save her! She is dead! I have killed her!"

I put out my hand and touched his hair.

"I am alive," I said softly; and he threw himself upon me and kissed me. The women stood round us in a semi-circle, gay and graceful as the figures on a Gobelin tapestry.

"I love you," Vassili was exclaiming; "I love you just as you are. I should hate you to be like everybody else." And in French he added, looking at Madame Terlezkaja: "C'est très rigolo d'avoir une femme qui n'est pas une femme."

I hid my face in the pillow, and wept; while the fair Terlezkaja, who seemed to be the kindest of them all, bent over and consoled me.

"Pay no heed to him," she whispered. "I think he has been drinking a little."

The door opened. A doctor, who had been sent for by the manager of the hotel, entered with a resolute authoritative air. At the sight of him the women disappeared like a flight of startled sparrows. Of course they took Vassili with them.

To the good old doctor I confided the secret which Vassili had disclosed to me and which was burning my heart.

"I want to have a child, a little child of my own!" I cried.

"Of course. Of course. So you shall," said the old doctor, with a soothing smile. "There is no reason why you should not. You are a little anemic, that is all."

He scribbled some prescriptions on his tablets.

"There. You will take all that. And you will go to Franzensbad. Within a year you will be asking me to act as godpapa."

I took all he prescribed. But I did not go to Franzensbad. Vassili wanted to go to Petersburg, so, of course, it was to Petersburg we went.

The very first evening we were there a number of his friends came to call on him.

I remember, among the rest, a certain German Grand Duke, who, after showing me an infinite amount of attention, drew Vassili aside and spoke to him in undertones. I heard him mention the name of a famous restaurant and the words: "A jolly supper-party to-night—some ravishingly pretty tziganes...." There followed names of men and women whom I did not know, and my husband laughed loudly.

Then the Grand Duke turned to me, and bowing deeply and ceremoniously kissed my hand.

For an instant a frenzied impulse came over me to clutch that well-groomed head and cry: "Wicked man! Why are you trying to lure my husband from me?" But social conventions prevailed over this elementary instinct, and when the Grand Duke raised his patrician head he found me all amiability and smiles.

“She is indeed a bewitching creature!” I heard him mutter to Vassili. “Looks just like one of Botticelli's diaphanous angels. Well then, at eleven o'clock to-night, at the 'Hermitage.'”

Promptly at a quarter to eleven Vassili, sleek, trim and immaculate, kissed my cheek gaily and went out.

I was alone. Alone in the great drawing-room, gorgeous with lights and mirrors and gilded decorations. What was the good of being a bewitching creature? What was the good of looking like one of Botticelli's diaphanous angels?...

V

I rang for my maid, Katja, a good creature, ugly beyond words—and gladly chosen by me on that account—and I told her that she was to undress me for I was going to bed. While she was unfastening my dress I could hear her muttering: “If it were me, I should not go to bed. If it were me, I should put on my diamonds and my scarlet chiffon gown; I should take a good bottle of vitriol in my pocket, and go and see what they were up to.”

“Katja, what are you mumbling? Do you mean to say that you—that you think I ought to go—?”

“Of course,” she cried, and her small squinting eyes shot forth, to the right and left, fierce, divergent flashes of indignation. “Why should my lady not go?”

Why should I not, indeed? Had I not the right—nay, the duty—to follow Vassili? Had I not most solemnly promised so to do, in the little church on the steppes a year ago? “*Follow him!*” With what tremulous joy had I repeated after the priest those two words of tenacity and submission. Had they no application to the Hermitage restaurant?

“Perhaps I might venture to go,” I murmured, “but, Katja, do not other women always have rouge and powder to put on when they go out? I have nothing.”

“Nothing but your eighteen years, madame,” replied Katja.

She dressed me in the low-necked scarlet chiffon gown. She drew on my flame-colored stockings, and my crimson shoes. On my head she placed the diamond and ruby tiara, and about my shoulders she wound a red and gold scarf which looked like a snake of fire.

“Alas, Katja!” I sighed as I looked at myself in the mirror; “what would my mother say if she were to see me like this? What do I look like?”

“You look like a lighted torch,” said Katja.

I made her come with me in the troika, which sped swiftly and silently through the dim snow-covered streets. I was shaking with fear at the thought of Vassili. Katja was mumbling some prayers.

We drew up at the brilliant entrance of the restaurant.

“Oh, heavens, Katja! What will my husband say?”

“He will say that you are beautiful.”

How did I ever venture across that threshold of dazzling light? How was I able to ascend the red-carpeted stairs, preceded and followed by bows and smiles and whispers? At the head of the wide staircase, in front of a double-paneled door of white and gold, I paused with beating heart, almost unable to breathe. I could hear the gipsy-music inside, and women's voices and men's laughter and the tinkling of glasses.

An impassive head-waiter stood before me, calmly awaiting my orders.

“Tell”—I stammered—“tell—” as I thought of Vassili my courage failed me—“tell his Highness the Grand Duke that I wish to see him.”

Then I clung to the balustrade and waited. As the door opened and was quickly closed again, there came forth a puff of heat and sound which enwrapped me like a flame.

Almost immediately the door opened again and the Grand Duke appeared upon the threshold, his countenance still elated by recent laughter. He stared at me in astonishment, without recognition. “What—what can I do for you?” he asked. Then his eyes widened in limitless astonishment. “Upon my word! It is the Botticelli angel!”

I said “Yes,” and felt inclined to weep.

“Come in, come in!” he cried eagerly, taking me by the arm and leading me to the door.

A waiter threw it wide open. I had a dazzling vision of a table resplendent with crystal, silver, and flowers, and the bare jeweled shoulders of women.

“Tarnowsky!” called the Grand Duke from the threshold. “Fortunate among men! Behold—the most glorious of your conquests!”

Vassili had started to his feet and was looking at me with amazed and incredulous eyes. There was a deep silence. I felt as if I should die. Vassili came up to me. He took me brusquely by the hand, crushing my fingers in his iron clasp. “You are mad!” he said. Then he looked at me from head to foot—not with the gaze of a husband, nor yet with that of a lover, but with the cold curious scrutiny of the perfect connoisseur.

“Come,” he said at last, drawing me towards the others who were in a riot of laughter. “I have always told my friends that you were a chilling, lily-white flake of snow. You are not!” And he laughed. “You are a blazing little firebrand! Come in!”

Thenceforward my husband would always have me with him. My untutored adolescence was trailed from revelry to revelry, from banquet to orgy; my innocence swept into the maelstrom of a licentious life. I was forced to look into the depths of every depravity; to my lips was proffered every chalice of shame.

Oh, if as I stood trembling on the confines of maidenhood, some strong and tender hand had drawn me into safety, should not I have been like other women, those happy women who walk with lofty brows in the sunshine, august and ruthless in their purity?

But, alas! when with tardy and reluctant step I issued forth from my long childhood, a thousand cruel hands were thrust out to push me towards the abyss.

Oh, white pathway of innocence which knows no return! Oh, tenuous light of purity which, once quenched, kindles no more! Did I not grieve and mourn for you when I lost you before my twentieth year? Sadly, enviously, like some poor exile, I saw other girls of my age passing in blithe security by the side of their mothers, blushing at an eager word or at a daring glance. Alas! I felt that I was unworthy to kiss the hem of their skirts.

But bliss was to be vouchsafed to me. Redeeming and triumphant there came to me at last the Angel of Maternity. With proud humility I bore the little human flower fluttering in my breast. At every throb of life I felt myself swooning with joy—with the ineffable joy of my reconquered purity.

My mother was with me, and in the tender haven of her arms I found shelter for my meek and boundless ecstasy.

How is it possible, I asked myself, that there are women who dread this perfect happiness, who weep and suffer through these months fraught with rapturous two-fold life?

For me, I felt like a flowering plant in springtime, impelled by some potent influence towards its perfect blossoming. The whole of that blissful period seemed a sublime ascent to unalloyed felicity; everything enchanted me, from the awed and tremulous waiting to the final crowning consummation.

When at last the fragile infant—my son!—lay in my arms, he seemed to me sufficient to fill my entire life. I nursed him into ever-growing wonder and beauty. Day by day he seemed fairer, more entrancing, like a delicate flower in some fantastic lunar legend.

Oh, the wee groping hands against my face! The wilful little caprices, the cries like those of an angry dove! And the dimples on the elbows; the droll battle with the little cap always awry, and the joyous impatience of the tiny kicking feet!

Each day my mother and I invented new names for him—names of little flowers, names of little animals, nonsense-names made up of sweet senseless sounds.

I had no thought, I had no desire. Pale and pure I sat enthroned in the milk-white paradise of maternity.

VI

Soon after that my thoughts are adrift, my recollections grow confused. I see my mother with my baby in her arms, and myself in traveling attire, with my arms twined about them, weeping, despairing, refusing to leave them and set out on a journey of Vassili's planning. But Vassili grows impatient. Vassili grows angry. He is tired of playing the papa, tired of seeing me no longer a little "firebrand," but calm as a young Madonna in the beatific purity of motherhood.

Vassili has taken it into his head that he wants to study singing. He has made up his mind to go to Italy, to Milan, to study scales and exercises; and I must go with him.

"But our baby, Vassili, our little Tioka! We must take our baby with us!"

No. Vassili does not want babies. He does not want to be bothered or hindered. "We are carting about eight trunks as it is!" he says, cynically.

And so we start for Italy—Italy, the yearned-for goal of all my girlish dreams.

At Milan Vassili sings. I seem always to see him with his handsome mouth open, singing scales and arpeggios. But a slow poison is creeping through my blood and I fall ill, ill with typhoid fever.

Again my thoughts go adrift and my recollections are confused. They dance in grotesque and hideous visions through my brain. I see livid hallucinated faces peering at me, towers and mountains tottering above me, undefined horrors all about me, and in the midst of them all I see Vassili—singing! He sings scales and arpeggios with his rounded open mouth. Now I can see a white spider—no, two white spiders—running about on a scarlet coverlet.... They are my hands. They frighten me. And Vassili is singing.

"Vassili, why are you singing? Don't sing! Don't sing!"

"No, darling, I am not singing. You only imagine it. You are ill; you are feverish. Calm yourself."

.....

"Vassili, where is my baby?"

"At home in Kieff, with grandmama. Dear grandmama is taking such good care of him!"

"And why are we not with him? Where are we?"

"We are at Pegli, darling."

"Why? Why? Where is Pegli? What are we doing at Pegli?"

"Come now, dearest; you know—we came to Italy because I wanted to sing—"

"Ah, you see! You wanted to sing! Why do you want to sing when the baby is crying? The baby is so helpless. Why did you take me away from him? You sing, you sing so loud that I cannot hear my baby crying. Don't sing!"

But even as I speak I see that Vassili has his round mouth open again and he sings and sings, and the white spiders run over the scarlet counterpane and come close to my face—and the white spiders are my hands. I shriek and shriek to have them taken away. But the baby is crying and Vassili is singing and no one hears me.

.....

Then I drop down to the bottom of a deep well. I feel myself falling, falling, until with a great shock I touch the bottom. And there I lie motionless in the dark.

.....

When I open my eyes there is a great deal of light; the windows are open, the sun is pouring in; I know that outside there is the sea. Beside my bed sits a doctor with a gray beard, feeling my pulse. Under the light intermittent pressure of his fingers my pulse seems to grow quieter; I can see the doctor's head giving little nods as he counts the beats.

“Sixty-five. Excellent, excellent!” The doctor pats my hand gently and encouragingly. “That is first-rate. We are quite well again.”

Then I hear some one weeping softly, and I know it is my mother. I try to turn and smile at her, but my head will not move. It is like a ball of lead sunk in the pillow. Immediately afterwards—or have years passed?—I hear some one say: “Here is the Professor!” And again the same doctor with the gray beard comes in and smiles at me.

Before sitting down beside the bed he turns to my mother: “Has she not yet asked about her child?” My mother shakes her head and presses her handkerchief to her eyes. Then the doctor sits down beside my bed and strokes my forehead and speaks to me.

He speaks about a baby. He repeats a name over and over again—perhaps it is Tioka. Tioka? Who is Tioka? I watch his beard moving up and down, and do not know what he is saying. The ball of lead on my pillow rolls from side to side with a dull and heavy ache.

My mother weeps bitterly: “Oh, doctor, do not let her die!”

The white spiders are there again, running over the coverlet. And I fall once more, down, down, down, to the bottom of the well.

VII

For how many months was I ill? I do not know. Vassili, restless and idle, “carted” me and my medicines and my sufferings from Pegli to Genoa, from Genoa to Florence. He seemed to have forgotten that we had a home; he seemed to have forgotten that we had a child.

Our rooms at the hotel in Florence were bright with sunshine and with the frivolous gaiety of a graceful trio of Russian ladies—the Princess Dubinskaja, her sister Vera Vojatschek, and the fair-haired Olga Kralberg, who came to see us every day. But I felt lost and lonely, as if astray in the world. My mother had returned to Russia, and my vacant and aching heart invoked Vassili, who, alas! was never by my side.

“You must win him back,” said Olga Kralberg to me one day—she, whose fate it was on a not distant day to commit suicide for his sake. “Every man, especially if he is a husband, has—after some time—to be won back again.”

“That is sooner said than done,” I replied despondently. “To win a man is easy enough. But to win him back—”

“There are various ways of doing it,” she said. “Have you tried being very affectionate?”

“Yes, indeed,” said I.

“How did it answer?”

“He was bored to death.”

“Have you tried being cool and distant? Being, so to speak, a stranger to him?”

“Yes, I have.”

“And he?”

“He never even noticed that I was being a stranger to him. He was as happy and good-tempered as ever.”

Olga shook her head dejectedly. “Have you tried being hysterical?” she asked after a while.

I hesitated. “I think so,” I said at last. “But I do not quite know what you mean.”

“Well,” explained Olga sententiously, “with some men, who cannot bear healthy normal women, hysteria is a great success. Of course, it must be esthetic hysteria—you must try to preserve the plastic line through it all,” and Olga sketched with her thumb a vague painter's gesture in the air. “For example, you deluge yourself in strange perfumes. You trail about the house in weird clinging gowns. You faint away at the sight of certain shades of color—”

“What an absurd idea!” I exclaimed.

“Not at all. Not in the least,” said Olga. “On the contrary, it is very modern, very piquant to swoon away every time you see a certain shade of—of mauve, for instance.”

“But what if I don't see it?”

“Silly! You *must* see it. Give orders to a shop to send you ten yards of mauve silk. Open the parcel in your husband's presence. Then—then you totter; you fall down—but mind,” added Olga, “that you fall in a graceful, impressionist attitude. Like this.” And Olga illustrated her meaning in what appeared to me a very foolish posture.

“I think it ridiculous,” I said to her. And she was deeply offended.

“Good-by,” she said, pinning her hat on briskly and spitefully.

“No, no! Don't go away. Do not desert me,” I implored. “Try to suggest something else.”

Olga was mollified. After reflecting a few moments she remarked.

“Have you tried being a ray of sunshine to him?”

I lost patience with her. “What do you mean by a 'ray of sunshine'? You seem to be swayed by stock phrases, such as one reads in novels.”

This time Olga was not offended. She explained that in order to be a ray of sunshine in a man's life, one must appear before him gay, sparkling and radiant at all hours of the day.

“Always dress in the lightest of colors. Put a ribbon in your hair. When you hear his footsteps, run to meet him and throw your arms round his neck. When he goes out, toss a flower to him from the window. When he seems dull or silent, take your guitar and sing to him.”

“You know I don't play the guitar,” I said pettishly.

“That does not matter. What really counts is the singing. The atmosphere that surrounds him should be bright with unstudied gaiety. He ought to live, so to speak, in a whirlwind of sunshine!”

“Well, I will try,” I sighed, without much conviction.

I did try.

I dressed in the lightest of colors and I pinned a ribbon in my hair. When I heard his footstep, I ran to meet him and threw my arms round his neck.

“What is the matter?” he asked. “And what on earth have you got on your head? You look like a barmaid.”

To the best of my powers I was a whirlwind of sunshine; and as soon as I saw that he was dull and silent (and this occurred almost immediately) I said to myself that the moment was come for me to sing to him.

I sat down at the piano. I have not much ear, but a fine strong voice, even if not always quite in tune.

At the second bar Vassili got up, took his hat and left the house. I threw a flower to him from the window.

He did not come back for three days.

VIII

When I talked it over with Olga, she was very sympathetic.

"I know," she mused, "that these things sometimes succeed and sometimes do not. Men are not all alike." Then she added: "But there is one sure way of winning them back. It is an old method, but infallible."

"What is it?" I asked skeptically.

"By making them jealous. It is vulgar, it is *rococo*, it causes no end of trouble. But it is infallible."

We reviewed the names of all the men who could possibly be employed to arouse Vassili's jealousy. We could think of no one. I was surrounded by nothing but women.

"It is past belief," said Olga, surveying me from head to foot, "that there should be no one willing to—"

I shook my head moodily. "No one on earth."

Olga grasped my wrist. "Stay! I have an idea. We will get some one who is not on earth. Some one who is dead. It will be much simpler. I remember there was an idea of that kind in an unsuccessful play I saw a year or two ago. What we need is a dead man—recently dead, if possible, and, if possible, young. If he has committed suicide, so much the better."

"What on earth do you want with a dead man?" I asked, shuddering.

"Why! can't you see? We will say that he died for your sake!" cried Olga, "that he killed himself on your account. We will have a telegram sent to us by some one in Russia. We will get them to telegraph to you: 'I die for your sake. Am killing myself. Farewell!'"

"But who is to sign it?"

"Oh, somebody or other," said Olga vaguely. "Or we could have it signed with an imaginary name, if you prefer it. That would enable us to dispense with the corpse."

"I most certainly prefer that," I remarked. "But, frankly, I can't see—"

"What can't you see? Don't you see the effect upon Vassili of the news that a man has killed himself for your sake? Don't you see the new irresistible attraction which you will then exercise over him? Surely you know what strange subtle charm emanates from the 'fatal woman'—the woman whose lethal beauty—"

"Very well, very well," I said, slightly encouraged. "Let us have the telegram written and sent to me."

We spent the rest of the afternoon composing it.

Three days later Vassili entered the drawing-room where Olga and I were having tea; he held a telegram in his hand; his face was of a ghastly pallor.

"He's got it," whispered Olga hysterically, pinching my arm.

"Mura," said Vassili; "a horrible thing has happened. Horrible!" His white lips trembled as he uttered the incoherent words:

"Dead—he is dead—he has killed himself—"

He was unable to go on. His voice broke in a sob.

I sprang to my feet. "Who, Vassili? Who?"

Olga thought the moment had arrived for putting things in the proper light. She turned to me with a significant glance, and grasped my hand.

"Ah! It is the man who loved you!" she exclaimed. "And this—this is what you dreaded!"

"What! What!" shouted Vassili, clutching her arm and pushing her roughly aside. Then he turned upon me and seized me by the shoulder. "You—you knew of this? You dreaded this?"

I stood trembling, struck dumb with terror. I could hear the futile and bewildered explanations of Olga:

“Why, surely,” she was saying with an insensate smile, “it is a thing that might happen to anybody. It is not her fault if people love her to distraction.”

But Vassili was crushing my wrist. “My brother—he loved you?” he gasped.

“*Your brother?* Your brother—little Peter?” I stammered.

“Yes, yes! Peter,” shouted Vassili. “My brother! What have you to do with his death?”

“Nothing, nothing.” I groaned. “I swear it—nothing!”

And Olga, realizing at last that she stood in the presence of a genuine tragedy and not of the jest we had plotted, darted forward and caught his arm.

“Vassili, you are mistaken. She knows nothing about it; nothing whatever. We had planned a joke to play on you, and we thought—” She pursued her agitated and incoherent explanations.

Vassili looked from one to the other of us, scanning our faces, hardly hearing what Olga was saying. Suddenly he seemed to understand, and loosening his hold on my arm he fell upon the couch and buried his face in his hands.

The telegram had dropped on the carpet. Olga picked it up and read it; then she handed it to me:

Peter hanged himself last night. Come at once.

Tarnowsky.

We left for Kieff the same evening. Throughout the entire journey Vassili never spoke. I sat mournful and silent opposite him and thought of my brother-in-law, Peter. Not of the pale youth, already corrupted by absinthe and women, whom we had left at Kieff a few months before, but of the child Peter, in his short velvet suit and lace collar, whom I had loved so dearly in the days of my girlhood—little Peter who used to run to meet me in the sun-splashed avenues of the Villa Tarnowsky, trotting up with his little bare legs and serious face, stopping to be kissed and then trotting hurriedly off again, the nape of his neck showing fair and plump beneath the upturned brim of his sailor-hat.

How well I remember that sailor-hat! The black ribbon round the crown bore, between two anchors, the word, “*Implacable*”; and from under that fierce device the round and gentle countenance of little Peter gazed mildly out into the world.

Little Peter's legs were always cold. He was brought up in English fashion, with short socks even in the depths of winter. From afar you could see little Peter's chilly bare legs, crimson against a background of snow. Sometimes, rubbing his knees, he would say to me: “I wish God had made me of fur, instead of—of leather, like this.” And again he would remark: “I don't like being alive. Not that I want to die; but I wish I had never begun.”

And now little Peter had finished. Little Peter lay solemn and magnificent in the *chambre ardente* where his dead ancestors had lain solemn and magnificent before him. “Implacable” indeed he lay, unmoved by the tears of his mother and father; his lofty brow was marble; his fair eyelashes lowered over his quenched and upturned eyes.

When I thought of him thus I felt afraid.

And it seemed strange to be afraid of little Peter.

IX

After we had crossed the Russian frontier another thought—a thought that filled me with unspeakable happiness—put all others to flight: my child! I should see my child again! All our relations would certainly be assembled at the Tarnowskys' house, so I should find my parents and my little Tioka there too. The image of the living child soon displaced the tragic memory of the dead youth. As the train sped towards Kieff my fever of gladness and impatience increased. Yes, tomorrow would be poor Peter's funeral, but this very evening I should clasp little Tioka in my arms!

Raising my eyes, I saw that Vassili was looking at me with a scowl. "I have been watching you for some time," he said. "Heartless creature that you are, to laugh—to laugh in the face of death."

"I was thinking of Tioka," I stammered. Vassili did not reply. But in the depths of my heart joy sang and whispered like a hidden fountain.

Thus, inwardly rejoicing, did I enter the house of death and hasten to the dark-red room—the very scene of Peter's suicide—in which they had placed my baby's cradle; thus, while others mourned with prayers and tears in the gloomy death-chamber, I ran across the sun-filled garden holding my infant to my breast. I hid myself with him in the orchard and laughed and laughed aloud, as I kissed his starry eyes and his tiny, flower-like mouth.

But Death, the Black Visitor, had entered my life. Little Peter had shown him the way, had opened the door to him.

From that day forward the dread Intruder never forsook my threshold.

Death, lurking at my door in terrifying silence, stretched out his hand at intervals and clutched some one belonging to me. Generally it was with a swift gesture—a fell disease or a pistol-shot—that he struck down and flung into the darkness those I loved.

But towards me Death comes with a slower, more deliberate tread. For years, ever since the birth of my little daughter Tania,—my white rosebud born midst the snows of a dreary winter in Kieff—I have felt Death creeping towards me, slow, insidious, inexorable, holding in his hand a knot of serpents, each of which will fasten its poisoned fangs upon me. Disease, the venomous snake, will hide in my bosom and thrust its way through my veins. The heavy snake of Grief will coil round my heart and crush me in its spirals. Insanity will glide into my brain and nest there. Then—last but not least horrible—the little glass viper, the syringe of Pravaz, whose fang is a hollow needle, will draw me into the thralldom of its virulent grip. It will spurt its venom into my blood. The bland balm of coca, the milky juice of the poppy, will flow into my veins, soothing, assuaging, lulling me into sleep and forgetfulness—only to waken me in renewed agony of suffering to a renewed bite of the envenomed fang. For the only antidote to the poison of narcotics is the narcotic itself, the only alleviation to the tearing agony of the poison generated by morphia is morphia again. And so the fatal sequence swings on forever, in ever-widening circles of torment....

X

*From Alexis Bozevsky to Stepan Nebrasoff.
Kieff, Thursday.*

Dear Stepan, my good Friend,—

I am here in the house of your cousin, Dr. Stahl, who seems to have grown longer and leaner than ever. He is a mere shadow. It is here that your letter reaches me. You tell me to write to you about myself. To-day, the 15th of October, 1903, I am twenty-four years old. What gift will Destiny give me for my birthday? Love? Wealth? A hero's death?

Your cousin Stahl, in his cavernous voice that seems to come echoing up from underground, says that the gift of Destiny is precisely these four-and-twenty years of mine! Perhaps he is right. I feel them eddying in my blood like four-and-twenty cyclones.

The world is a whirlwind of youth.

Kaufmann this morning lent me his sorrel stallion—the finest horse in the Empire—and I had a gallop along the bastions. All the women looked at me. In a phaeton I saw the brazen and beautiful Princess Theodora, blonde and torrid as a Mexican landscape. She was resplendent in amethyst and heliotrope, her red locks flaming to the sun; no one but a princess would permit herself to display such a riot of violent colors.

Soon afterwards I saw Vera Voroklizkaja, reclining in her carriage, aloof and severe as a vestal virgin; her glossy black tresses parted over her brow enclosed the narrow oval of her face like soft black wings. Beside her sat little Miriam Grey, clothed in her youthfulness as in an armor of roses. The beauty of all these women courses through my blood like sun and wine.

Upon my word life is an excellent institution.

And you—what are you doing?

*Ever yours,
Bozevsky.*

The next day

Stepan, Stepan, Stepan!—

I am in love! Madly, sublimely, tragically in love! This morning I went to the parade-ground as in a dream; I found myself speaking to the colonel in a gentle winning voice that was perfectly ludicrous. When I drilled my company I could hear myself giving the words of command in an imploring tone which I still blush to remember. I am obsessed, hallucinated; there floats before my eyes a slender, ethereal creature, with red lips that never smile, and hair that looks like a cataract of champagne.

Stahl introduced me to her yesterday, here at his house. “Come,” he said, taking me by the arm. “You are going to make the acquaintance of a superior being, soft of voice and sad of countenance, who bears the gentle name of Marie.”

“Let me off,” I replied skeptically. “Sad and superior beings are not to my liking.”

“You will like this one,” said Stahl.

“I know I shan't,” I replied curtly. I saw Stahl's eye warn me, and, turning, found myself face to face with the subject of our conversation, a tall, flower-like vision, with translucent eyes and a mystic inscrutable face.

I knew she had overheard me, and as I bowed low before her, she said: “That you should like me is of no importance. What really matters is that I should be pleased with you.”

Her beauty and the scornful levity of her words struck me strangely. “Madame,” and I was surprised to feel that I spoke with sincerity, “to please you will be henceforward the highest aim of my desire.”

She looked at me a moment; then she spoke quietly: “You have attained your aim.”

She turned and left me. I stood thunderstruck by the brief and daring reply and by the flash of that clear gaze. She had spoken the words without a smile.

She did not address me during the rest of the evening. When she left, she barely glanced at me and vouchsafed neither smile nor greeting.

Just for an instant she raised her black-fringed eyes and gazed at me; then her lashes fell; and it was as if a light had been blown out.

I am in love with her! Madly, divinely, desperately in love. Ah, Stepan, love—what an ecstasy and what a disaster!

Your Bozevsky.

It was Dr. Stahl, the “Satanic Stahl,” who got these letters from his cousin Stepan Nebrasoff, and showed them to me. They bewildered and troubled me. What? Was I really so attractive and so perturbing in the eyes of the gallant young Pole—the handsomest officer in the Imperial Guard? I repeated to myself his disquieting epithets: “flower-like,” “ethereal,” “inscrutable”; and in my room at night when I loosened my hair, I wondered: “Does it really look like a cataract of champagne?” When I went out I never smiled, even when I felt inclined to do so, since my gravity had seemed so charming to him.

Night and day he followed me like a shadow—or rather, should I say, like a blaze of light. In whatever direction I turned I was sure to encounter his radiant smile and his flashing glance. His passion encompassed me; I felt like Brunnhilde surrounded by a sea of flame. I was elated yet terrified.

One evening at dinner I made up my mind to speak to Vassili about it.

“Vassili,” I said falteringly, “I think we ought to go away for a time.”

“Away? Where to?” asked my husband.

“Anywhere—anywhere away from Kieff.”

“Why?”

I felt myself turning pale! “I am afraid,” I stammered, “I am afraid—that Bozevsky—”

“Well?” asked Vassili serenely, pouring some vodka into his champagne and drinking it.

“I am afraid that Bozevsky is falling in love with me.”

“And who would not fall in love with you, dushka?” laughed Vassili. “As for Bozevsky, may the wolves eat him.”

And dinner being over, he lit his cigar and went out.

.....

I go sadly upstairs to the nursery where Tioka and Tania, like blonde seraphs, lie asleep.

A dim lamp hangs between the two white cots and illumines their favorite picture—an artless painting of the Virgin Mary, holding in her youthful arms the infant Jesus with a count's coronet on His head.

I kneel down beside the two little beds and weep.

Aunt Sonia, rectilinear and asexual in her gray flannel dressing-gown, comes in softly and bends over me.

“You must trust in Providence,” she says, raising towards the ceiling her long virginal face. “And take a little camomile tea. That always does one good.”

I obey her meekly and gratefully. It comforts me to think that a day will come when I also shall be like Aunt Sonia; when I also shall be content to wear gray flannel dressing-gowns and turn in my sorrows to Providence and to camomile tea.

And I wish that that day of peace were near.

XI

So we stayed on in Kieff and Bozevsky came to see us every day. He brought me flowers—wonderful orchids the color of amethyst, tenuous contorted blossoms that looked as if they had bloomed in some garden of dreams. He brought me books; books of nebulous German poetry; Spanish plays by Echegaray all heroism and fire; and disquieting, neurotic French novels. Then he brought me English books which filled me with pleasant surprise. How far removed from our Slav souls were those limpid Anglo-Saxon minds! How child-like and simple was their wit, how bland and practical their outlook on life. That was the literature I liked best of all; perhaps because it was so different from everything in myself. I felt that I was a strange, ambiguous, complicated creature compared with those candid elemental natures.

Bozevsky liked to find me reading. He would arrive in the evening—usually after Vassili had gone out, alone or with friends—and enter the drawing-room with bright and cheerful greeting. He always smiled when he found me with one of his books in my hand, sitting beside Aunt Sonia placidly knitting in her armchair.

“I like your thoughts to be far away from here,” he would say, kissing my hand. “I like to know that your soul is far from the frivolous society you live in, far from the petty preoccupations, the compliments and the flattery which surround you. Let me read with you; let me join you in the purer realm of fancy, far away from the world.” And he would sit down beside me, with an air of protecting fraternal affection.

One evening he found me nervous and agitated.

“What has happened?” he asked.

“I have been reading a ghastly book,” I told him with a shudder. “The story of a mysterious plant, a sort of huge octopus that feeds on human flesh—”

“Ugh!” laughed Bozevsky, “how gruesome!” and he bent his sunny head over the page.

“Just imagine,” I continued, “its branches are long moving tentacles, its thick leaves are quite black and hard; they glitter and move like living scorpions....”

“Horrid, horrid,” said Bozevsky with his shining smile as he took the book out of my hand. “Forget the scorpions. To-night I shall read you some Italian poetry. I want you to make friends with Carducci.”

He opened a plainly bound volume at random, and read to me.

“Oh favolosi prati d'Eliseo...”

I forgot the tree of scorpions. I forgot Bozevsky. I forgot Aunt Sonia and the world. The unknown poet had wrapped my spirit in his giant wings and was bearing me far away.

It was about this time that Vassili took me to Moscow. There, one evening, our friends the Maximoffs brought a stranger to see us. They introduced him as an estimable Moscow lawyer of high repute. I was surrounded by other friends and I greeted him absently, without hearing his name. I remember casually noticing that he was neither young nor old, neither ugly nor handsome. His wife, a timid, fair-haired woman, was with him.

At Vassili's suggestion we all went to the “Strelna,” a famous night-restaurant. I remember that there was a great deal of laughter at the grotesque jokes which Vassili and Maximoff and also the estimable lawyer played on the pretty dark-faced tziganes.

I noticed that the lawyer's wife did not laugh. She passed her hand across her wistful Madonna-like brow, and listened only to the music.

Like her I felt out of tune with the merriment around me. My thoughts wandered back to the silent drawing-room at Kieff: I thought of Aunt Sonia and her peaceful knitting, of Bozevsky and

the books he had brought me. I seemed to hear his voice saying, “Ugh! a tree of scorpions”—and at that very instant something cold and claw-like clutched my bare shoulder. I uttered a piercing shriek, which seemed to turn every one—including myself—cold with terror. But it was only the estimable lawyer, who, having drunk rather too much, had playfully climbed upon the sofa behind me and, to save himself from falling off, had laid his hand upon my shoulder.

“What on earth has happened?” exclaimed Vassili. “What made you scream like that?”

“I don't know,” I stammered, taken aback, “I thought—I thought it was a scorpion!”

Every one laughed and for the rest of the evening the lawyer was nicknamed “the Scorpion.” Perhaps this name added to the unreasoning fear I felt of him, or perhaps I was merely nervous, but he seemed to be always close behind me, and during the whole of that evening I kept on turning round, with little shivers running down my spine, to see what he was doing.

Suddenly he had disappeared. Vassili laughed loudly. “Hullo! Where's the Scorpion?” And amidst the laughter of the guests he set himself to count the flippant tziganes one by one to see if any were missing. But they were all there—and I was glad for the sake of the Scorpion's poor little Madonna-wife.

It was three in the morning when we went back to our sleighs. It was very cold; the clear deep-blue sky was powdered with stars. Assisted by Maximoff I was about to step into the sleigh, when, with another cry, I drew back; my foot had touched something soft and shapeless that was lying huddled up beneath the rug.

“What is the matter now?” cried Vassili. “Another scorpion?”

No, it was the same one. It was the estimable lawyer very drunk and fast asleep at the bottom of the sleigh.

On our way back to the hotel, driving through the keen night air, I asked Vassili:

“Who was that man?”

“What man?” said Vassili, who sat opposite to us and was pressing the small feet of Maximoff's wife.

“You know—the man who frightened me.”

“Oh, the Scorpion?” laughed Vassili. “That was Donat Prilukoff.”

When we returned to Kieff I told Bozevsky the adventure of our evening at the Strelna, and described the Scorpion to him with as much humor as I could. But Bozevsky did not laugh. My absence had embittered and exasperated him. He no longer sat beside me with an air of protective fraternal affection. He would not speak of literature or poetry any more. He spent entire evenings making mute scenes of jealousy and despair, while dear Aunt Sonia, instinctively feeling the atmosphere around her charged with electricity, dropped many stitches in her knitting and became sour and irritable.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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