

Tolstoy Leo

The Light Shines in Darkness



Лев Толстой

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Tolstoy Leo, graf

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ACT I

Scene 1

The scene represents the verandah of a fine country-house, in front of which a croquet-lawn and tennis-court are shown, also a flower-bed. The children are playing croquet with their governess. Mary Ivánovna Sarýntsova, a handsome elegant woman of forty; her sister, Alexándra Ivánovna Kóhovtseva, a stupid, determined woman of forty-five; and her husband, Peter Semyónovich, a fat flabby man, dressed in a summer suit, with a pince-nez, are sitting on the verandah at a table with a and coffee-pot. Mary Ivánovna Sarýntsova, Alexándra Ivánovna Kóhovtseva, and Peter Semyónovich Kóhovtsev are drinking coffee, and the latter is smoking.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. If you were not my sister, but a stranger, and Nicholas Ivánovich not your husband, but merely an acquaintance, I should think all this very original, and perhaps I might even encourage him, *J'aurais trouvé tout ça très gentil*;¹ but when I see that *your* husband is playing the fool – yes, simply playing the fool – then I can't help telling you what I think about it. And I shall tell your husband, Nicholas, too. *Je lui dirai son fait, ma chère*.² I am not afraid of anyone.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. I don't feel the least bit hurt; don't I see it all myself? but I don't think it so very important.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. No. You don't think so, but I tell you that, if you let it go on, you will be beggared. *Du train que cela va ...*³

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Come! Beggared indeed! Not with an income like theirs.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, beggared! And please don't interrupt me, my dear! Anything a *man* does always seems right to you!

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Oh! I don't know. I was saying —

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But you never do know what you are saying, because when you men begin playing the fool, *il n'y a pas de raison que ça finisse*.⁴ I am only saying that if I were in your place, I should not allow it. *J'aurais mis bon ordre à toutes ces lubies*.⁵ What does it all mean? A husband, the head of a family, has no occupation, abandons everything, gives everything away, *et fait le généreux à droite et à gauche*.⁶ I know how it will end! *Nous en savons quelque chose*.⁷

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH [to Mary Ivánovna]. But do explain to me, Mary, what is this new movement? Of course I understand Liberalism, County Councils, the Constitution, schools, reading-rooms, and *tout ce qui s'en suit*;⁸ as well as Socialism, strikes, and an eight-hour day; but what is this? Explain it to me.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. But he told you about it yesterday.

¹ I should have considered it all very pretty.

² I will tell him the plain fact, my dear.

³ At the rate things are going.

⁴ There is no reason for it to stop.

⁵ I should put an end to all these fads

⁶ And plays the bountiful left and right.

⁷ We know something about it.

⁸ All the rest of it.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. I confess I did not understand. The Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount – and that churches are unnecessary! But then how is one to pray, and all that?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. Yes. That is the worst of it. He would destroy everything, and give us nothing in its place.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. How did it begin?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. It began last year, after his sister died. He was very fond of her, and her death had a very great effect on him. He became quite morose, and was always talking about death; and then, you know, he fell ill himself with typhus. When he recovered, he was quite a changed man.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. But, all the same, he came in spring to see us again in Moscow, and was very nice, and played bridge. *Il était très gentil et comme tout le monde.*⁹

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. But, all the same, he was then quite changed.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. In what way?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. He was completely indifferent to his family, and purely and simply had *l'idée fixe*. He read the Gospels for days on end, and did not sleep. He used to get up at night to read, made notes and extracts, and then began going to see bishops and hermits – consulting them about religion.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. And did he fast, or prepare for communion?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. From the time of our marriage – that's twenty years ago – till then he had never fasted nor taken the sacrament, but at that time he did once take the sacrament in a monastery, and then immediately afterwards decided that one should neither take communion nor go to church.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. That's what I say – thoroughly inconsistent!

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. Yes, a month before, he would not miss a single service, and kept every fast-day; and then he suddenly decided that it was all unnecessary. What can one do with such a man?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. I have spoken and will speak to him again.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Yes! But the matter is of no great importance.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. No? Not to you! Because you men have no religion.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Do let me speak. I say that that is not the point. The point is this: if he denies the Church, what does he want the Gospels for?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. Well, so that we should live according to the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount, and give everything away.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. But how is one to live if one gives everything away?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. And where has he found in the Sermon on the Mount that we must shake hands with footmen? It says “Blessed are the meek,” but it says nothing about shaking hands!

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. Yes, of course, he gets carried away, as he always used to. At one time it was music, then shooting, then the school. But that doesn't make it any the easier for me!

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Why has he gone to town to-day?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. He did not tell me, but I know it is about some trees of ours that have been felled. The peasants have been cutting trees in our wood.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. In the pine-tree plantation?

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. Yes, they will probably be sent to prison and ordered to pay for the trees. Their case was to be heard to-day, he told me of it, so I feel certain that is what he has gone about.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNÁ. He will pardon them, and to-morrow they will come to take the trees in the park.

MARY IVÁNOVNÁ. Yes, that is what it leads to. As it is, they break our apple-trees and tread down the green cornfields, and he forgives them everything.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Extraordinary!

⁹ He was very nice, and like everybody else.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. That is just why I say that it must not be allowed to go on. Why, if it goes on like that, *tout y passera*.¹⁰ I think it is your duty as a mother to *prendre tes*.¹¹

MARY IVÁNOVNA. What can I do?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What indeed! Stop him! Explain to him that this cannot go on. You have your children! What sort of an example is it for them?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Of course, it is hard; but I go on bearing it, and hoping it will pass, like his former infatuations.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, but “*Aide toi et Dieu t'aidera!*”¹² You must make him feel that he has not only himself to think of, and that one can't live like that.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. The worst of all is that he no longer troubles about the children, and I have to decide everything myself. I have an unweaned baby, besides the older children: girls and boys, who have to be looked after, and need guidance. And I have to do it all single-handed. He used to be such an affectionate and attentive father, but now he seems no longer to care. Yesterday I told him that Ványa is not studying properly, and will not pass his exam., and he replied that it would be by far the best thing for him to leave school altogether.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. To go where?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Nowhere! That's the most terrible thing about it; everything we do is wrong, but he does not say what would be right.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. That's odd.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What is there odd about it? It is just *your* usual way. Condemn everything, and do nothing yourself!

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Styópa has now finished at the University, and ought to choose a career; but his father says nothing about it. He wanted to take a post in the Civil Service, but Nicholas Ivánovich says he ought not to do so. Then he thought of entering the Horse-Guards, but Nicholas Ivánovich quite disapproved. Then the lad asked his father: “What am I to do then – not go and plough after all?” and Nicholas Ivánovich said: “Why not plough? It is much better than being in a Government Office.” So what was he to do? He comes to me and asks, and I have to decide everything, and yet the authority is all in his hands.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Well, you should tell him so straight out.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. So I must! I shall have to talk to him.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And tell him straight out that you can't go on like this. That you do your duty, and he must do his; or if not – let him hand everything over to you.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. It is all so unpleasant!

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. I will tell him, if you like. *Je lui dirai son fait*.¹³

Enter a young priest, confused and agitated. He carries a book, and shakes hands all round.

PRIEST. I have come to see Nicholas Ivánovich. I have, in fact, come to return a book.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. He has gone to town, but will be back soon.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What book are you returning?

PRIEST. Oh, it's Mr. Renan's *Life of Jesus*.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Dear me! What books you read!

PRIEST [*much agitated, lights a cigarette*] It was Nicholas Ivánovich gave it to me to read.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA [*contemptuously*] Nicholas Ivánovich gave it you! And do you agree with Nicholas Ivánovich and Mr. Renan?

¹⁰ Everything will be lost.

¹¹ To take measures.

¹² God helps those who help themselves.

¹³ I'll tell him the truth.

PRIEST. No, of course not. If I really did agree, I should not, in fact, be what is called a servant of the Church.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But if you are, as it is called, a faithful servant of the Church, why don't you convert Nicholas Ivánovich?

PRIEST. Everyone, in fact, has his own views on these matters, and Nicholas Ivánovich really maintains much that is quite true, only he goes astray, in fact, on the main point, the Church.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA [*contemptuously*]. And what are the many things that Nicholas Ivánovich maintains that are quite true? Is it true that the Sermon on the Mount bids us give our property away to strangers and let our own families go begging?

PRIEST. The Church, in fact, sanctions the family, and the Holy Fathers of the Church, in fact, blessed the family; but the highest perfection really demands the renunciation of worldly advantages.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Of course the Anchorites acted so, but ordinary mortals, I should imagine, should act in an ordinary way, as befits all good Christians.

PRIEST. No one can tell unto what he may be called.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And, of course, you are married?

PRIEST. Oh yes.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And have you any children?

PRIEST. Two.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Then why don't you renounce worldly advantages, and not go about smoking a cigarette?

PRIEST. Because of my weakness, in fact, my unworthiness.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Ah! I see that instead of bringing Nicholas Ivánovich to reason, you support him. That, I tell you straight out, is wrong!

Enter Nurse.

NURSE. Don't you hear baby crying? Please come to nurse him.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. I'm coming, [*Rises and exit*].

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. I'm dreadfully sorry for my sister. I see how she suffers. Seven children, one of them unweaned, and then all these fads to put up with. It seems to me quite plain that he has something wrong here [*touching her forehead. To Priest*] Now tell me, I ask you, what new religion is this you have discovered?

PRIEST. I don't understand, in fact ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Oh, please don't beat about the bush. You know very well what I am asking you about.

PRIEST. But allow me ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. I ask you, what creed is it that bids us shake hands with every peasant and let them cut down the trees, and give them money for , and abandon our own

PRIEST. I don't know that ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. He says it is Christianity. You are a priest of the Orthodox Greek Church, and therefore you must know and must say whether Christianity bids us encourage robbery.

PRIEST. But I ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Or else, why are you a priest, and why do you wear long hair and a cassock?

PRIEST. But we are not asked ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Not asked, indeed! Why, I am asking you! He told me yesterday that the Gospels say, "Give to him that asketh of thee." But then in what sense is that meant?

PRIEST. In its plain sense, I suppose.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And I think not in the plain sense; we have always been taught that everybody's position is appointed by God.

PRIEST. Of course, but yet ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Oh, yes. It's just as I was told; you take his side, and that is wrong! I say so straight out. If some young school teacher, or some young lad, lickspittles to him, it's bad enough – but you, in your position, should remember the responsibility that rests on you.

PRIEST. I try to ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What sort of religion is it, when he does not go to church, and does not believe in the sacraments? And instead of bringing him to his senses, you read Renan with him, and interpret the Gospels in a way of your own.

PRIEST [*excitedly*] I cannot answer. I am, in fact, upset, and will hold my tongue.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Oh! If only I were your Bishop; I'd teach you to read Renan and smoke cigarettes.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. *Mais cessez, au nom du ciel. De quel droit?*¹⁴

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Please don't teach me. I am sure the Reverend Father is not angry with me. What if I have spoken plainly. It would have been worse had I bottled up my anger. Isn't that so?

PRIEST. Forgive me if I have not expressed myself as I should. [*Uncomfortable pause*].

Enter Lyúba and Lisa. Lyúba, Mary Ivánovna's daughter, is a handsome energetic girl of twenty. Lisa, Alexándra Ivánovna's daughter, is a little older. Both have kerchiefs on their heads, and are carrying baskets, to go gathering mushrooms. They greet Alexándra Ivánovna, Peter Semyónovich, and the priest.

LYÚBA. Where is Mamma?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Just gone to the baby.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Now mind you bring back plenty of mushrooms. A little village girl brought some lovely white ones this morning. I'd go with you myself, but it's too hot.

LISA. Do come, Papa!

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, go, for you are getting too fat.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Well, perhaps I will, but I must first fetch some cigarettes. [*Exit*].

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Where are all the young ones?

LYÚBA. Styópa is cycling to the station, the tutor has gone to town with papa. The little ones are playing croquet, and Ványa is out there in the porch, playing with the dogs.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Well, has Styópa decided on anything?

LYÚBA. Yes. He has gone himself to hand in his application to enter the Horse-Guards. He was horribly rude to papa yesterday.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Of course, it's hard on him too... *Il n'y a pas de patience qui tienne.*¹⁵ The young man must begin to live, and he is told to go and plough!

LYÚBA. That's not what papa told him; he said ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Never mind. Still Styópa must begin life, and whatever he proposes, it's all objected to. But here he is himself.

The Priest steps aside, opens a book, and begins to read. Enter Styópa cycling towards the verandah.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. *Quand on parle du soleil on en voit les rayons.*¹⁶ We were just talking about you. Lyúba says you were rude to your father.

STYÓPA. Not at all. There was nothing particular. He gave me his opinion, and I gave him mine. It is not my fault that our views differ. Lyúba, you know, understands nothing, but must have her say about everything.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Well, and what have you decided on?

¹⁴ But do stop, for heaven's sake. What right have you?

¹⁵ There are limits to human endurance.

¹⁶ Speak of the sun and you see its rays.

STYÓPA. I don't know what Papa has decided. I'm afraid he does not quite know himself; but as for me, I have decided to volunteer for the Horse-Guards. In our house some special objection is made to every step that is taken; but this is all quite simple. I have finished my studies, and must serve my time. To enter a line regiment and serve with tipsy low-class officers would be unpleasant, and so I'm entering the Horse-Guards, where I have friends.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes; but why won't your father agree to it?

STYÓPA. Papa! What is the good of talking about him? He is now possessed by his *idée fixe*.¹⁷ He sees nothing but what he wants to see. He says military service is the basest kind of employment, and that therefore one should not serve, and so he won't give me any money.

LISA. No! Styópa. He did not say that! You know I was present. He says that if you cannot avoid serving, you should go when you are called; but that to volunteer, is to choose that kind of service of your own free will.

STYÓPA. But it's I, not he, who is going to serve. He himself was in the army!

LISA. Yes, but he does not exactly say that he will not give you the money; but that he cannot take part in an affair that is contrary to his convictions.

STYÓPA. Convictions have nothing to do with it. One must serve – and that's all!

LISA. I only say what I heard.

STYÓPA. I know you always agree with Papa. Do you know, Aunt, that Lisa takes Papa's side entirely in everything?

LISA. What is true ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Don't I know that Lisa always takes up with any kind of nonsense. She scents nonsense. *Elle flaire cela de loin*.¹⁸

Enter Ványa running in with a telegram in his hand, followed by the dogs. He wears a red shirt.

VÁNYA [to Lyúba]. Guess who is coming?

LYÚBA. What's the use of guessing? Give it here [*stretching towards him. Ványa does not let her have the telegram*].

VÁNYA. I'll not give it you, and I won't say who it is from. It's someone who makes you blush!

LYÚBA. Nonsense! Who is the telegram from?

VÁNYA. There, you're blushing! Aunty, she is blushing, isn't she?

LYÚBA. What nonsense! Who is it from? Aunty, who is it from?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. The Cheremshánovs.

LYÚBA. Ah!

VÁNYA. There you are! Why are you blushing?

LYÚBA. Let me see the telegram, Aunt. [*Reads*] “Arriving all three by the mail train. Cheremshánovs.” That means the Princess, Borís, and Tónya. Well, I am glad!

VÁNYA. There you are, you're glad! Styópa, look how she is blushing.

STYÓPA. That's enough – teasing over and over again.

VÁNYA. Of course, because you're sweet on Tónya! You'd better cast lots; for two men must not marry one another's sisters.¹⁹

STYÓPA. Don't humbug! Shut up! How often have you been told to?

LISA. If they are coming by the mail train, they will be here directly.

LYÚBA. That's true, so we can't go for mushrooms.

Enter Peter Semyónovich with his cigarettes.

LYÚBA. Uncle Peter, we are not going!

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Why not?

¹⁷ Fixed idea.

¹⁸ She scents it from afar.

¹⁹ In Russia the relationships that are set up by marriage debar a marriage between a woman's brother-in-law and her sister.

LYÚBA. The Cheremshánovs are coming directly. Better let's play tennis till they come. Styópa, will you play?

STYÓPA. I may as well.

LYÚBA. Ványa and I against you and Lisa. Agreed? Then I'll get the balls and call the boys. [Exit].

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. So I'm to stay here after all!

PRIEST [*preparing to go*]. My respects to you.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. No, wait a bit, Father. I want to have a talk with you. Besides, Nicholas Ivánovich will be here directly.

PRIEST [*sits down, and lights another cigarette*]. He may be a long time.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. There, someone is coming. I expect it's he.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Which Cheremshánova is it? Can it be Golitzin's daughter?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, of course. It's the Cheremshánova who lived in Rome with her aunt.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Dear me, I shall be glad to see her. I have not met her since those days in Rome when she used to sing duets with me. She sang beautifully. She has two children, has she not?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, they are coming too.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. I did not know that they were so intimate with the Sarýntsovs.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Not intimate, but they lodged together abroad last year, and I believe that *la princesse a des vues sur Lyúba pour son fils. C'est une fine mouche, elle flaire une jolie dot.*²⁰

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. But the Cheremshánovs themselves were rich.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. They *were*. The prince is still living, but he has squandered everything, drinks, and has quite gone to the dogs. She petitioned the Emperor, left her husband, and so managed to save a few scraps. But she has given her children a splendid education. *Il faut lui rendre cette justice.*²¹ The daughter is an admirable musician; and the son has finished the University, and is charming. Only I don't think Mary is quite pleased. Visitors are inconvenient just now. Ah! here comes Nicholas.

Enter Nicholas Ivánovich.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. How d'you do, Alína; and²² you, Peter Semyónovich. [*To the Priest*] Ah! Vasíly Nikanórych. [*Shakes hands with them*].

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. There is still some coffee left. Shall I give you a cup? It's rather cold, but can easily be warmed up. [*Rings*].

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. No, thank you. I have had something. Where is Mary?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Feeding Baby.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Is she quite well?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Pretty well. Have you done your business?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. I have. Yes. If there is any tea or coffee left, I will have some. [*To Priest*] Ah! you've brought the book back. Have you read it? I've been thinking about you all the way home.

Enter man-servant, who bows. Nicholas Ivánovich shakes hands with him. Alexándra Ivánovna shrugs her shoulders, exchanging glances with her husband.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Re-heat the , please.

²⁰ The princess has her eye on Lyúba for her son. She is a knowing one, and scents a nice dowry

²¹ One must do her that much justice.

²² Alína is an abbreviation, and a pet name, for Alexándra.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. That's not necessary, Alína. I don't really want any, and I'll drink it as it is.

Missy, on seeing her father, leaves her croquet, runs to him, and hangs round his neck.

MISSY. Papa! Come with me.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH [*caressing her*]. Yes, I'll come directly. Just let me eat something first. Go and play, and I'll soon come.

Exit Missy.

Nicholas Ivánovich sits down to the table, and eats and drinks eagerly.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Well, were they sentenced?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Yes! They were. They themselves pleaded guilty. [*To Priest*] I thought you would not find Renan very convincing ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And you did not approve of the verdict?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH [*vexed*]. Of course I don't approve of it. [*To Priest*] The main question for you is not Christ's divinity, or the history of Christianity, but the Church ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Then how was it? *They* confessed their guilt, *et vous leur avez donné un démenti?*²³ They did not steal them – but only took the wood?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH [*who had begun talking to the priest, turns resolutely to Alexándra Ivánovna*]. Alína, my dear, do not pursue me with pinpricks and insinuations.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But not at all ...

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. And if you really want to know why I can't prosecute the peasants about the wood they needed and cut down ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. I should think they also need this .

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Well, if you want me to tell you why I can't agree with those people being shut up in prison, and being totally ruined, because they cut down ten trees in a forest which is considered to be mine ...

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Considered so by everybody.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Oh dear! Disputing again.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Even if I considered that forest mine, which I cannot do, we have 3000 acres of forest, with about 150 trees to the acre. In all, about 450,000 trees – is that correct? Well, they have cut down ten trees – that is, one 45-thousandth part. Now is it worth while, and can one really decide, to tear a man away from his family and put him in prison for that?

STYÓPA. Ah! but if you don't hold on to this one 45-thousandth, all the other trees will very soon be cut down also.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. But I only said *that* in answer to your aunt. In reality I have no right to this forest. Land belongs to everyone; or rather, it can't belong to anyone. We have never put any labour into this land.

STYÓPA. No, but you saved money and preserved this forest.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. How did I get my savings? What enabled me to save up? And I didn't preserve the forest myself! However, this is a matter which can't be proved to anyone who does not himself feel ashamed when he strikes at another man —

STYÓPA. But no one is striking anybody!

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Just as when a man feels no shame at taking toll from others' labour without doing any work himself, you cannot prove to him that he ought to be ashamed; and the object of all the Political Economy you learnt at the University is merely to justify the false position in which we live.

STYÓPA. On the contrary; science destroys all prejudices.

²³ And you contradicted them.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. However, all this is of no importance to me. What is important is that in Yefím's²⁴ place I should have acted as he did, and I should have been desperate had I been imprisoned. And as I wish to do to others as I wish them to do to me – I cannot condemn him, but do what I can to save him.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. But, if one goes on that line, one cannot possess anything.

Alexándra Ivánovna and Styópa —

*Both speak
together*

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Then it is much more profitable to steal than to work.

STYÓPA. You never reply to one's arguments. I say that a man who saves, has a right to enjoy his savings.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH [*smiling*] I don't know which I am to reply to. [*To Peter Semyónovich*] It's true. One should not possess anything.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But if one should not possess anything, one can't have any clothes, nor even a crust of bread, but must give away everything, so that it's impossible to live.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. And it should be impossible to live as we do!

STYÓPA. In other words, we must die! Therefore, that teaching is unfit for life...

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. No. It is given just that men may live. Yes. One should give everything away. Not only the forest we do not use and hardly ever see, but even our clothes and our bread.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What! And the children's too?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Yes, the children's too. And not only our bread, but ourselves. Therein lies the whole teaching of Christ. One must strive with one's whole strength to give oneself away.

STYÓPA. That means to die.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Yes, even if you gave your life for your friends, that would be splendid both for you and for others. But the fact is that man is not solely a spirit, but a spirit within a body; and the flesh draws him to live for itself, while the spirit of light draws him to live for God and for others: and the life in each of us is not solely animal, but is equipoised between the two. But the more it is a life for God, the better; and the animal will not fail to take care of itself.

STYÓPA. Why choose a middle course: an equipoise between the two? If it is right to do so – why not give away everything and die?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. That would be splendid. Try to do it, and it will be well both for you and for others.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. No, that is not clear, not simple. *C'est tiré par les cheveux*.²⁵

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Well, I can't help it, and it can't be explained by argument. However, that is enough.

STYÓPA. Yes, quite enough, and I also don't understand it. [*Exit*].

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH [*turns to Priest*] Well, what impression did the book make on you?

PRIEST [*agitated*] How shall I put it? Well, the historic part is insufficiently worked out, and it is not fully convincing, or let us say, quite reliable; because the materials are, as a matter of fact, insufficient. Neither the Divinity of Christ, nor His lack of Divinity, can be proved historically; there is but one proof...

During this conversation first the ladies and then Peter Semyónovich go out.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. You mean the Church?

PRIEST. Well, of course, the Church, and the evidence, let's say, of reliable men – the Saints for instance.

²⁴ Yefím was the peasant who had cut down the tree.

²⁵ It's too fine spun.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Of course, it would be excellent if there existed a set of infallible people to confide in. It would be very desirable; but its desirability does not prove that they exist!

PRIEST. And I believe that just *that is* the proof. The Lord could not in fact have exposed His law to the possibility of mutilation or misinterpretation, but must in fact have left a guardian of His truth to prevent that truth being mutilated.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Very well; but we first tried to prove the truth itself, and now we are trying to prove the reliability of the guardian of the truth.

PRIEST. Well here, as a matter of fact, we require faith.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Faith – yes, we need faith. We can't do without faith. Not, however, faith in what other people tell us, but faith in what we arrive at ourselves, by our own thought, our own reason ... faith in God, and in true and everlasting life.

PRIEST. Reason may deceive. Each of us has a different mind.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH [*hotly*] There, that is the most terrible blasphemy! God has given us just one sacred tool for finding the truth – the only thing that can unite us all, and we do not trust it!

PRIEST. How can we trust in it, when there are.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Where are the contradictions? That twice two are four; and that one should not do to others what one would not like oneself; and that everything has a cause? Truths of that kind we all acknowledge because they accord with all our reason. But that God appeared on Mount Sinai to Moses, or that Buddha flew up on a sunbeam, or that Mahomet went up into the sky, and that Christ flew there also – on matters of that kind we are all at variance.

PRIEST. No, we are not at variance, those of us who abide in the truth are all united in one faith in God, Christ.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. No, even there, you are not united, but have all gone asunder; so why should I believe you rather than I would believe a Buddhist Lama? Only because I happened to be born in your faith?

[*The tennis players dispute*] “Out!” “Not out!”

VÁNYA. I saw it ...:

During the conversation, men-servants set the table again for tea and coffee.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. You say the Church unites. But, on the contrary, the worst dissensions have always been caused by the Church. “How often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chickens.” ...

PRIEST. That was until Christ. But Christ did gather them all together.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Yes, Christ united; but we have divided: because we have understood him the wrong way round. He destroyed all Churches.

PRIEST. Did he not say: “Go, tell the Church.”

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. It is not a question of words! Besides those words don't refer to what we call “Church.” It is the spirit of the teaching that matters. Christ's teaching is universal, and includes all religions, and does not admit of anything exclusive; neither of the Resurrection nor the Divinity of Christ, nor the Sacraments – nor of anything that divides.

PRIEST. That, as a matter of fact, if I may say so, is your own interpretation of Christ's teaching. But Christ's teaching is all founded on His Divinity and Resurrection.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. That's what is so dreadful about the Churches. They divide by declaring that they possess the full indubitable and infallible truth. They say: “It has pleased us and the Holy Ghost.” That began at the time of the first Council of the Apostles. They then began to maintain that they had the full and *exclusive* truth. You see, if I say there is a God: the first cause of the Universe, everyone can agree with me; and *such* an acknowledgment of God will unite us; but if I say there is a God: Brahma, or Jehovah, or a Trinity, such a God divides us. Men wish to unite, and to that end devise all means of union, but neglect the one indubitable means of union – the search for truth! It is as if people in an enormous building, where the light from above shone down into the

centre, tried to unite in groups around lamps in different corners, instead of going towards the central light, where they would naturally all be united.

PRIEST. And how are the people to be guided – without any really definite truth?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. That's what is terrible! Each *one* of us has to save *his own* soul, and has to do God's work *himself*, but instead of that we busy ourselves saving *other people* and teaching *them*. And what do we teach them? We teach them now, at the end of the nineteenth century, that God created the world in six days, then caused a flood, and put all the animals in an ark, and all the rest of the horrors and nonsense of the Old Testament. And then that Christ ordered everyone to be baptized with water; and we make them believe in all the absurdity and meanness of an Atonement essential to salvation; and then that he rose up into the heavens which do not really exist, and there sat down at the right hand of the Father. We have got used to all this, but really it is dreadful! A child, fresh and ready to receive all that is good and true, asks us what the world is, and what its laws are; and we, instead of revealing to him the teaching of love and truth that has been given to us, carefully ram into his head all sorts of horrible absurdities and meannesses, ascribing them all to God. Is that not terrible? It is as great a crime as man can commit. And we – you and your Church – do this! Forgive me!

PRIEST. Yes, if one looks at Christ's teaching from a rationalistic point of view, it is so.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Whichever way one looks, it is so. [*Pause*].

Enter Alexándra Ivánovna. Priest bows to take his leave.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Good-bye, Father. He will lead you astray. Don't you listen to him.

PRIEST. No. Search the Scriptures! The matter is too important, as a matter of fact, to be – let's say – neglected. [*Exit*].

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Really, Nicholas, you have no pity on him! Though he is a priest, he is still only a boy, and can have no firm convictions or settled views...

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Give him time to settle down and petrify in falsehood? No! Why should I? Besides, he is a good, sincere man.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But what will become of him if he believes you?

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. He need not believe *me*. But if he saw the truth, it would be well for him and for everybody.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. If it were really so good, everyone would be ready to believe you. As it is, no one believes you, and your wife least of all. She *can't* believe you.

NICHOLAS IVÁNOVICH. Who told you that?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Well, just you try and explain it to her! She will never understand, nor shall I, nor anyone else in the world, that one must care for other people and abandon one's own children. Go and try to explain that to Mary!

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