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Peasant Tales of Russia



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THE DESERTED MINE

I

At the entrance of the Voskressensky mine stood a group of miners. All were quite silent.

It was still dark, for the autumn days begin late. Heavy grey clouds glided slowly over the sky, in which the first streaks of dawn were hardly visible. These clouds glided so low that they seemed to wish to lie on the earth in order to hide this black hole, this well-like orifice which was about to swallow up the miners one by one. The air was saturated with a cloud of damp dust, particles of which fell on the men's hair and faces. The miners wore leather jerkins, and small lamps, whose light flickered fitfully, hung at their belts. An imaginative person might have thought that they trembled with fear at having to descend into the heavy dense darkness of the mine.

"Listen, old man! You can never go down alone," said the

young overseer to an old miner who was of tall stature, thin and withered. His long grey beard fell in disarray over his hollow chest, and his breath came and went with a thin whistling sound, as though the damp air of this dark morning found as much difficulty in entering as in leaving it. The features of the old miner's face were strongly marked, and his two black eyes burned in the depths of their sockets with a brilliant, almost fantastic light. This death's-head seemed almost buried from sight between two very high shoulders. When he walked, his back was arched, and his whole long body leaned forward, so that he seemed to be looking for something he had lost, or to be picking his steps very carefully. His feeble arms hung languidly by his side, and his legs tottered and gave way every moment under the weight of his body, slight as it was.

"You will never be able to descend the ladders! We will put you into the basket! Hullo! you fellows over there, come and help to start old Ivan!" the overseer called to the rest.

"Here we are, Father Ivan!" they cried, saying to each other jocosely, "Fancy his wishing to go down the ladders with us!"

The old miner turned towards them. It was a long time ago since he had been born in a mine about five versts distant which had been subsequently closed. His mother, who had lost her husband by the falling-in of one of the mine-galleries, continued to work in the same gallery after it had been repaired. Ivan had been born in the eternal darkness. His first cry had been drowned by the noise of blasting rocks, his first glance met nothing but

the gloom of the subterranean gallery. He was hoisted to the surface of the ground in a large bucket full of ore. All the first impressions of his sad childhood were intimately connected with the mine where his mother, who was obliged to earn her living, always worked. As she had no one to whom to entrust the child, she took him with her, and he remained lying beside her, fixing his wide-open eyes on his mother's flickering lamp, while he sucked at his milk-bottle. It was this black hole which echoed to his laughter and his crying, especially to the latter. His mother, who was naturally taciturn, had scarcely time to caress her child, for she would have had to quit her work; when she heard the little one's sobs, she redoubled the blows of her pickaxe against the dark mass of coal, as though she wished by the noise they made to drown the feeble wailing of the infant.

It was in this mine that he grew and made his first experiments in walking; later on he began to explore, first the narrow passage where his mother worked at her daily task, then venturing into the other galleries of this subterranean kingdom. As his mind developed, a whole world of phantoms created by his imagination rose around him. All these masses of black earth with their blocks of metal, which had slumbered for centuries in the depths, seemed to him living beings, and all the mysterious muffled sounds which came one knew not whence, sounded in his ears like the groans of victims imprisoned by evil genii in gloomy caves. For him the water which filtered through the walls of the mine was a shower of tears, and that which trickled, yellow

of tint, across the ore resembled flowing blood. The darkness was constantly traversed by vague and ever new apparitions, vanishing as soon as they appeared, which nevertheless left a trace of their passage on the child's impressionable mind.

When a miner's song reached him, deadened by distance, it seemed to him to issue from the depths of the rocks. By dint of practice, his sense of hearing had acquired a fine subtlety, and sometimes putting his ear to the rugged walls, he listened with so much attention that he could catch the faintest unknown and inexplicable sounds. It was perhaps only the wrathful murmur of some imprisoned spring, but for Ivan it was the groan of a human being struggling in his dungeon. All the objects round him – the ore, the rocks, the water – were animated with a life visible and comprehensible to him alone. These things were not for him, simple parts of inanimate nature, but creatures with souls, full of life, similar to himself, watching and listening to him as he watched and listened to them.

Later on he made friends with an old man. He was a miner of a somewhat sombre disposition, but his eyes always grew moist when the child ran towards him. He would lay his wrinkled hand, hard as iron, tenderly on the head of the little one, and, as he rested, tell him how one day our Lord Jesus Christ had descended to the depths of this subterranean kingdom, and since then remained there with the miners. "Jesus is in the midst of us, I tell you," the old man would say dreamily, peering intently into the darkness, as though his half-blind eyes could really

distinguish the divine Saviour there. As long as he was a child, Ivan saw Him also, and seeing Him feared Him, because he knew that Jesus does not love evil deeds and dark thoughts. Jesus is everywhere at once; He has thousands of eyes at His disposal; He sees and knows the slightest movements of men's hearts.

One day when the child was sitting on the old miner's knees, they heard far off in the direction where Ivan's mother was working a dull shock – a noise like a sigh escaping from the breast of Mother Earth herself. The shock re-echoed in all the mine-shafts and smallest recesses of all the galleries. The earth fell in in several places.

"Save us, Lord!" cried the old man, rising quickly. "Pray to God, little one. A child's prayer avails much with Him."

Little Ivan knelt down, and prayed without knowing why or for what. All his prayer consisted in repeating, "Kind Jesus!.. Good Jesus!.. Dear old Jesus!" Since for him goodness was personified in the old miner, and as on the other hand Jesus was the very incarnation of goodness, it followed that Jesus must be old, very old. It was thus that the child imagined Him, and under this aspect that he sometimes saw Him standing in the darkness of the mine.

The subterranean shocks re-echoed to a great distance and did not cease till they passed beyond the boundaries of the mine. Then only a vague vibration remained in the air like the presentiment of a great calamity. The old miner turned in the direction where Ivan's mother had been working. He walked

with uncertain steps and then returned hesitatingly towards the child. When they reached the gallery they found it narrower and contracted above where the earth had sunk. Presently they came to a point where it shrank to a narrow hole. The old man and the child crawled through it with difficulty. Soon, fortunately, they could stand upright. A few steps more and the old man abruptly fell on his knees.

The place where Ivan's mother had been working no longer existed. The child and the old man were confronted by a huge mass of damp earth. Its dampness was constantly increasing, for it was traversed by a thread of water from a spring which had suddenly been liberated, one knew not how, from its long imprisonment. From underneath this damp mass projected the feet of Ivan's mother. The child rushed forward, seized the coarse boots which she wore and tugged at them, but in vain; the earth which lay on his mother guarded its prey well.

"Maria! Maria!" cried the old miner in a despairing voice.

There was no reply. The feet in their coarse boots, feebly lighted by the little lamp, remained motionless.

When Ivan grew up and became a miner in his turn his surroundings changed their aspect in his eyes and became inanimate. The springs and the metals, these bondslaves of the earth, no longer possessed a soul for him. The dark rocks, when his pickaxe laid their sides open, were as inanimate as the damp masses of ore. Jesus also, Whom he saw so clearly in his childhood, had disappeared from the time that they had

abandoned the old mine for another one. But the impressions made on him in childhood remained hidden and shut up in the profoundest depth of Ivan's heart, resembling in this the hidden springs in the heart of the rock. Later on, under the inexorable pressure of time when Ivan had become old, these impressions rose again to the surface, and he found himself once more surrounded by vague apparitions and mysterious murmurs. Only Jesus remained absent, though the fixed gaze of the old Ivan searched for Him perseveringly in the darkness of the subterranean kingdom.

II

"Well, old man, get in!" said the miners. The moving windlass brought to the mouth of the shaft the bucket in which the ore was brought up. The rusty iron chain unrolled slowly with a harsh grating sound. Below the darkness was so dense that one could not even perceive the reflection of water which is always visible at the bottom of the deepest wells. Ivan squatted down in the bucket.

"Now, in the name of God! you will turn round a bit, old man."

"It won't hurt him to swing a little," said others jokingly.

"Look, you fellows, we will get him down in the twinkling of an eye."

The windlass creaked, the rusty chain groaned plaintively, and the bucket began to descend by jerks, knocking against the wooden lining of the shaft with a metallic echo. Ivan raised his eyes; above him the pit-mouth looked like a greyish patch, round him was impenetrable darkness. The bucket turned with the chain and descended slowly. The little lamp fastened to his waist cast trembling gleams on the damp walls, and its light flickered timidly, hardly making visible the drops of water which trickled across the wooden lining of the shaft; in fact it seemed on the point of going out. Any one unused to such a descent would at once have become giddy, but to old Ivan it seemed a mere trifle. How often already he had thus descended and come up!

The walls of the shaft became more and more damp. Above, the grey patch shrank and shrank. It seemed as though the day staring fixedly into the darkness of the pit gradually closed its grey eye, baffled at its depth.

"Yes, this shaft is very old," thought the miner to himself; "I remember the day it was sunk, and it must be quite sixty years ago, if I recollect right. It is quite time to repair the lining; the wood has decayed till it is black. I wonder how it can still hold together. Jesus must certainly be watching over us. I am getting old too; they say I am eighty-four. It is a lucky thing that they don't dismiss me, and only give me easy work; otherwise I should starve, or at any rate be obliged to beg."

Thoughts of all kinds passed through the old man's head. He was accustomed to think much but never spoke. It was a long time since any one had heard the sound of his voice, and it was thought that he had forgotten how to speak because he had always lived surrounded by the silence of the mine. The fact was that, hearing nothing but the sound of his pickaxe, the noise of the ore being crushed, etc., he had lost the habit of replying to questions. When any one spoke to him, he quickly removed his leather cap, and answered by a bow so low that one could see the top of his head adorned only by two locks of yellow hair. People finished by leaving him in peace.

No one went so far as to ridicule him. He was, so to speak, one of the curiosities of the mine, for it was known that he had been present at its opening. The proprietors of the mine knew

that in former days he was always the first to go down, and that it was he who had loosened the first yellow block from which the first piece of copper had been extracted. All his contemporaries who were not dead had grown old around him, and he himself, decrepit and bent, was still alive and even worked, as far as his strength permitted.

"Old Ivan is a true miner; he was born in a gallery of the old mine," the workmen often said to one another. They had forgotten for a long time past where the old worked-out mine which had been abandoned sixty years ago was situated. His disuse of speech only augmented the respect they felt for him. Some even thought that his silence was in consequence of a vow. "He is Ivan the Silent," they would say. "Disbelieve it if you like, but it is quite ten years since he has been silent."

Meanwhile the bucket suspended from the chain which rattled remorselessly continued to descend. The greyish patch of the orifice was no more visible at all, and its last vague glimmer had been swallowed up in the damp cold darkness of the pit. The wooden lining had come to an end, and the walls were formed of strata of different metals. On one hand the sides and sharp edges of a great black stone projected, on the other was damp mud encrusted with fragments of rock. Then the pale light of the little lamp glided windingly over the rounded outlines of flint fossils. It then zigzagged over a layer of brilliant white mineral, which was soon succeeded by another of mud.

Through all – the earth, the flints, the edges of rent rocks –

there trickled innumerable water-drops. Was it the blood of the earth escaping from a deep wound? Or was it shedding tears over the hard lot of hundreds of men shut up in the eternal darkness of its mysterious kingdom?

The tears fell thickly, one by one, forming threads of water, which in their turn formed rivulets. Now the old man heard something else beside the creaking of the rusted chain, every link of which seemed to be complaining of extreme weariness, the result of long service. His ear, accustomed to silence, caught the murmur of rivulets, and the noise of water-drops, falling one by one, resembling the sound of grains of lead falling on stone. Here is a spring which has escaped from its narrow prison in the heart of the mountain and which forms a wide stream, but which, finding on its escape from its long bondage only darkness as deep as that of its prison, seems to moan as it glides over the damp stones.

The bucket continued its descent. He could no longer see above or below him and the journey appeared interminable. The light of the little lamp, which had nearly gone out, grew suddenly brighter. Around him innumerable springs were trickling, running and descending on all sides. Here and there uniting in large streams, they came down in cascades, splashing Ivan's clothes. The darkness was full of the babbling, rushing and noise of this water.

The old man knew that for sixty years it had been ceaselessly undermining this shaft. Long ago, when he first went down

it, only a few drops of water used to filter through its sides. Later on these became more numerous, and collecting together, finished by channelling for themselves convenient passages and by flowing in streams. By this time the work of destruction had become more and more threatening and the earth was everywhere like a sponge. It seemed as though the springs imprisoned in the mountain had found out the existence of this shaft and had united to flow into it.

"They will certainly end by flooding the shaft," thought the old man. "What is to be done? One can only hope in God. As long as He wills, the shaft will exist, but as soon as He does not will it, it will be destroyed from top to bottom."

Formerly the shaft was supported by the rocks, but the water had succeeded in undermining them, sometimes by infiltration underneath them, sometimes by dislodging them from their places and making them lose their equilibrium; some of them projected through the walls of the shaft and their sides were black with moisture. Presently these undermined rocks would collapse, dragging down in their fall all the surrounding earth. What a disaster it would be. The miners would be buried alive like earth-worms. Only their feet would be visible, thought the old man, as had been the case with his mother. "Entombed by the will of God." It would be no use digging and trying to reach them; they would be too far down; the shaft was three hundred fathoms deep and the whole mine was dangerous. The walls of its galleries were as thin as those of a bee-hive. So much ore had been extracted

from it that entire caves had been formed in the spongy earth. Whenever the shaft should collapse, the walls of the galleries would not hold out any more, the whole mine would fall in, and nothing would be left but an enormous cavity to show the curious sightseer.

The old man regarded the prospect of such a collapse calmly, for to die in a mine seemed to him quite natural as he had been born there. He would have found it strange if his sad existence had ended on the surface of the ground; on the other hand a death down here seemed quite simple and natural. Here he felt at home. He remembered how when seized with illness on one occasion, before he had become old, he had not even ascended to the surface, but remained in the gallery where he worked all the time, his comrades bringing him food. He had often passed the night in his gallery stretched on comparatively soft ground. In old times he had been often seized with a desire to ascend, to see again the sun and the starry nights, but all that was now far away. Now he felt at home here in this darkness where it was so warm and so comfortable, that, but for the dampness, one would like to remain there always!

The water kept on coming down in resonant cascades. But in spite of this, the old man distinctly heard not far off the blows of the miners' innumerable pickaxes, the dull echoes of explosions in distant galleries, and vague human noises. Here and there in the walls of the shaft one saw black holes, once the entrances to ancient galleries which had long ago been exhausted of their ore

and abandoned.

The miners were now working in another stratum. But the old Ivan had not forgotten these ancient galleries, for he had left in each of them a little of his strength, and each of them had been moistened by his perspiration. He rose and looked downwards, the flickerings of little lamps like his own were visible, and vague sounds came up to him. The gleam of water was also to be seen, for the bottom of the shaft was entirely flooded. Pumps were no longer of any use to expel the water, for pump as one might, the water kept pouring in. However, they had to keep on pumping, for if they stopped, even for an hour, the whole mine would have been flooded and the water would have rapidly penetrated all the galleries, drowning the miners who were working in them.

"Earth and water – both are in the hands of God," said the miner to himself.

The rusty chain ceased to unwind and the bucket stopped its descent half-submerged in the water which covered the bottom of the shaft. The miners ran up from all sides, holding their little lamps. "See who comes!" they said with a laugh. "Good day, father!" They laid a plank for him and helped him to get out. Then, as he always did, he removed his cap and made a low bow to the miners, showing his bald head.

Numerous galleries diverged from this point in all directions, and their darkness was pierced by little lights which ran hither and thither. Sounds of voices were heard clearly as well as the noise of subterranean explosions, but all other sounds were

dominated by the roar of the waters.

The old man re-lighted his little lamp, which had gone out, and stooping forward, as though he were examining some mysterious footprints, he went towards his gallery with unsteady steps.

III

The gallery in which the old man worked was fairly high. Here and there beams sustaining the roof were visible, but their decrepit condition testified to their age. Above these worm-eaten beams, the earth formed protuberances bristling with pointed rocks. The ground was strewn with fragments of rock which had fallen from the roof.

Old Ivan remembered having seen one day one of these fragments kill as it fell a little boy who had been a great pet of his. This little boy generally accompanied his father, and his gay bursts of careless laughter animated a little the sepulchral silence of the mine. It seemed but yesterday that the old man had seen the child running merrily along the gallery. All at once a misshapen block protruded from the roof. The child stopped, out of curiosity, raised his clear eyes to see what it was, and the huge stone suddenly dropped, burying and crushing him entirely. His father was in utter despair and the other miners could not restrain their tears; as for Ivan, he persisted in prowling for a long time round the great black stone, as though he were expecting to hear from under the enormous block the well-known laugh of the little one. But nothing came to awaken the melancholy silence of the gallery.

The old man now halted near this murderous rock and held his lamp near it, lighting up the indistinct outlines of a cross rudely

engraved in the stone. After looking round, as though he were afraid of being seen, he rapidly made the sign of the cross above the "tomb." If the miners had been able to watch him just then, they would have been astonished to his perpetually closed lips moving. But no one could have said whether he only wished to speak or actually spoke, for none but himself heard the vague murmur which issued from his lips.

On his left hand there was an extremely narrow passage; the old man entered it, crawled through it, and stood upright again, for he had reached the place where he worked, which was fairly roomy. However, although one could stand upright in it, the place had a sepulchral aspect.

The old man raised his lamp, whose tiny gleam lit up for a moment the black walls discoloured by stains of yellowish rust. Here it was almost dry and the light of the lamp revealed no moisture. Little irregular heaps of ore dotted the ground. However, there was one damp corner, and in it grew thickly together a little group of mushrooms with little flat hoods of a sickly white colour on stalks which were also white and very slender. The old man took care of them and avoided covering them with any of the earth which he dug out. One day he had even brought to this corner a piece of turf in the midst of which were some field-flowers. But neither the buttercups nor the daisies consented to live without the sun; they gradually died, fading away by stages like consumptives who are deprived of the sun and of its warmth. Only one little flower had a tougher life than

the rest and held out a long time, although it completely lost its colour in the eternal darkness of this tomb. Ivan watched it with curiosity until it also hung its head over its desiccated stalk. Then he had nothing left but the mushrooms and a kind of greyish lichen which spotted the rock at intervals.

To-day old Ivan was very tired; he sat down on a heap of ore, placed his little lamp in a niche of the rock, which was already blackened with smoke, and buried his head in his hands. Not a single echo reached this spot. A melancholy silence reigned in this vault, but the old man was accustomed to it. He for whom the darkness was peopled by mysterious apparitions vanishing as soon as they appeared, heard also strange voices down here. Sometimes it was like the fragment of an incomplete song or a distant call which pierced the silence. At other times, when his pickaxe penetrated deeply the heart of the rock, he fancied he heard a stifled sigh as if the tool had pierced the breast of a living creature. All these vague sounds seemed to him full of significance. Having nothing in common with the world of reality, he lived in fancies and dreams.

Sometimes, after making sure that he had a supply of matches, he put out his lamp, lay on his back on the ground and fixed his wide-open eyes on the darkness. Then it seemed to him that the walls of his black prison expanded indefinitely. The vaulted roof overhead rose to a prodigious height, and he felt himself for the first few moments lost in such a terrible void that his breath seemed to stop. He felt a strange uneasiness mixed with fear, for

in the absolute darkness he seemed suspended alone and without the least support in the immensity of space, and every moment about to fall.

But this lasted only a short time, and the darkness gradually became less dense. First of all the blackness was diversified by spots of light, then by blazing spirals of fire; these then changed into golden circles, which in their turn disappeared in showers of sparks. Then the spots of light assumed all the colours of the rainbow and the fiery spirals shone with a dazzling light, revolving rapidly in the darkness, which, however, was not dispersed by this lightning-like splendour. Then they melted together and rose to giddy heights, appearing up there like glittering mirages. Sometimes the spots of light assumed indistinct shapes which seemed to have transparent wings, while white robes fluttered behind them. Mysterious spirits who shunned the light of the lamp escaped from the black rock bastion and gathered round the old man, leaning over him and gazing intently into his wide-open eyes. At such times he heard a vague rustling around him.

He seemed to feel the breath of the rocks reaching him through invisible fissures. He heard the musical complaint of a spring imprisoned in the rock, or it might be a distant song. His ear caught distinctly harmonious sounds, which sometimes melted together and sometimes followed each other, sporting like butterflies in the field, and he eagerly listened to their ineffable melody. Thus he would pass hours and even entire nights while,

forgotten by his comrades, he remained alone in the enormous mine, alone with his visions and the fantastic echoes of a world unknown and invisible. But to-day these things hardly occupied his mind at all.

The next day was a Saturday, and he had to break as much ore possible and convey it, together with the piles already prepared, to the principal gallery, where the overseer of the mine would take it over. In the evening he would receive his pay, the whole of which he would take to an old woman living in the village. She looked after him, prepared his meagre repasts, mended his clothes, and bought his boots. People said she was his sister, but he felt doubtful about it. He knew that he had passed his childhood far away from her, for while he was always in the mine with his mother, she was growing up in a strange family who took care of her. He never spoke to her. When he entered in the evening he silently placed his money on the table, let his head drop in his hands, and remained sitting in this attitude. When she called him to sit down at table, he rose and obeyed, otherwise he would have remained as he was till the morning, as motionless as a log. When he happened to remain in the mine for the night, his sister was not anxious about it; she knew that he had taken with him a large chunk of bread and a handful of salt; as for water, there was no lack of that in the mine! She knew also that in a corner of the sepulchral vault, where he worked like a mole from morning to night, there was a can of oil, and that he could re-light his lamp whenever it went out.

Ivan stooped down, looked for his pickaxe, found it, and sat down to break pieces from a block of ore which projected from the wall. This ferruginous earth was as hard to break as stone. Ivan worked slowly, sparing his strength because he could not do otherwise; care had been taken to show him a place where the rock was not so hard as elsewhere. Fragments of yellowish earth fell on the ground, and the rays of the little lamp lit up the particles of copper which glittered here and there in the pieces of rock. After two hours' work the pickaxe fell from the old man's hand. Feeling quite exhausted, he squatted down on the ground, cut himself a large slice of bread, sprinkled it plentifully with salt, and began to munch the soft part of it with the remnants of his teeth.

There was in one corner a wheelbarrow light enough for the old man to push it. After having rested, he filled it with ore, and crawled, pushing the barrow in front of him, through the narrow passage which led to the main gallery. At the end of the passage a point of yellow light was visible. This proceeded from the main gallery where a large number of miners worked, and the yellow light was that cast by their lamps. Several times the old man sank exhausted on his stomach on the ground; then after resting a minute or two to recover strength, he began to crawl on again, pushing his load in front of him. The point of light grew larger from moment to moment and soon became a broad luminous disk against which the outline of a miner stood out in sharp relief. A few minutes more and the wheelbarrow issued

from the passage, pushed by the old man, who sank as he did so on the ground.

"Stop a minute! You are tired: let me help you, old man," said a young miner who had finished his work. The old man lifted his head, looked at him for a moment, and sank down again. The younger laid hold of the wheelbarrow, but Ivan took it brusquely from him, and shook his head with an air of disapproval.

"What fly is buzzing in your head, comrade?" several of the other miners said to the young one. "Have you forgotten the old man's habits? You know that he never allows any one to enter his hole, nor to touch his barrow, for he has heaped up riches in it. Since he has worked in the mine, he has found so much gold that he has become a regular Cræsus."

The miners laughed good-naturedly, tapping the old man's shoulder with their horny fingers.

"March on in front, Ivan, and the other one will follow," they said to soothe him.

Instead of answering, Ivan removed his old leather cap and commenced bowing to right and to left as if to give his comrades a good view of his bald head.

"That's enough, old man! Yes, we know your zeal!" said the miners, laughing. "He is quite a child, eh?"

"He has forgotten how to talk," some one remarked.

"Yes, he is an innocent. Ah, my God! What is that?"

In the twinkling of an eye every one was on their feet. It seemed as though the huge mountain was breathing with all

its lungs. The noise came from a distance and drowned all the others. The miners were deafened. Suddenly a gust of wind rushed violently through the gallery, extinguishing nearly all the lamps. Somewhere, one knew not where, rose cries of anguish which were soon lost in an immense uproar. After hurriedly re-lighting their lamps, the miners rushed in the direction of the cries. A gleam of intelligence lit up the eyes of old Ivan as he tottered after them on his feeble legs.

IV

In front of what had been the exit from the gallery the miners stood silent. Others were running up from the more or less distant side galleries; their steps could be heard approaching and their lamps seen.

"What has happened, sir?" they exclaimed in alarm, as they came staring in a stupefied way at the place where a moment before had stood the principal shaft of the mine.

If the vaulted roof of the gallery had resisted the formidable shock of the collapse, it was only because it was part of the solid rock. Already the miners' feet were standing in water which had been liberated by this displacement of masses of earth and flowed into the gallery, reflecting the faint lights of the lamps and the vivid flame of the torch which the overseer of the mine held above his head, while its smoke ascended towards the high black vaulted roof.

"Lost! We are lost!" some one exclaimed in the crowd with a sob.

Old Ivan pushed his way to the front of the crowd. Neither he nor the others noticed that the water was flowing round their ankles. They found themselves confronted by a huge and visibly growing mass, composed of a mixture of stones from the ruined shaft and fragments of timber-work and earth. In the midst of all lay upside-down, the bucket which had become detached from

its chain and carried away.

The overseer held his torch near a mass of earth which had assumed a round shape. It lit up the head of a miner with eyes immensely wide open whose fixed look seemed to be concentrated on the flame of the torch. There was something terrible in the sight of those motionless eyelids, those white teeth gleaming between two torn lips, that deep wound in the temple from which blood was oozing. A little lower down one saw projecting from the earth a hand with wide-extended fingers and a broken wrist. Still lower down could be seen the feet of miners whose bodies were invisible, buried under the earth. Not a single one moved.

Up to that moment no one had noticed them, but when the torch lit up this tragic spectacle the whole crowd of miners instinctively started backward. As he turned round, the overseer only saw faces pale with fright and shrinking from his torch as though there were something terrible about it. However, one miner, leaning his hand on the wall, bent forward, looking attentively at the dead man's face. What did he see extraordinary in it? He could not have said himself, but it was plain that he had not the power to turn his terrified eyes away from it. Another miner approached and touched something with his pickaxe which he quickly withdrew.

"Look at that piece of bread!" he exclaimed.

The overseer looked in his turn. He saw another hand projecting from underneath the earth holding a slice of bread

sprinkled with coarse salt in its curved fingers. But the owner of the hand was completely buried and invisible.

Other miners ran up. Each pushed his way to the front, eager to see, then having contemplated the huge mass, retired with his face working. One of them put his hand over his eyes in order not to see the terrible sight. Others stood motionless, their faces turned to the wall, as though petrified, and seemed unable to turn their heads. One young workman, pale with fear, had seized hold of another, who as though rendered temporarily idiotic, kept on passing his finger over the damp black wall of the rock.

"There are perhaps still living men below," stammered the overseer in a low voice. A plaintive groan as though in answer to his question came to his ears from below the mass of fallen earth. He approached it again, but the groan was not repeated.

"Now, comrades, we must dig!" he said.

"Come you there, Orefieff Smirnoff! Let us get to work."

So speaking, the overseer seized a miner by the hand, led him before the mass of collapsed earth and began to work with him. Hardly had they commenced than a second landslip took place, and the first mass of earth, pressed by the second which had just fallen, spread in liquid mud over the gallery. The two men only leaped back just in time.

The overseer could now properly estimate the magnitude of the disaster. It was evident that they were imprisoned and that no help could reach them from without. But at any rate they could breathe easily, and the fact that the air circulated in the gallery

much more freely than before the accident, showed that there was still some means of ventilation left. They must hasten to take advantage of it. In a few hours the whole mine would collapse owing to this immense falling-in of earth.

"Come here quickly, comrades!" said the overseer.

In the twinkling of an eye they surrounded him.

"There is only one way of saving ourselves," he said, "and that is by reaching the old upper gallery. Let those who care for their lives follow me. Perhaps the shaft is still intact on that side. It ought to be so, for the air circulates freely. Call those who are working in the side galleries, and all of you come back here."

Some of the miners, who had preserved more presence of mind than the rest, rushed to the side galleries to summon their companions.

V

In less than a quarter of an hour, all the survivors of the catastrophe were collected. The overseer ordered them to provide themselves with torches, of which a reserve store was always kept in a dry place under the roof. Then the roll of names was called and seven miners were found to be missing. They had been buried alive and there was no hope of finding them.

"Now, listen to me, comrades," said the overseer. "I mean to be obeyed. Above all, no quarrelling; this is not the time for it. If we begin that, we are all lost. I think that if we try by the old gallery above we shall reach the shaft, which is possibly only flooded below, and may still be practicable above. You, Ivan, lean on somebody. Support the old man, comrades. We must not leave him here. You are the strongest of all, Terenti, help him. God will reward you. And now forward with God's help!"

He uncovered and crossed himself. Every one followed his example.

"What are we to do with these?" asked a miner, pointing to the dead bodies.

"Nothing. God has undertaken to bury them," answered several voices. "They are well where they are, for to die thus in an accident is the same thing as dying after confession. God Himself has willed it. Every one knows that among us in the Ural."

"Well, may the earth lie lightly upon them."

The overseer raised his torch still higher and the march began. The miners followed him, skirting the walls timidly. They soon reached the slanting passage leading to the old deserted gallery, which was above the one they were leaving.

The overseer entered it resolutely. Keeping closely together, the miners began to climb up the steep incline, stopping at moments, sometimes to see if they would be able to advance, sometimes to listen whether there was not a noise behind them, and whether the gallery they had just quitted had not fallen in. Before and behind them there was nothing but darkness, the only light being the flame of the torch. The miners walked in this dim light while the darkness seemed to follow them and dog their footsteps. They thus climbed upwards for twenty minutes, sometimes stooping when the roof came low, then walking erect when possible. If one of them found himself lagging a little behind, he hastened to rejoin the rest, their chief fear seeming now to be left alone, as those who loitered too long were sure to perish.

From time to time the overseer slackened his pace, in order to make sure that all were present; then he resumed the march.

Suddenly a strong gust of air made the flame of the torch waver. As the draught became stronger the flame was blown backward and became a long tongue of fire. A thick smoke blackened the miners' faces, but they took no notice of it and still advanced. The passage became wider. Remnants of old beams, decayed with age, projected from the walls and barred their way,

but they strode over them. Suddenly the end of the procession found itself plunged in darkness – the torch had disappeared. The overseer and several others had finally reached the old gallery.

He gave the order to light several torches. Now they saw the old gallery stretching before them. The rock appeared intact. When the torches were raised, the roof was seen to be still solid, though here and there water filtered through. On the ground was a pool in the midst of which a slight gurgling noise was heard, evidently caused by a subterranean spring. A long thread of water escaped from this pool, flowing to the exit from the gallery which opened on the shaft. The miners followed it.

"Stop, comrades!" said the chief miner, turning round. "Wait for me here a moment. I will first go alone and see if there is any danger in proceeding farther."

In alarm, the miners halted, keeping close one to another. The overseer's torch gradually became more distant and soon was only a little luminous point in the darkness. Then they saw this little point stop, rise and sink again, finally rest motionless, and soon commence to grow larger as it approached. Then the overseer's figure was distinctly seen. His face was pale with alarm. He approached the miners without speaking, while they also remained silent.

"My friends, there is nothing left us but to die!"

A strong agitation ran through the crowd of miners. The overseer approached the exit of the gallery, and at the risk of falling into the shaft, he leant over and lit it up with his torch.

Then one could see to what extent the mine had been damaged. Huge fragments of rock were displaced and threatened to fall at any moment. One great block undermined by the water had been detached immediately above the shaft, whose opening it obstructed, destroying all hope of getting out that way. As for the ladders, they existed no longer.

VI

"It is impossible to go back, my friends, for in an hour or two the other gallery will fall in."

The miners listened in silence to the words of the overseer, whose words sounded hollowly. The flame of the torch quivered, agitated by currents of air coming from all sides.

"Shall we wait here?" suggested a miner timidly.

"Wait for what?"

"Perhaps help will come from outside."

"What help can one hope for, when the mine has entirely collapsed? This gallery, moreover, affords no safety. When the one we have just left falls in, this will not resist long."

There was no answer, and nothing was audible but the crackling of torches and the breath which came in gasps from many chests.

"However, I still have an idea!" said the overseer.

The crowd of miners gathered closely around him again.

"You know that this mine is next to the old abandoned one. Is there among you any one who has worked in it?"

"Only old Ivan."

"There is nothing to be done then. In the first place, he must have forgotten everything; and secondly, one cannot extract a word from him."

During this time old Ivan, who seemed to have no idea that

any one was talking of him, was gazing intently into the deep darkness which filled the gallery; he stood erect, his dim eyes were wide open, and a tremor passed over his wrinkled face, the expression of which was constantly changing from one moment to another, and betrayed now terror, now a kind of joy, then surprise. Finally he put his hand before his eyes as though they could not endure a dazzling splendour which issued from that darkness.

"If he wished, he could get us out of this," said a miner. "He worked for a long time in the old mine. But we cannot reckon on him; he is not even able to speak. He has been silent for ten years."

Suddenly something startling and unexpected happened. Ivan had just seized the miner who was nearest to him by the hand, and pointed into the darkness. When the miner saw the dilated pupils of the old man's eyes, he staggered with astonishment.

"Look at him! He is going mad!" they whispered.

"Here I am!" cried Ivan, as though answering a call.

The crowd fell back from him.

"Here I am! Here I am!" repeated Ivan.

The overseer approached him with his torch uplifted. Ivan turned his face toward him radiant with an inner light.

"Look! There He is Jesus! It is sixty years since He came, and now – there He is. He is calling us!"

"But what do you see? Who is calling us?"

"Jesus, I tell you. Stop! Look! There He is standing, in a white

robe. He signs to us to follow Him... Here I am, Lord! Here I am!"

Suddenly, when no one was expecting it, old Ivan snatched the torch from the overseer's hand, and held it above his head.

"Jesus will save us! I tell you He will save us all! Here I am, Lord, I am coming! Behold Him, our Lord full of mercy. I am coming! Here I am!.."

Then without looking round, or lowering the torch which he held aloft with a firm hand, the old man, suddenly grown quite cheerful, walked steadily towards the end of the gallery. Who had given this strength to his feeble legs, and straightened his hollow chest? Old Ivan was unrecognizable.

After a moment's hesitation the chief miner signed to the others to obey, and all followed the old man, holding their breath and not daring to speak. A mysterious force seemed to be guiding him, for without even looking at his feet he avoided the very numerous crevasses, and strode over huge stones which had fallen from the roof. As they went along the overseer had some more torches lit, and the crowd, which advanced in silence, was followed by a broad train of black smoke, momentarily lit up by the red reflection of the flame, and at other times lost in the increasing darkness behind them. The walls and wet roofs of the gallery were visible by its flickering light. Now and again drops of water fell on the torches with a hissing sound.

Some one behind him called to the old man, "Ivan!" but the latter did not turn his head, only gazing in front of him intently.

He seemed to see some one who was only visible to himself.

"Here I am, Lord, here I am!" he repeated from time to time, and it was surprising to hear how his voice sounded like that of a young man. What strange cause had roused him so far as to restore to him his former strength, and what inner flame glowed within him?

"Who is there then?" asked the chief miner, catching him up. "Whom do you see, Ivan?"

"It is a very long time since I saw Him. When I was a little fellow, I saw him often. There He is in front of me, all in white. I see His halo. He marches in the darkness like the sun... Here I am, Lord, here I am!"

After that no one asked Ivan any more questions.

At the end of the gallery they came up against an obstructing wall formed by the rock itself; but the old man seemed to see a gleam of light.

"Here He has passed ... here! There are His shining footsteps," he said, pointing to the blocks of earth which lay on one side.

The miners began to ply their picks. The earth was so soft that in a few seconds an opening was made through which the air rushed with such violence that it nearly extinguished the already flickering flames of the torches. It was plain that the gallery extended still much farther, and that if just where it turned round the rock it was obstructed by a mass of earth, this must be caused by a landslide.

Before they had time to enlarge the opening which had been made, the old man had already entered it.

"I see Him! There He is! I come, Lord. I come!" These words were heard from the other side of the passage which was lit up by old Ivan's torch. The miners followed him, crawling one after the other.

On the other side of the opening the gallery, which was hollowed through the rock itself, was much higher. The torches showed seams of flint and strata of white marble. The air circulated freely, and it seemed as though there were somewhere an invisible outlet; the flames of the torches flickered violently and it felt cold. A torrent of water fell down from the top of the rocky walls, and ran noisily along the gallery, winding from one wall to another. Soon it fell roaring into the black gaping mouth of a crevasse and disappeared in the bottomless depth. Still holding his torch high, Ivan skirted the precipice without appearing to notice it.

"There is one thing I should like to know," said a little boy, pressing up close to a miner in the gloom.

"What is that?" asked the latter in a low voice.

"What is it the old man sees there?"

"Hush! Some heavenly power is guiding him."

The gallery through which they were passing just now still formed part of the Voskressensky mine, but it had been deserted for a long time, after having been worked out. As it had been cut through the native rock, the walls were solid and unshakable.

Suddenly Ivan stopped.

"Well, what is it?"

"He is there... Standing. Oh, listen! Do you hear?"

Ivan leant forward, straining his ear to catch mysterious sounds. As a matter of fact distant and strange moanings were audible. Was it the complaint of a spring imprisoned in the rock? Was it the noise of a landslide? Or was it simply the sound made by a current of air passing through the fissures of the rock?

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