

THE GARNET BRACELET

by
Alexander Kuprin

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Largo Appassionato

I

In mid August, before the new moon, there suddenly came a spell of bad weather, of the kind peculiar to the north coast of the Black Sea. Dense, heavy fog lay on land and sea, and the huge lighthouse siren roared like a mad bull day and night. Then a drizzle, as fine as water dust, fell steadily from morning to morning and turned the clayey roads and foot-paths into a thick mass of mud, in which carts and carriages would be bogged for a long time. And then a fierce hurricane began to blow from the steppeland in the north-west; the tree-tops rocked and heaved like waves in a gale, and at night the iron roofing of houses rattled, as if someone in heavy boots were running over it; window-frames shook, doors banged, and there was a wild howling in the chimneys. Several fishing boats lost their bearings at sea, and two of them did not come back; a week later the fishermen's corpses were washed ashore.

The inhabitants of a suburban seaside resort—mostly Greeks and Jews, life-loving and over-apprehensive like all Southerners—were hurrying back to town. On the muddy highway an endless succession of drays dragged along, overloaded with mattresses, sofas, chests, chairs, wash-stands, samovars. Through the blurred muslin of the drizzle, it was a pitiful and dismal sight—the wretched bag and baggage, which looked so shabby, so drab and beggarly; the maids and cooks sitting atop of the carts on soaked tarpaulin, holding irons, cans or baskets; the exhausted, panting horses which halted every now and again, their knees trembling, their flanks steaming; the draymen who swore huskily, wrapped in matting against the rain. An even sorer sight were the deserted houses, now bare, empty and spacious, with their ravaged flowerbeds, smashed panes, abandoned dogs and rubbish—cigarette ends, bits of paper, broken crockery, cartons, and medicine bottles.

But the weather changed abruptly in late August. There came calm, cloudless days that were sunnier and mellow than they had been in July. Autumn gossamer glinted like mica on the bristly yellow stubble in the dried fields. The trees, restored to their quietude, were meekly shedding their leaves.

Princess Vera Nikolayevna Sheyina, wife of the marshal of nobility, had been unable to leave her villa because repairs were not yet finished at the town house. And now she was overjoyed by the lovely days, the calm and solitude and pure air, the swallows twittering on the telegraph wires as they flocked together to fly south, and the caressing salty breeze that drifted gently from the sea.

II

Besides, that day—the seventeenth of September— was her birthday. She had always loved it, associating it with remote, cherished memories of her childhood, and always expected it to bring on something wonderfully happy. In the morning, before leaving for town on urgent business, her husband had put on her night-table a case with magnificent ear-rings of pear-shaped pearls, and the present added to her cheerful mood.

She was all alone in the house. Her unmarried brother Nikolai, assistant public prosecutor, who usually lived with them, had also gone to town for a court hearing. Her husband had promised to bring to dinner none but a few of their closest friends. It was fortunate that her birthday was during the summer season, for in town they would have had to spend a good deal of money on a grand festive dinner, perhaps even a ball, while here in the country the expenses could be cut to a bare minimum. Despite his prominence in society, or possibly because of it, Prince Sheyin could hardly make both ends meet. The huge family estate had been almost ruined by his ancestors, while his position obliged him to live above his means: give receptions, engage in charity, dress well, keep horses, and so on. Princess Vera, with whom the former passionate love for her husband had long ago toned down to a true, lasting friendship, spared no pains to help him ward off complete ruin. Without his suspecting it she went without many things she wanted, and ran "the household as thriftily as she could.

She was now walking about the garden, carefully clipping off flowers for the

dinner table. The flower-beds, stripped almost bare, looked neglected. The double carnations of various colours were past their best, and so were the stocks—half in bloom, half laden with thin green pods that smelled of cabbage; on the rose-bushes, blooming for the third time that summer, there were still a few undersized buds and flowers. But then the dahlias, peonies and asters flaunted their haughty beauty, filling the hushed air with a grassy, sad autumnal scent. The other flowers, whose season of luxurious love and over-fruitful maternity was over, were quietly dropping innumerable seeds of future life.

A three-tone motor-car horn sounded on the nearby highway, announcing that Anna Nikolayevna Friesse, Princess Vera's sister, was coming. She had telephoned that morning to say that she would come and help about the house and to receive the guests.

Vera's keen ear had not betrayed her. She went to meet the arrival. A few minutes later an elegant sedan drew up at the gate; the chauffeur jumped nimbly down, and flung the door open.

The two sisters kissed joyfully. A warm affection had bound them together since early childhood. They were strangely unlike each other in appearance. The elder sister, Vera, resembled her mother, a beautiful Englishwoman; she had a tall, lithe figure, a delicate but cold and proud face, well-formed if rather large hands, and charmingly sloping shoulders such as you see in old miniatures. The younger sister, Anna, had the Mongol features of her father, a Tatar prince, whose grandfather had not been christened until the early nineteenth century and whose forbears were descended from Tamerlane himself, or Timur Lenk, the Tatar name by which her father proudly called the great murderer. Standing half a head shorter than her sister, she was rather broad-shouldered, lively and frivolous, and very fond of teasing people. Her face, of a markedly Mongol cast—with prominent cheek-bones, narrow eyes which she, moreover, often screwed up because she was short-sighted, and a haughty expression about her small, sensuous mouth, especially its full, slightly protruding lower lip—had, nevertheless, an elusive and unaccountable fascination which lay perhaps in her smile, in the deeply feminine quality of all her features, or in her piquant, coquettish mimicry. Her graceful lack of beauty excited and drew men's attention much more frequently and strongly than her sister's aristocratic loveliness.

She was married to a very wealthy and very stupid man, who did absolutely nothing though he was on the board of some sort of charity institution and bore the title of *Kammerjunker*. She loathed her husband, but she had borne him two children—a boy and a girl; she had made up her mind not to have any more children. As for Vera, she longed to have children, as many as possible, but for some reason she had none, and she morbidly and passionately adored her younger sister's pretty, anaemic children, always well-behaved and obedient, with pallid, mealy faces and curled doll hair of a flaxen colour.

Anna was all gay disorder and sweet, sometimes freakish contradictions. She readily gave herself up to the most reckless flirting in all the capitals and health resorts of Europe, but she was never unfaithful to her husband, whom she, however, ridiculed contemptuously both to his face and behind his back. She was extravagant and very fond of gambling, dances, new sensations and exciting spectacles, and when abroad she would frequent cafes of doubtful repute. But she was also generously kind and deeply, sincerely religious—so much so that she had secretly become a Catholic. Her back, bosom and shoulders were of rare beauty.

When she went to a grand ball she would bare herself far beyond the limits allowed by decorum or fashion, but it was said that under the low-cut dress she always wore a hair shirt.

Vera, on the other hand, was rigidly plain-mannered, coldly, condescendingly amiable to all, and as aloof and composed as a queen.

III

"Oh, how nice it is here! How very nice!" said Anna as she walked with swift small steps along the path beside her sister. "Let's sit for a while on the bench above the bluff, if you don't mind. I haven't seen the sea for ages. The air is so wonderful here—it cheers your heart to breathe it. Last summer I made an amazing discovery in the Crimea, in Miskhor. Do you know what surf water smells like? Just imagine—it smells like mignonette."

Vera smiled affectionately.

"You always fancy things."

"But it does. Once everybody laughed at me, I remember, when I said that moonlight had a kind of pink shade. But a couple of days ago Boritsky—that artist who's doing my portrait—said that I was right and that artists have known about it for a long time."

"Is that artist your latest infatuation?"

"You always get queer ideas!" Anna laughed, then, stepping quickly to the edge of the bluff, which dropped in a sheer wall deep into the sea, she looked down and suddenly cried out in terror, starting back, her face pale.

"What a height!" Her voice was faint and tremulous. "When I look down from so high up it gives me a sort of sweet, nasty creeps, and my toes ache. And yet I'm drawn to it!"

She was about to look down again, but her sister held her back.

"For heaven's sake, Anna dear! I feel giddy myself when you do that. Sit down, I beg you."

"All right, all right, I will. But see how beautiful it is, how exhilarating—you just can't look enough. If you knew how thankful I am to God for all the wonders he has wrought for us!"

Both fell to thinking for a moment. The sea lay at rest far, far below. The shore could not be seen from the bench, and that enhanced the feeling of the immensity and majesty of the sea. The water was calm and friendly, and cheerfully blue, except for pale blue oblique stripes marking the currents, and on the horizon it changed to an intense blue.

Fishing boats, hardly discernible, were dozing motionless in the smooth water, not far from the shore. And farther away a three-master, draped from top to bottom in white, shapely sails bellied out by the wind, seemed to be suspended in the air, making no headway.

"I see what you mean," said the elder sister thoughtfully, "but somehow I don't feel about it the way you do. When I see the sea for the first time after a long interval, it excites and staggers me. I feel as if I were looking at an enormous, solemn wonder I'd never seen before. But afterwards, when I'm used to it, its flat

emptiness begins to crush me. I feel bored as I look at it, and I try not to look any more."

Anna smiled.

"What is it?" asked her sister.

"Last summer," said Anna slyly, "we rode in a big cavalcade from Yalta to Uch Kosh. That's beyond the forester's house, above the falls. At first we wandered into some mist, it was very damp and we couldn't see well, but we climbed higher and higher, up a steep path, between pine-trees. Then the forest ended, and we were out of the mist. Imagine a narrow foothold on a cliff, and a precipice below. The villages seemed no bigger than match-boxes, the forests and gardens were like so much grass. The whole landscape lay below like a map. And farther down was the sea, stretching away for fifty or sixty miles. I fancied I was hanging in mid-air and was going to fly. It was so beautiful, and made me feel so light! I turned and said happily to the guide, 'Well, Seyid Oghlu, isn't it lovely?' But he clicked his tongue and said

'Ah, leddy, you don't know how fed up I am vid all dat. I sees it every day.' "

"Thank you for the comparison," said Vera with a laugh. "But I simply think that we Northerners can never understand the charm of the sea. I love the forest. Do you remember our woods back in Yegorovskoye? How could you ever be bored by them? The pine-trees! And the moss! And the death-cups—looking as if they were made of red satin embroidered with white beads. It's so still, so cool."

"It makes no difference to me—I love everything," answered Anna. "But I love best of all my little sister, my dear sensible Vera. There are only two of us in the world, you know."

She put her arm round her sister and snuggled against her, cheek to cheek. And suddenly she started.

"But how silly of me! We sit here like characters in a novel, talking about Nature, and I quite forgot about' my present. Here, look. Only I'm afraid you may not like it."

She took from her handbag a small notebook in an unusual binding: on a background of old blue velvet, worn and grey with time, there wound a dull-golden filigree pattern of exquisite intricacy and beauty, apparently the diligent handiwork of a skilful and assiduous artist. The notebook was attached to a gold chain, thin as a thread, and the sheets inside it had been replaced by ivory plates.

"What a beauty! It's gorgeous!" said Vera, and kissed her sister. "Thank you. Where did you get this treasure?"

"In a curiosity shop. You know my weakness for rummaging in old trash. That was how I came upon this prayer-book. See how the ornament here shapes into a cross. I only found the binding, and everything else—the leaves, clasps and pencil—I had to think up myself. Hard as I tried to explain my idea to Mollinet, he simply refused to see what I wanted. The clasps should have been made in the same style as the whole pattern—dull in tone, of old gold, finely engraved—but he's done God knows what. However, the chain is of genuine Venetian workmanship, very old."

Admiringly Vera stroked the magnificent binding.

"What hoary antiquity! I wonder how old this notebook is," she said.

"I can only guess. It must date from the late seventeenth or mid-eighteenth century."

"How strange," said Vera, with a pensive smile. "Here I am holding an object

that may have been touched by the hand of Marquise de Pompadour or Marie Antoinette herself. Oh, Anna, it's so like you, to make a lady's *carnet* out of a prayer-book. But let's go and see what's going on inside."

They went into the house across a large terrace paved with flagstone and enclosed on all sides by trellises of Isabella grape-vine. The black rich clusters smelling faintly of strawberries hung heavily amid the dark green, gilded here and there by the sun. The terrace was submerged in a green half-light, which cast a pale reflection on the faces of the two women.

"Are you going to have dinner served here?" asked Anna.

"I was at first. But the evenings are so chilly now. I prefer the dining-room. The men may come out here to smoke."

"Will you have anybody worth seeing?"

"I don't know yet. All I know is that our Grandad is coming."

"Ah, dear Grandad! How lovely!" cried Anna, clasping her hands. "I haven't seen him for ages."

"Vasya's sister is coming too, and Professor Speshnikov, I think. I was at my wits' end yesterday. You know they both like good food—Grandad and the professor. But you can't get a thing here or in town, for love or money.

Luka came by quail somewhere—ordered them from a hunter—and is now trying his skill on them. The beef isn't bad, comparatively speaking—alas! the inevitable roast beef! Then we have very nice lobsters."

"Well, it doesn't sound so bad, after all. Don't worry. Between you and me, you like good food yourself."

"But we'll also have something special. This morning a fisherman brought us a gurnard. I saw it myself. It's a monster, really. Terrible even to look at."

Anna, who was eagerly inquisitive about everything whether it concerned her or not, wanted to see the gurnard at once.

Luka, a tall man with a clean-shaven sallow face, came in carrying a white oblong basin, which he held with difficulty by the lugs, careful not to spill the water on the parquet floor.

"Twelve and a half pounds, Your Highness," he said, with the peculiar pride of a cook. "We weighed it a while back."

The fish was too big for the basin and lay with its tail curled. Its scales were shot with gold, the fins were a bright red, and two long fan-like wings, of a delicate blue, stood out from the huge rapacious head. It was still alive and vigorously worked its gills.

The younger sister cautiously touched the fish's head with her little finger. But the gurnard lashed out with its tail, and Anna with a scream snatched back her hand. "You can depend on it, Your Highness, we'll arrange everything in the best manner," said the cook, obviously aware of Vera's anxiety. "Just now a Bulgarian brought two pine-apple melons. They're a bit like cantaloups, only they smell much nicer. And may I ask Your Highness what gravy you will have with the gurnard: *tartare* or *polonaise*, or simply rusk in butter?" "Do as you like. You may go," said the princess.

After five o'clock the guests began to arrive. Prince Vasily Lvovich brought his widowed sister, Lyudmila Lvovna Durasova, a stout, good-natured woman who spoke very little; Vasyuchok, a wealthy young scapegrace and rake, whom everybody in town called by that familiar name, and who was very good company because he could sing and recite poetry, as well as arrange tableaux, plays and charity bazaars; the famous pianist Jennie Reiter, a friend of Princess Vera's from the Smolny Institute; and also his brother-in-law, Nikolai Nikolayevich. After them came in a motor-car Anna's husband, along with the fat, hulking Professor Speshnikov, and the vice-governor, von Seek. The last to arrive was General Anosov, who came in a fine hired landau, accompanied by two officers: Staff Colonel Ponamaryov, looking older than his age, a lean, bilious man worn out by clerical drudgery, and Guards Lieutenant Bakhtinsky of the Hussars, who was reputed to be the best dancer and master of ceremonies in Petersburg.

General Anosov, a silver-haired old man, tall and obese, stepped heavily down from the footboard, holding on to the rail of the box with one hand and to the back of the landau with the other. In his left hand he carried an ear-trumpet and in his right a rubber-tipped cane. He had a large, coarse, red face with a fleshy nose, and he looked out of narrowed eyes with the dignified, mildly contemptuous good humour typical of courageous and plain men who have often met danger and death face to face.

The two sisters, who recognized him from afar, ran up to the landau just in time to support him half-jokingly under the arms.

"You'd think I was the bishop," said the general in a friendly, husky boom.

"Grandad, dear Grandad!" said Vera, a little reproachfully. "All these days we've been expecting you, and you haven't let us get so much as a glimpse of you."

"Our Grandad's lost all shame here in the south," said Anna with a laugh. "As if you couldn't have thought of your godchild. You behave like a shameless old fop, and you've forgotten all about us."

The general, who had bared his majestic head, kissed the hands of the sisters, then he kissed both women on the cheeks and again on the hands.

"Wait, girls, don't scold me," he said, pausing for breath after each word, because of his long-standing asthma. "Upon my honour—those wretched doctors— have been treating my rheumatism all summer—with some sort of foul jelly—it smells awful— And they wouldn't let me go— You're the first—I'm calling on— Very glad—to see you— How are you getting along? You're quite the lady, Vera—you look very much like— your late mother— When'll you be inviting me to the christening?"

"I'm afraid never, Grandad."

"Don't give up hope—it'll come yet— Pray to God. And you, Anna, you haven't changed a bit— At sixty you'll be—the same fidget. But wait. Let me introduce these gentlemen to you."

"I had the honour long ago," said Colonel Ponamaryov, bowing.

"I was introduced to the princess in Petersburg," added the Hussar.

"Well, then, Anna, may I introduce to you Lieutenant Bakhtinsky. He's a dancer and brawler, but a good horseman all the same. There, my dear Bakhtinsky, take that thing from the carriage. Come along, girls. What are you going to feed us on, Vera dear? After the starvation diet—those doctors kept me on—I have the appetite of an ensign—on graduation."

General Anosov had been a companion-in-arms and devoted friend of the late Prince Mirza Bulat-Tuganovsky. After the prince's death he had passed on to his daughters all his love and affection. He had known them when they were quite small—indeed, he was Anna's godfather. At that time he had been, as he still was, governor of a big but almost abandoned fortress in the town of K., and had come to Tuganovsky's almost daily. The children literally adored him because he pampered them, gave them presents, and offered them boxes at the circus or the theatre, and also because no one could play with them so well as he could. But what they liked and remembered best was his stories of military campaigns, of battles and bivouacs, of victories and retreats, of death and wounds and severe frosts—artless unhurried stories, calm as an epic, told between evening tea and the hated hour when the children were told to go to bed.

This fragment of old times appeared as a colossal and strangely picturesque figure. He combined those simple but deep and touching traits which, even in his day, were more often to be found among the privates than among the officers, those purely Russian, muzhik traits which, taken together, form an exalted character that sometimes makes our soldier not only invincible but a martyr, almost a saint. He has a guileless, naive faith, a clear, cheerfully good-natured view of life, cool and matter-of-fact courage, humility in the face of death, pity for the vanquished, infinite patience, and amazing physical and moral stamina.

Since the Polish War Anosov had taken part in every campaign except the Japanese. He would not have hesitated to go to that war, either, but he was not called upon, and he had a maxim which was great in its modesty: "Never challenge death until you're called." Throughout his service he never struck any of his men, let alone had them flogged. During the Polish uprising he refused to shoot a group of prisoners despite the regimental commander's personal orders. "If it's a spy, I can not only have him shot," he said, "but am ready to kill him with my own hand if you command me to. But these men are prisoners, and I can't do it." And he said that simply and respectfully, without the least hint of challenge or bravado, looking his superior straight in the eyes with his own clear, steady eyes, so that instead of shooting him for disobeying orders they let him alone.

During the war of 1877-1879, he rose very quickly to the rank of colonel, although he lacked proper education or, as he put it himself, had finished only a "bear's academy." He took part in crossing the Danube and the Balkan Mountains, camped at Shipka through the winter, and was among those who launched the last attack on Plevna; he was wounded five times, once seriously, and got severe concussion from a grenade splinter. General Radetsky and Skobelev knew him personally and had a great respect for him. It was about him that Skobelev had said, "I know an officer who is much braver than I am, and that officer's Major Anosov."

He returned from the war almost deaf from the grenade splinter; three toes on one foot had been amputated as a result of frost-bite during the Balkan march, and he had contracted an acute rheumatism at Shipka. After two years of peace-time service it was deemed timely to retire him, but he rebelled. The governor of the territory, who had witnessed his cool courage in crossing the Danube, brought his influence to bear at the critical moment. The Petersburg authorities decided not to hurt the feelings of the distinguished colonel and gave him for life the governorship of K., an office which was honorary rather than indispensable for the defence of the country.

Everyone in town knew him and good-naturedly made fun of his foibles and habits and the way he dressed. He never carried arms, and he went about in a long, old-fashioned coat and a cap with a Large top and an enormous straight visor, a cane in his right hand and an ear-trumpet in his left; he was always accompanied by two fat, Lazy, hoarse pugs with tongues lolling between their clamped jaws. If in the course of his morning stroll he met an acquaintance, the passers-by several blocks away could hear him shouting and the pugs barking in unison.

Like many people who are hard of hearing, he was passionately fond of opera, and sometimes, during a romantic duet, his commanding boom would suddenly resound throughout the hall, "Why, that- was a jolly good C, damn him! Cracked it right through like a nut." Subdued laughter would ripple across the hall, but the general would suspect nothing, being under the impression that he had merely whispered a comment in his neighbour's ear.

As part of his official duties he often visited, together with his wheezing pugs, the guard-house where officers under arrest relaxed comfortably from the hardships of military service, telling stories over tea and cards. He would carefully question each of them, "Your name? Who; arrested you? For how long? What for?" Sometimes he would quite unexpectedly commend an officer for a courageous if unlawful act, or take him to task so loudly that he could be heard outside. But when he had finished shouting he would inquire almost in the same breath! where the officer got his meals and how much they cost him. It sometimes happened that a lieutenant, who had erred and been sent for a prolonged detention from an out-of-the-way corner that had no guard-room of its own,, would confess that, being short of funds, he had to eat with the privates. Anosov then would immediately order meals to be supplied to the poor devil from his own home, which was no more than a hundred yards from the guardhouse.

It was in K. that he had grown intimate with the Tuganovsky family and established a close friendship with the children, so that with him it had become a virtual necessity to see them every evening. If it so happened that the young ladies went away somewhere or he himself was kept away by his official duties, he would feel terribly lonely and melancholy in the large rooms of the governor's mansion. Every summer he would take his leave and spend a whole month at the Tuganovsky estate, Yegorovskoye, some forty miles from K.

All his repressed tenderness and his longing for love had gone out to the children, especially the girls. Once he had been married, but that had been so long ago that he hardly remembered it. It was before the war that his wife had eloped with a strolling actor, who had fascinated her with his velvet jacket and lace cuffs. Anosov paid her an allowance as long as she lived, but did not permit her to come back to him despite all the scenes of repentance and tearful letters. They had had no children.

V

Unexpectedly, the evening was calm and warm, and the candles on the terrace and in the dining-room burned with a steady flame. At dinner Prince Vasily Lvovich amused the company. He had an extraordinary and very peculiar gift for

telling stories. He would take some incident that had happened to one of the company or a common acquaintance, but would embellish it so, and use so matter-of-fact a tone, that his listeners would split their sides with laughter. That night he was telling the story of Nikolai Nikolayevich's unhappy wooing of a wealthy and beautiful lady. The only authentic detail was the husband's refusal to give her a divorce. But the prince skilfully combined fact and fancy. He made the grave, rather priggish Nikolai run down the street in his stocking-feet at the dead of night, his boots under his arm. At a corner the young man was stopped by the policeman, and it was only after a long and stormy explanation that Nikolai managed to convince him that he was an assistant public prosecutor and not a burglar. The wedding all hut came off, or so the narrator said, except that at the crucial moment a band of false witnesses, who had a hand in the affair, suddenly went on strike, demanding a rise. Being a stingy man—which he actually was, to some extent—and also being opposed on principle to all forms of strike, Nikolai flatly refused to pay more, referring to a certain clause in the law, which was confirmed by a ruling of the court of appeal. Then, in reply to the customary question, "Does anyone here present know of any impediment to the lawful joining together of these two in matrimony?" the enraged perjurers said as one man, "Yes, we do. All that we have testified under oath in court is a falsehood to which the prosecutor here forced us by intimidation and coercion. As for this lady's husband, we can only say from personal knowledge that he is the most respectable man in the world, chaste as Joseph and kind as an angel."

Having begun to tell wedding stories, Prince Vasily did not spare even Gustav Ivanovich Friesse, Anna's husband, who, he said, had on the day following his wedding called the police to evict the young bride from her parents' house because she had no passport of her own and to install her in her lawful husband's home. The only part of the tale which was true was the fact that, in the very first days of her married life, Anna had had to be continually with her sick mother because Vera had gone off south, and poor Gustav Ivanovich was plunged in despair.

Everybody laughed. Anna smiled with her narrowed eyes. Gustav Ivanovich guffawed in delight, and his gaunt face with the tight, shining skin, the thin, light hair sleeked carefully down and the deep-set eyes, was like a skull mirthfully baring a set of very bad teeth. He still adored Anna as *on* the first day of their married life; he was always trying to sit beside her, and touch her surreptitiously, and he danced attendance on her with such smug infatuation that you often pitied him and felt embarrassed for him.

Before rising from the table Vera Nikolayevna mechanically counted the guests. There were thirteen of them. She was superstitious and she said to herself, "What a nuisance! Why didn't I think of counting them before? And Vasya's to blame too—he told me nothing on the telephone."

When friends gathered at Sheyin's or Friesse's they usually played poker after dinner, because both sisters were ridiculously fond of games of chance. In fact, certain rules had been established in both houses: all the players would be given an equal number of ivory tokens of a specific value, and the game would go on until all the tokens passed to one of the players; then it would be stopped for the evening, no matter how earnestly the others insisted on continuing it. It was strictly forbidden to take fresh tokens from the cash-box. Experience had shown that these rigid rules were indispensable to check Vera and Anna, who would grow so excited in the course of the game that there was no stopping them. The

total loss seldom exceeded two hundred rubles.

This time, too, they sat down to poker. Vera, who was not playing, was about to go out on to the terrace, where the table was being set for tea, when the housemaid, looking rather mysterious, suddenly called her from the drawing-room.

"What is it, Dasha?" asked Princess Vera in annoyance, passing into her little study next to the bedroom. "Why are you staring at me so stupidly? And what are you holding there?"

Dasha put on the table a small square object, neatly wrapped in white paper and tied by a pink ribbon.

"It isn't my fault, Your Highness, honest to God," she stammered, blushing offensively. "He came in and said—"

"Who is *he*?"

"A messenger boy, Your Highness."

"Well?"

"He came into the kitchen and put this on the table. 'Give it to your mistress,' he said. 'Only,' he says, 'be sure to hand it to her personally. 'Who's it from?' I asked. 'It's written here,' he said. And then he ran away."

"Go and bring him back."

"Oh, but I couldn't do that, Your Highness. He came when you were in the middle of dinner, so I didn't dare to disturb you. It must have been half an hour ago."

"All right, you may go."

She cut the ribbon with scissors and threw it into the waste-basket along with the paper bearing her address. Under the wrapping she found a small jeweller's box of red plush, apparently fresh from the shop. She raised the lid, which was lined with light-blue silk, and saw, stuck into the black velvet, an oval gold bracelet, and inside it a note carefully folded into a neat octagon. Quickly she unfolded the paper. She thought she knew the handwriting, but, woman that she was, she put aside the note to take a look at the bracelet.

It was of low-standard gold, very thick but hollow and studded on the outside with small, poorly polished old garnets. But in the centre there arose, surrounding a strange small green stone, five excellent cabochon garnets, each the size of a pea. As Vera happened to turn the bracelet at a lucky angle under the electric light, beautiful crimson lights flashed suddenly, deep under the smooth egg-shaped surface of the stones.

"It's like blood!" Vera thought with apprehension.

Then she recalled the letter. It was written in an elegant hand and ran as follows:

"Your Highness, Princess Vera Nikolayevna, "Respectfully congratulating you on your bright and happy birthday, I take the liberty of sending to you my humble offering."

"Oh, so that's who it is," Vera said to herself resentfully. But she read the letter to the end.

"I should never have dared to offer you a present of my own choice, for I have neither the right, nor the refined taste, nor, to be frank, the money to do so.

Moreover, I believe there is no treasure on earth worthy of adorning you.

"But this bracelet belonged to my great-grandmother, and my late mother was the last to wear it. In the middle, among the bigger stones, you will see a green one. It is a very rare stone—a green garnet. We have an old family tradition that this stone enables the women who wear it to foresee the future, and keeps off unhappy thoughts, and protects men from violent death.

"All the stones have been carefully transferred from the old, silver bracelet, and you may rest assured that no one has worn this bracelet before you.

"You may at once throw away this absurd trinket, or present it to someone else; I shall be happy to know that your hands have touched it.

"I beseech you not to be angry with me. I blush to remember my audacity of seven years ago, when I dared write to you, a young lady, stupid and wild letters, and even had the assurance to expect an answer to them. Today I have nothing for you but awe, everlasting admiration and the humble devotion of a slave. All that I can do now is to wish you perpetual happiness and to rejoice if you are happy. In my mind I bow deeply to the, chair on which you sit, the floor you tread, the trees which you touch in passing, the servants to whom you speak. I no longer presume to envy those people or things.

"Once again I beg your pardon for having bothered you with a long, useless letter.

"Your humble servant till death and after,

"G.S.Z."

"Shall I show it to Vasya or not? If so, when? Now or after the guests have left? No, I'd better do it later—now I'd look as silly as this poor man."

While debating thus with herself Princess Vera could not take her eyes off the five blood-red lights glowing inside the five garnets.

VI

It was only with great difficulty that Colonel Ponamaryov was induced to play poker. He said that he knew nothing about the game, that he did not gamble even for fun and that the only game he cared for and had any skill in was *vint*. But in the end he gave in.

At first they had to teach and prompt him, but soon he had mastered the rules of the game, and within half an hour he had all the chips piled in front of him.

"That isn't fair!" said Anna in mock reproach. "You , might have allowed us a little more of the excitement."

Vera did not know how to entertain three of the guests —Speshnikov, the colonel and the vice-governor, a doltish, respectable and dull German. She got up a game of *vint* for them and invited Gustav Ivanovich to make a fourth. Anna thanked her by lowering her eyelids, and her sister at once understood. Everybody knew that unless Gustav Ivanovich was disposed of by suggesting a game of cards he would hang about his wife all evening, baring the rotten teeth in his skull-face

and making a perfect nuisance of himself.

Now things went smoothly, in an easy and lively atmosphere. Vasyuchok, accompanied by Jennie Reiter, sang in an undertone Italian folk canzonets and Oriental songs by Rubinstein. He had a light but pleasant voice, responsive and true. Jennie Reiter, a very exacting musician, was always willing to accompany him; but then it was said that he was courting her.

Sitting on a couch in a corner, Anna was flirting audaciously with the Hussar. Vera walked over and listened with a smile.

"Oh, please don't laugh," said Anna gaily, narrowing her lovely, mischievous Tatar eyes at the officer. "Of course, you think it's a feat to gallop at the head of a squadron, or to clear hurdles at races. But look at *our* feats. We've just finished a lottery. Do you think that's easy? Fie! The place was so crowded and full of tobacco smoke, there were porters and cabbies and God knows who else, and they all pestered me with complaints and grievances. I didn't have a moment's rest all day. And that isn't all, either, for now there's to be a concert in aid of needy gentlewomen, and then comes a charity ball—"

"At which you will not refuse me a mazurka, I hope?" Bakhtinsky put in and, bending slightly forward, clicked his heels under the arm-chair.

"Thank you. But the saddest case is our children's home. You know what I mean—a home for vicious children."

"Oh, I see. That must be very amusing."

"Don't, you should be ashamed of laughing at things like that. But do you know what the trouble is? We'd like to give shelter to those unfortunate children, whose souls are corrupted by inherited vice and bad example, we'd like to give them warmth and comfort—"

"Humph!"

"—to improve their morality, and instil in them a sense of duty. Do you see my point? And every day hundreds and thousands of children are brought to us, but there isn't a single vicious child among them! If you ask the parents whether their child is vicious they take offence— can you imagine that? And so the home has been opened and dedicated, everything is ready and waiting, but it hasn't a single inmate! We're almost at the stage of offering a prize for every vicious child brought in."

"Anna Nikolayevna," the Hussar interrupted her, with insinuating earnestness. "Why offer a prize? Take me free. Upon my honour, you couldn't find a more vicious child than I am."

"Stop it! It's impossible to talk to you seriously." She burst out laughing, and sat back on the couch, her eyes shining.

Seated at a large round table, Prince Vasily was showing his sister, Anosov and his brother-in-law a family album of cartoons drawn by himself. All four were laughing heartily, and gradually those other guests who were not playing cards gathered round them.

The album was a sort of supplement to Prince Vasily's satirical stories—a collection of illustrations. With imperturbable calm he showed "The Story of the Amorous Adventures of the Brave General Anosov in Turkey, Bulgaria and Elsewhere," "An Adventure of Prince Nicole Boulate-Touganofski the Coxcomb in Monte Carlo," and so on.

"I'll now acquaint you, ladies and gentlemen, with a brief biography of my beloved sister, Lyudmila Lvovna," he said, with a swift teasing glance at his sister.

"Part One. Childhood. The child was growing. Her name was Lima."

The album leaf displayed the figure of a little girl, purposely drawn in childish style, her face set in profile and yet showing both eyes; two broken lines sticking out from under her skirt represented her legs, and the fingers of both hands were spread out.

"Nobody ever called me Lima," said Lyudmila Lvovna with a laugh.

"Part Two. First Love. A cavalry cadet, kneeling before the damsel Lima, presents her with a poem of his own production. It contains these lines of rare beauty:

*Your gorgeous leg, I do opine,
Is a thing of love divine!*

"And here is an original likeness of the leg.

"Here the cadet induces the innocent Lima to elope from her parents' home. Here you see them in flight. And here is a critical situation: the enraged father has overtaken the fugitives. The faint-hearted cadet leaves the meek Lima in the lurch.

*You powdered your nose in a manner so slack
That now our pursuers are hot on our track;
So just do your best to hold them at bay,
While into the bushes I run away."*

The story of "the damsel Lima" was followed by one entitled "Princess Vera and the Infatuated Telegraphist."

"This moving poem is so far only in illustrations," Vasily Lvovich explained with a serious air. "The text is in the making."

"That's something new," said Anosov, "I haven't seen it before."

"It's the latest issue. First edition."

Vera gently touched his shoulder.

"Don't, please," she said.

But Vasily Lvovich did not hear, or perhaps he did not take it seriously.

"It dates from prehistoric times. One fine day in May a damsel by the name of Vera received a letter with kissing doves on the first page. Here's the letter, and here are the doves.

"The letter contains an ardent confession of love, written against all rules of spelling. It begins: 'O Beautiful Blonde who art—a raging sea of flames seathing in my chest. Thy gaze clings to my tormented soul like a venomous serpent,' and so on. It ends in this humble way: 'I am only a poor telegrafist, but my feelings are worthy of Milord George. I dare not reveal my full name—it is too indecent. I only sign my initials: P.P.Z. Please send your answer to the post-office, poste restante.' Here, ladies and gentlemen, you can see the portrait of the telegraphist himself, very skilfully executed in crayon.

"Vera's heart was pierced (here's her heart and here's the arrow). But, as beseeched a well-behaved and good-mannered damsel, she showed the letter to her honourable parents, and also to her childhood friend and fiance, Vasya Sheyin, a handsome young man. Here's the illustration. Given time the drawings will be supplied with explanations in verse.

"Vasya Sheyin, sobbing, returned the engagement ring to Vera. 'I will not stand

in the way of your happiness,' he said, 'but, I implore you, do not be hasty. Think it over before you take the final step—test his feelings and your own. Child, you know nothing about life, and you are flying like a moth to a glowing flame. But I—alas! I know the cold, hypocritical world. You should know that telegraphists are attractive but perfidious. It gives them an indescribable pleasure to deceive an innocent victim by their proud beauty and false feelings and cruelly abandon her afterwards.'

"Six months rolled by. In the whirl of life's waltz Vera forgot her admirer and married young handsome Vasya, but the telegraphist did not forget her. One day he disguised himself as a chimney-sweep and, smearing himself with soot, made his way into Princess Vera's boudoir. You can see that he left the traces of his five fingers and two lips everywhere: on the rugs and pillows and wallpaper, and even on the floor.

"Then, dressed as a countrywoman, he took up the duties of dish-washer in our kitchen. But the excessive favour which Luka the cook bestowed upon him put him to flight.

"He found himself in a mad-house. And here you see him as a monk. But every day he unfailingly sent a passionate letter to Vera. And where his tears fell on the paper the ink ran in splotches.

"At last he died, but before his death he willed to Vera two telegraph-office buttons and a perfume bottle, filled with his tears."

"How about some tea, ladies and gentlemen?" asked Vera Nikolayevna.

VII

The long autumn sunset was dying. The narrow crimson slit glowing on the edge of the horizon, between a bluish cloud and the earth, faded out. Now earth and trees and sky could no longer be seen. Overhead big stars shimmered with their eyelashes in the blackness of night, and the blue beam of the lighthouse shot upwards in a thin column that seemed to splash into a liquid, blurred circle of light as it struck the firmament. Moths fluttered against the glass hoods over the candles. In the front garden the star-shaped flowers of the tobacco-plant gave off a stronger scent in the cool darkness.

Speshnikov, the vice-governor and Colonel Ponamaryov had left long ago, promising to send the horses back from the tramway terminus to pick up the general. The remaining guests sat on the terrace. Despite his protests General Anosov was made to put on his greatcoat, and his feet were wrapped in a warm rug. He sat between the two sisters, with a bottle of his favourite Pommard claret in front of him. The} waited on him eagerly, filling his thin glass with the heavy, thick wine, passing the matches, cutting cheese for him, and so on. The old general all but purred with bliss.

"Yes, autumn's coming," said the old man, gazing at the candle-light and thoughtfully shaking his head. "Autumn. And I must start packing up. What a pity! It would have been so nice to stay here at the seaside, in ease and quiet, now that the weather's so fine!"

"Why not do so, Grandad?" said Vera.

"I can't, my dear, I can't. Duty calls. My leave is over. But I certainly wish I could. How the roses smell! I can feel it from here. And in summer the flowers somehow had no scent, except the white acacias—and they smelled of sweets."

Vena took two little roses—pink and carmine—out of a small jug and stuck them into the buttonhole of the general's greatcoat.

"Thanks, Vera dear." He bent his head to smell the flowers, and smiled the friendly smile of a kind old man.

"I remember when we took up our quarters in Bucharest. One day as I was walking down the street there came a strong smell of roses. I stopped and saw two soldiers, with a line cut-glass bottle of attar standing between them. They had already oiled their boots and rifle-locks with it. 'What's that you've got?' I asked. 'It's some sort of oil, sir. We put some of it in our gruel but it's no good—rasps the tongue—but it smells all right.' I gave them a ruble and they gladly let me have it. The bottle was no more than half-full, but considering the high price of the stuff it would fetch at least two hundred rubles. The soldiers were quite content, and they said, 'Here's another thing, sir. Peas of some kind. We tried hard to boil them, but the accursed stuff won't get soft.' It was coffee-beans, so I told them, 'That's only good for the Turks—it's of no use to soldiers.' Fortunately they hadn't eaten any opium. In some places I had seen opium tablets trampled into the mud."

"Tell us frankly, Grandad," said Anna, "did you ever know fear in battle? Were you afraid?"

"How strangely you talk, Anna. Of course I was afraid. Please don't believe those who say they weren't afraid and think the whizzing of bullets the sweetest music on earth. Only cranks or braggarts can talk like that. Everybody's afraid, only some shake in their boots with fear, while others keep themselves in hand. And though fear always remains the same, the ability to keep cool improves with practice; hence all the heroes and brave men. That's how it is. But once I was frightened almost to death."

"Tell us about it, Grandad," both sisters begged in unison.

They still listened to Anosov's stories with the same rapture as in their early childhood. Anna had spread out her elbows on the table quite like a child, propping her chin on her cupped hands. There was a sort of cosy charm about his unhurried, simple narrative. The somewhat bookish words and figures of speech which he used in telling his war memories sounded strange and clumsy. You would have thought he was imitating some nice ancient story-teller.

"It's a very short story," he responded. "It happened at Shipka in winter, after I was shell-shocked. There were four of us in our dug-out. That was when something terrible befell me. One morning when I rose from bed, I fancied I was Nikolai and not Yakov, and I couldn't undeceive myself, much as I tried. Sensing that my mind was becoming deranged, I shouted for some water to be brought to me, wet my head with it, and recovered my reason."

"I can imagine how many victories you won over women there, Yakov Mikhailovich," said Jennie Reiter, the pianist. "You must have been very handsome in your youth."

"Oh, but our Grandad is handsome - even now!" cried Anna.

"I wasn't handsome," said Anosov, with a calm smile. "But I wasn't shunned, either. There was a moving incident in Bucharest. When we marched into the city, the people welcomed us in the main square with gunfire, which damaged many windows; but where water had been placed in glasses the windows were

unharméd. This is how I learned that. Coming to the lodgings assigned to me, I saw on the window-sill a low cage and on the cage a large cut-glass bottle with clear water that had goldfish swimming in it, and a canary perched among them. A canary in water! I was greatly surprised, but inspecting it I saw that the bottle had a broad bottom with a deep hollow in it, so that the canary could easily fly in and perch there.

"I walked into the house and saw a very pretty Bulgarian girl. I showed her my admission slip and took the opportunity to ask her why the panes in the house were undamaged after the gunfire, and she told me it was because of the water. She also told me about the canary; how dull-witted I had been! While we were talking, our eyes met, a spark flew between us like electricity, and I felt that I had fallen headlong in love—passionately and irrevocably."

The old man paused and slowly sipped the black wine.

"But you confessed it to her afterwards, didn't you?" asked the pianist.

"Well, yes, of course. But I did it without words. This is how it came about—"

"I hope you won't make us blush, Grandad?" Anna remarked, smiling slyly.

"Not at all, the affair was perfectly respectable. You see, the townspeople didn't give us the same welcome everywhere, but in Bucharest the people were so easy-going with us that one day when I started playing a violin the girls at once came in their Sunday dresses and began to dance, and then it became a daily habit.

"On an evening like that, when the moon was shining, I went into the passage where my Bulgarian girl had disappeared. On seeing me she pretended to be picking dry rose petals, which, incidentally, are gathered there by the sackful. But I put my arms round her, held her close to my heart and kissed her several times.

"From then on, when the moon and stars came out in the sky, I would hurry to my beloved and forget the day's worries while I was with her. And when the time came for us to march on we swore eternal love, and parted for ever."

"Is that all?" asked Lyudmila Lvovna, disappointed.

"What else did you expect?" replied the general.

"You will pardon me for saying so, Yakov Mikhailovich, but that isn't love — it's just an army officer's camp adventure."

"I don't know, really, whether it was love or some other sentiment."

"What I mean is, have you never known genuine love? A love that—well, in short, the kind of love that is holy and pure and eternal—and unearthly— Have you never experienced love like that?"

"I can't tell, honestly," faltered the old man, rising from his arm-chair. "I suppose not. At first, when I was young, I had no time, what with merry-making and cards and war. It seemed as if life and youth and good health would last for ever. Then I looked back and saw that I was already an old wreck. And now, Vera dear, please don't keep me any longer. I'll say goodbye to you all. Hussar," he said to Bakhtinsky, "the night is warm, let's go and meet our carriage."

"I'll go with you, Grandad," said Vera.

"So will I," added Anna.

Before leaving Vera stepped up to her husband.

"There's a red case in my drawer," she said to him softly. "In it you'll find a letter. Read it."

VIII

Anna and Bakhtinsky led the way, followed at some twenty paces by the general, arm-in-arm with Vera. The night was so black that during the first few minutes, before their eyes got used to the darkness, they had to grope for the way with their feet. Anosov, who despite his age still boasted surprisingly keen eyesight, had to help his companion. From time to time his big cold hand fondly stroked Vera's hand, which lay lightly on the bend of his sleeve.

"She's a funny woman, that Lyudmila Lvovna," he said suddenly, as if continuing aloud the thoughts that had been going through his head. "I've seen it so often in my life: as soon as a lady gets past fifty, especially if she's a widow or a spinster, she longs to hang about somebody else's love. She either spies, gloats and gossips, or offers to take care of your happiness, or works up a lot of treacly talk about exalted love. But I would say that nowadays people no longer know how to love. I see no real love. Nor did I see any in my time!"

"How can that be, Grandad?" Vera objected as she squeezed his arm slightly. "What slander! You were married yourself, weren't you? Then you must have loved."

"It doesn't mean a thing, Vera. Do you know how I got married? She was a peach of a girl, young and fresh, and she would sit by my side, her bosom heaving under the blouse. She'd lower her beautiful long eyelashes, and blush suddenly. The skin of her cheeks was so delicate, her neck so white and innocent, and her hands so soft and warm. God! Her papa and mamma slunk about us, eavesdropped at the door, and looked wistfully at me—with the gaze of faithful dogs. And I'd get little swift pecks when I was leaving. At tea her foot would touch mine as if by chance. Well, they got me before I knew where I was. 'Dear Nikita Antonovich, I have come to ask you for the hand of your daughter. Believe me, this angel—' Before I had finished the papa's eyes were moist, and he started to kiss me. 'My dear boy! I guessed it long ago. May God keep you. Only take good care of our treasure!' Three months later the angelic treasure was going about the house in a shabby dressing-gown and slippers on her bare feet, her thin hair unkempt and hung with curl-papers. She wrangled with orderlies like a fishwife and made a fool of herself with young officers, lispng, giggling, rolling her eyes. In the presence of others she for some reason called me Jacques, pronouncing it with a languid, long-drawn nasal twang, 'Oh, Ja-a-acques.' A spendthrift and a hypocrite, slovenly and greedy. And her eyes were always so insincere. It's all over now, finished and done with. I'm even grateful to that wretched actor. It was lucky we had no children."

"Did you forgive them, Grandad?"

" 'Forgive' isn't the word, Vera dear. At first I was like a madman. If I'd seen them then I'd certainly have killed them. Then the whole thing gradually wore off, and nothing was left but contempt. So much the better. God warded off useless bloodshed. Besides, I was spared the lot of most husbands. Indeed, what would have become of me if it hadn't been for that disgusting incident? A pack-camel, a despicable abettor and protector, a milk cow, a screen, some sort of household utensil. No! It's all for the best, Vera."

"No, no, Grandad, the old grievance still rankles in your heart, if you'll allow me to say so. And you extend your own unhappy experience to all mankind. Take

Vasya and me. You couldn't call our marriage an unhappy one, could you?"

Anosov did not speak for a while.

"All right, let's say your case is an exception," he said at length reluctantly. "But why do people generally get married? Let's take the woman. She's ashamed of remaining single, especially after all her friends have married. It's unbearable to be a burden on the family. She wants to be mistress of the house, mother of a family, enjoy independence. Then there's the need—the outright physical need—for motherhood, and for making a nest of her own. Men's motives are different. First of all they get sick of their bachelor life, the disorder in their rooms, restaurant meals, dirt, cigarette ends, torn or unmatching linen, debts, unceremonious friends, and so on, and so forth. Secondly, they feel that it's healthier and more economical to live in a family. In the third place, they think that after they've died, a part of them will be left in their children—an illusion of immortality. In the fourth place, there's the temptation of innocence, as in my case. And sometimes there is the consideration of a nice dowry. But where does love come in? Disinterested, self-sacrificing love that expects no reward? The love said to be 'stronger than death'? I mean that kind of love for which it's not an effort but sheer joy to perform any feat, give your life, accept martyrdom. Wait, Vera, are you going to talk to me about your Vasya again? Believe me, I like him. He's all right. Who knows if the future may not show his love in a light of great beauty. But try to understand what kind of love I am talking about. Love must be a tragedy. The greatest mystery in the world! No comforts, calculations or compromises must affect it."

"Have you ever seen such love, Grandad?" Vera asked softly.

"No," the old man replied firmly. "I know of two instances that come close to it. But one of them was prompted by stupidity, and the other—it was—a kind of sour stuff—utterly idiotic. I can tell you about them if you like. It won't take long."

"Please do, Grandad."

"All right. A regimental commander in our division—but not in our regiment—had a wife. She was a regular scarecrow, I must tell you. She was bony, red-haired, long-legged, scraggy, big-mouthed. Her make-up used to peel off her face like plaster off an old Moscow house. But, for all that, she was a kind of regimental Messalina, with a lot of spirit, arrogance, contempt for people, a passion for variety, and she was a morphine addict into the bargain.

"One day in autumn a new ensign was sent to our regiment, a greenhorn fresh from military school. A month later that old jade had him under her thumb. He was her page, her slave, her eternal dance partner. He used to carry her fan and handkerchief and rush out in snow and frost to get her horses, with nothing on but his flimsy coat. It's awful when an innocent lad lays his first love at the feet of an old, experienced, ambitious debauchee. Even if he manages to get away unscathed, you must give him up for lost just the same. He's marked for life.

"By Christmas she was fed up with him. She fell back on one of her previous, tried and tested passions. But he couldn't do without her. He trailed after her like a shadow. He was worn out, and lost weight and colour.

In high-flown language, 'death had marked his brow.' He was terribly jealous of her. They said that he used to stand under her window all night long.

"One day in spring they got up a kind of picnic in the regiment. I knew the two personally, but I was not there when it happened. As usual on such occasions, a lot was drunk. They started back after nightfall, along the railway. Suddenly they saw

a goods train coming. It was creeping up a rather steep incline. They heard whistles. And the moment the headlights of the engine came alongside she suddenly whispered in the ensign's ear, 'You keep telling me you love me. But if I tell you to throw yourself under this train I'm sure you won't do it.' He didn't say a word in reply, but just rushed under the train. They say he had worked it out well, and meant to drop between the front and back wheels, where he would have been neatly cut in two. But some idiot tried to keep him back and push him away. Only he wasn't strong enough. The ensign clung to the rail with both his hands and they were chopped off."

"How dreadful!" Vera exclaimed.

"He had to resign from military service. His comrades collected a little money for his journey. He couldn't very well stay in a town where he was a living reproach both to her and to the entire regiment. And that was the end of the poor chap—he became a beggar, and then froze to death somewhere on a Petersburg pier.

"The second case was quite a pitiful one. The woman was just like the other, except that she was young and pretty. Her behaviour was most reprehensible. Light as we made of domestic affairs like that, we were shocked. But her husband didn't mind. He knew and saw everything but did nothing to stop it. His friends gave him hints,, but he waved them away. 'Cut it out. It's no business of mine. All I want is for Lena to be happy.' Such a fool!

"In the end she got herself seriously involved with Lieutenant Vishnyakov, a subaltern from their company. And the three of them lived in two-husband wedlock, as if it were the most lawful kind of matrimony. Then our regiment was ordered to the front. Our ladies saw us off, and so did she, but, really, it was sickening: she didn't so much as glance at her husband, at least to keep up appearances if for no other reason. Instead she hung on her lieutenant like ivy on a rotten wall, and wouldn't leave him for a second. By way of farewell, when we were settled in the train and the train started, the hussy shouted after her husband, 'See that you take good care of Volodya! If anything happens to him I'll leave the house and never come back. And I'll take the children with me.'

"Perhaps you imagine the captain was a ninny? A jelly-fish? A sissy? Not at all. He was a brave soldier. At Zeloniye Gori he led his company against a Turkish redoubt six times, and of his two hundred men only fourteen were left. He was wounded twice, but refused to go to the medical station. That's what he was like. The soldiers worshipped him.

"But *she* had told him what to do. His Lena had! "And so, like a nurse or a mother, he took care of that coward and idler Vishnyakov, that lazy drone. At night in camp, in rain and mud, he'd wrap him in his own greatcoat. He would supervise a sapper's job for him, while he lounged in a dug-out or played faro. At night he'd inspect the outposts for Vishnyakov. And that was at a time, mark you, when the Turks used to cut down our pickets as easily as a Yaroslavl countrywoman cuts down her cabbages. It's a sin to say so, but, upon my honour, everybody was happy to learn that Vishnyakov had died of typhus in hospital."

"How about women, Grandad? Have you never met loving women?"

"Of course I have, Vera. I'll say more: I'm sure that almost every woman in love is capable of sublime heroism. Don't you see, from the moment she kisses, embraces, gives herself, she is a *mother*. Love to her, if she does love, is the whole meaning of life—the whole universe! But it is no fault of hers that love has

assumed such vulgar forms and degenerated into a sort of everyday convenience, a little diversion. The ones to blame are the men, who are surfeited at twenty, who have a chicken's body and a rabbit's heart, and are incapable of strong desires, heroic deeds, the tenderness and worship of love. They say real love did exist at one time. If not, then isn't it what the best minds and souls of the world—poets, novelists, musicians, artists—have dreamt of and longed for? The other day I read the story of Manon Lescaut and Cavalier des Grieux. It brought tears to my eyes—it really did. Tell me in all honesty, doesn't every woman dream, deep in her heart, of such a love—a single-minded, all-forgiving love ready to bear anything, modest and self-sacrificing?"

"Of course she does, Grandad."

"And since it isn't there women take their revenge. In another thirty years or so from now—I shan't live to see it, Vera dear, but you may; remember what I'm telling you—some thirty years from now women will wield unprecedented power in the world. They will dress like Indian idols. They'll trample us men underfoot as contemptible, grovelling slaves. Their extravagant wishes and whims will become painful laws for us. And all because throughout the generations we've been unable to worship and revere love. It will be a vengeance. You know the law: action and reaction are equal and opposite."

He paused a while, then asked suddenly, "Tell me, Vera, if only you don't find it embarrassing, what was that story about a telegraphist which Prince Vasily told us tonight? How much of it is fact and how much his usual embellishment?"

"Do you really wish to know, Grandad?"

"Only if you care to tell me, Vera. If for some reason you'd rather not—"

"Not at all. I'll tell you with pleasure."

And she told the general in detail about a crazy man who had begun to pursue her with his love two years before her marriage.

She had never seen him, and did not know his name. He had only written to her, signing G.S.Z. Once he had mentioned that he was a clerk in some office—he had not said a word about the telegraph office. He was apparently watching her movements closely, because in his letters he always mentioned very accurately where she had spent this or that evening and in what company, and how she had been dressed. At first his letters sounded vulgar and ludicrously ardent, although they were quite proper. But once she wrote to ask him—"by the way, Grandad, don't let that out to our people: nobody knows it"—not to annoy her any more with his protestations of love. From then on he wrote no more about love and sent her only an occasional letter—at Easter, on New Year's Eve, and on her birthday. Princess Vera also told the general about that day's parcel and gave him almost word for word the strange letter from her mysterious admirer.

"Y-es," the general drawled at last. "Perhaps he's just an addle-head, a maniac, or—who knows?—perhaps the path of your life has been crossed by the very kind of love that women dream about and men are no longer capable of. Just a moment. Do you see lights moving ahead? That must be my carriage."

At the same time they heard behind them the blare of a motor-car and the road, rutted by wheels, shone in a white acetylene light. Gustav Ivanovich drove up.

"I've taken your things with me, Anna. Get in," he said. "May I give you a lift, Your Excellency?"

"No, thank you, my friend," answered the general. "I don't like that engine. All it does is shake and stink—there's no pleasure in it. Well, good night, Vera dear."

I'll be coming often now," he said, kissing Vera's forehead and hands.

There were goodbyes all round. Friesse drove Vera Nikolayevna to the gate of her villa and, swiftly describing a circle, shot off into the darkness in his roaring, puffing motor-car.

IX

With a disagreeable feeling Princess Vera stepped on to the terrace and walked into the house. From a distance she heard the loud voice of her brother Nikolai and saw his gaunt figure darting back and forth across the room. Vasily Lvovich sat at the card table, his large head with the cropped tow hair bent low as he traced lines on the green cloth with a piece of chalk.

"It should have been done long ago!" said Nikolai irritably, making a gesture with his light hand as if he were throwing down some invisible burden. "I was convinced long ago that an end should have been put to those foolish letters. Vera wasn't yet your wife when I told you that you and she ought not to make fun of them like children, seeing only what was laughable in them. Here's Vera herself, by the way. Vasily Lvovich and I were talking about that madman of yours, P.P.Z. I consider the correspondence insolent and vulgar."

"There was no correspondence," Sheyin interrupted him coldly. "He was the only one who wrote."

Vera blushed at that, and sat down on the sofa, in the shade of a large fan-palm.

"I'm sorry," said Nikolai Nikolayevich, and threw down the invisible heavy object, as if he had torn it from his chest.

"I wonder why you call him mine," Vera put in, heartened by her husband's support. "He's mine as much as he's yours."

"All right, I'm sorry again. In short, what I mean is that we must put an end to his foolishness. I think this matter is getting beyond the stage where we may just laugh and draw funny pictures. Believe me that what I'm concerned about is Vera's reputation and yours, Vasily Lvovich."

"I think you're exaggerating, Kolya," replied Sheyin.

"Perhaps I am. But you risk finding yourself quite easily in a ridiculous position."

"I don't see how," said the prince.

"Suppose this idiotic bracelet"—Nikolai lifted the red case from the table and at once threw it down again with disgust—"this monstrous thing remains in our house, or we throw it out or present it to Dasha. Then, first of all, P.P.Z. will be able to brag to his acquaintances or friends that Princess Vera Nikolayevna Sheyina accepts his gifts, and, secondly, the first opportunity will encourage him to further exploits. Tomorrow he may send her a diamond ring, the day after a pearl necklace, and then, for all we knew, he may land in the dock for embezzlement or fraud and Prince and Princess Sheyin will be summoned to testify as witnesses. A nice prospect, eh?"

"The bracelet must certainly be sent back!" cried Vasily Lvovich.

"I think so too," Vera assented, "and the sooner the better. But how are we to do it? We don't know the name or address."

"Oh, that's child's play," Nikolai Nikolayevich replied carelessly. "We know the initials of this P.P.Z. Is that what they are, Vera?"

"G.S.Z."

"Very good. Besides, we know that he's employed somewhere. That's quite enough. Tomorrow I'll take the town directory and look up an official or clerk with those initials. If I don't find him for some reason, I'll simply call a detective and get him to trace the man for me. In case of difficulty I'll have this paper here with his handwriting. In short, by two o'clock tomorrow I'll know the exact name and address of the fellow and even the hours when he's in. And then we'll not only give him back his treasure tomorrow but will also see that he never reminds us of his existence again."

"What are you going to do?" asked Prince Vasily.

"What? I'm going to call on the governor."

"Not the governor—please! You know what terms we're on with him. We'd only make ourselves ridiculous."

"All right. I'll go to the chief of police. He's a club-mate of mine. Let him summon that Romeo and shake his finger under the man's nose. Do you know how he does it? He brings his finger close to your nose but doesn't move his hand—he just wags his finger and bawls, 'I won't stand for this, sir!' "

"Fie! Fancy dealing with the police!" said Vera, pulling a wry face.

"You're right, Vera," the prince agreed. "We'd better not drag any outsiders into this. There'd be rumours and gossip. We all know what our town is like. One might as well live in a glass jar. I think I had better go to that —er—young man myself; God knows he may be sixty. I'll hand him the bracelet and give him ;a talking to."

"Then I'll go with you," Nikolai Nikolayevich cut in. "You're too soft. Leave it to me to talk with him.

And now, my friends"—he pulled out his watch and glanced at it—"you'll excuse me if I go to my room. I can hardly stand on my feet, and I have two files to look through."

"Somehow I feel sorry for that unfortunate man," said Vera hesitantly.

"No reason to feel sorry for him!" Nikolai retorted, turning in the doorway. "If anyone of our own class had played that trick with the bracelet and letter Prince Vasily would have sent him a challenge. Or if he hadn't, I would. In the old days I'd simply have had him flogged in the stable. You'll wait for me in your office tomorrow, Vasily Lvovich. I'll telephone you."

X

The filthy staircase smelled of mice, cats, paraffin-oil, and washing. Before they had reached the fifth floor Prince Vasily Lvovich halted.

"Wait a bit," he said to his brother-in-law. "Let me catch my breath. Oh, Kolya, we shouldn't have come here."

They climbed another two flights. It was so dark on the stairs that Nikolai Nikolayevich had to strike two matches before he made out the number of the flat.

He rang and was answered by a stout, white-haired, grey-eyed woman wearing

spectacles, and slightly bent forward, apparently as a result of some disease.

"Is Mr. Zheltkov in?" asked Nikolai Nikolayevich.

The woman's eyes looked in alarm from one to the other and back. The two men's respectable appearance seemed to reassure her.

"Yes, won't you come in?" she said, stepping back. "First door on your left."

Bulat-Tuganovsky knocked three times, briefly and firmly.

"Come in," a faint voice responded.

The room had a very low ceiling, but it was very wide —almost square in shape. Its two round windows, which looked very much like port-holes, let in little light. In fact, it was rather like the mess-room of a cargo ship. Against one of the walls stood a narrow bedstead, against another was a broad sofa covered with an excellent but worn Tekke rug, and in the middle stood a table spread with a coloured Ukrainian cloth.

At first the visitors could not see the occupant's face, for he stood with his back to the light, rubbing his hands in perplexity. He was tall and thin, with long, silky hair.

"Mr. Zheltkov, if I'm not mistaken?" Nikolai Nikolayevich asked haughtily.

"Yes, that's my name. Very glad to meet you."

Holding out his hand, he took two paces towards Tuganovsky. But Nikolai Nikolayevich turned to Sheyin as if he had not noticed the gesture of welcome.

"I told you we weren't mistaken."

Zheltkov's slim, nervous fingers ran up and down the front of his short brown jacket, buttoning and unbuttoning it. At last he said with an effort, pointing to the sofa and bowing awkwardly, "Pray be seated."

He had now come into full view, a man with a very pallid, delicate girl's face, blue eyes and a cleft chin like a wilful child's; he looked somewhere between thirty and thirty-five.

"Thank you," said Prince Sheyin, who had been scanning him with keen interest.

"*Merci*," Nikolai Nikolayevich answered briefly. And both remained standing. "It'll only take us a few minutes. This is Prince Vasily Lvovich Sheyin, the marshal of nobility in this province. My name is Mirza Bulat-Tuganovsky. I'm assistant public prosecutor. The business which we shall have the honour to discuss with you concerns in equal measure the prince and myself, or, to be exact, concerns the prince's wife, who is my sister."

Completely dazed, Zheltkov sank down on the sofa and stammered through blanched lips, "Please, sit down, gentlemen." But, apparently recalling that he had already suggested that, he jumped up, rushed to the window, tousling his hair, and came back again. And once more his trembling hands ran up and down, tugging at his buttons, plucking his light-coloured, reddish moustache, and touching his face.

"I am at your service, Your Highness," he said in a hollow voice, with an entreating gaze at Vasily Lvovich.

But Sheyin made no reply. It was Nikolai Nikolayevich who spoke.

"First of all, may I return something that belongs to you," he said, and, taking the red case from his pocket, he carefully put it down on the table. "To be sure, it does credit to your taste, but we earnestly request that no further surprises of this kind shall be sprung on us."

"Please forgive me. I know I'm very much at fault," whispered Zheltkov, flushing, his eyes on the floor. "Wouldn't you like a glass of tea?"

"You see, Mr. Zheltkov," Nikolai Nikolayevich went on, as if he had not heard Zheltkov's last words. "I'm very glad to see you are a gentleman, who can take a hint. I believe we shall reach agreement promptly. If I'm not mistaken, you have been pursuing Princess Vera Nikolayevna for the last seven or eight years?"

"Yes," answered Zheltkov softly, and lowered his eyelashes in awe.

"But so far we haven't taken any action against you, although you'll concede that we could and, indeed, *should* have done so. Don't you agree?"

"Yes."

"Yes. But by your last act, namely, by sending this garnet bracelet, you overstepped the limit of our forbearance. Do you understand? The limit. I shall not conceal from you that our first thought was to refer the matter to the authorities, but we didn't do so, and I'm glad we didn't, because—I'll say it again—I saw at once that you are an honourable man."

"I beg your pardon. What was that you said?" Zheltkov asked suddenly, and laughed. "You were about to refer the matter to the authorities? Did I understand you rightly?"

He put his hands in his pockets, made himself comfortable in a corner of the sofa, took out his cigarette-case and matches, and lighted a cigarette.

"So you said you were about to refer the matter to the authorities? You will pardon my sitting, Prince?" he said to Sheyin. "Well, go on."

The prince pulled a chair up to the table and sat down. Mystified and eager, he gazed fixedly at the face of the strange man.

"It's open to us to take that step at any time, my good man," Nikolai Nikolayevich continued, with some insolence. "Butting into a stranger's family—"

"I beg to interrupt you—"

"No, I beg to interrupt *you*," all but shouted the assistant prosecutor.

"As you wish. Go on. I'm listening. But I want a word with Prince Vasily Lvovich."

And paying no more attention to Tuganovsky, he said, "This is the most difficult moment of my life. And I must speak without any regard for convention. Will you listen to me?"

"I'm listening," said Sheyin. "Be quiet, Kolya, please!" he said impatiently as he saw Tuganovsky make an angry gesture. "Yes?"

For a few seconds Zheltkov's breathing came in choking gasps, and suddenly he burst out in a torrent of words. He spoke with only his jaws; his lips were a ghastly white, and rigid like a dead man's.

"It's hard to utter those words—to say that I love your wife. But seven years of hopeless and unassuming love give me some right to it. I'll own that at first, while Vera Nikolayevna was still unmarried, I wrote her foolish letters and even expected her to answer them. I agree that my last step, namely, sending the bracelet, was an even more foolish thing to do. But—I look you straight in the eyes and I feel that you'll understand me. I know it's beyond my power ever to stop loving her. Tell me, Prince—supposing you resent the whole thing—tell me what you would do to break off that feeling? Would you have me transported to some other town, as Nikolai Nikolayevich suggested? But there I would go on loving Vera Nikolayevna as much as I do here. Put me in jail? But there, too, I'd find means to remind her of my existence. So the only solution is death. If you so desire I'll accept death in any form."

"Instead of talking business, here we are up to our necks in melodrama," said

Nikolai Nikolayevich, putting on his hat. "The point is quite clear: either you cease completely persecuting Princess Vera Nikolayevna or, if you don't, we shall take such measures as are available to men of our standing, our influence, and so on."

But Zheltkov did not so much as glance at him, although he had heard him. Instead he asked Prince Vasily Lvovich, "Would you mind my leaving you for ten minutes? I'll admit that I'm going to speak to Princess Vera Nikolayevna on the telephone. I assure you I will report to you as much of the conversation as I can."

"All right," said Sheyin.

Left alone with his brother-in-law, Nikolai Nikolayevich set upon him at once.

"This won't do," he shouted, his right hand as usual throwing down some invisible object from his chest. "This just won't do. I warned you I would take care of the matter. But you turned sloppy and gave him a chance to enlarge on his feelings. I'd have put everything in two words."

"Wait," said Prince Vasily Lvovich, "everything will be cleared up in a moment. The important thing is, I think he has the face of a man who is unable to deceive or lie deliberately. But is it his fault that he's in love? And how can you control a feeling like love, which people still can't account for?" He paused thoughtfully, and added, "I feel sorry for the man. Moreover, I feel as if I'm looking at a tremendous tragedy of the soul, and I can't behave like a clown." "I call that decadence," said Nikolai Nikolayevich. Ten minutes later Zheltkov came back. His eyes were shining and deep, as if they were filled with unshed tears. And it was obvious that he had quite forgotten about his good manners, about who should sit where, and had stopped behaving like a gentleman. And once again Prince Sheyin understood the reason with great sensitiveness.

"I'm ready," he said. "From tomorrow you'll hear nothing more of me. For you, I'm as good as dead. But there's one condition—I say this to *you*, Prince Vasily Lvovich—I've embezzled money and I must fly from this town anyway. Will you permit me to write a last letter to Princess Vera Nikolayevna?"

"No. If it's finished, it's finished. No letters!" shouted Nikolai Nikolayevich.

"All right, you may," said Sheyin. "That's all," said Zheltkov, smiling haughtily. "You'll hear no more of me, let alone see me. Princess Vera Nikolayevna didn't want to speak to me at all. When I asked her if I might remain in town so as to see her at least occasionally—without being seen by her, of course—she said, 'If only you knew how tired I am of the whole business! Please stop it as soon as you can.' And so I'm stopping the whole business. I think I've done all I could, haven't I?"

Coming back to the villa that evening, Vasily Lvovich told his wife in detail about his interview with Zheltkov. He seemed to feel it was his duty to do that.

Vera was worried, but not surprised or bewildered. Later that night, when her husband came into her bed, she suddenly turned away to the wall and said, "Leave me alone—I know that man is going to kill himself."

XI

Princess Vera Nikolayevna never read the newspapers because, firstly, they dirtied her hands, and, secondly, she could never make head or tail of the language

which they use nowadays.

But fate willed it that she should open the page and come upon the column which carried this news:

"A Mysterious Death. G. S. Zheltkov, an employee of the Board of Control, committed suicide about seven o'clock last night. According to evidence given at the inquest, his death was prompted by an embezzlement. He left a note to that effect. Since testimony furnished by witnesses has established that he died by his own hand, it has been decided not to order a post-mortem."

Vera thought, "Why did I feel it was coming? Precisely this tragic finale? And what was it: love or madness?"

All day long she wandered about the flower-garden and the orchard. The anxiety growing in her from minute to minute made her restless. And all her thoughts were riveted on the unknown man whom she had never seen, and would hardly ever see—that ridiculous "P.P.Z."

"Who knows? Perhaps a real, self-sacrificing, true love has crossed the path of your life," she recalled what Anosov had said.

At six o'clock the postman came. This time Vera Nikolayevna recognized Zheltkov's handwriting, and she unfolded the letter with greater tenderness than she would have expected of herself.

This was what Zheltkov wrote:

"It is not my fault, Vera Nikolayevna, that God willed to send to me, as an enormous happiness, love for you. I happen not to be interested in anything like politics, science, philosophy, or man's future happiness; to me life is centred in you alone. Now I realize that I have thrust myself into your life like an embarrassing wedge. Please forgive me for that if you can. I am leaving today and shall never come back, and there will be nothing to remind you of me.

"I am immensely grateful to you just because you exist. I have examined myself, and I know it is not a disease, not the obsession of a maniac—it is love with which God has chosen to reward me for some reason.

"I may have appeared ridiculous to you and your brother, Nikolai Nikolayevich. As I depart I say in ecstasy, *'Hallowed be thy name.'*

"Eight years ago I saw you in a circus box, and from the very first second I said to myself: I love her because there is nothing on earth like her, nothing better, no animal, no plant, no star, because no human being is more beautiful than she, or more delicate. The whole beauty of the earth seemed to be embodied in you.

"What was I to do? Fly to some other town? But my heart was always beside you, at your feet, at every moment it was filled with you, with thoughts of you, with dreams of you, with a sweet madness. I am very much ashamed of, and blush in my mind for, that foolish bracelet—well, it cannot be helped; it was a mistake. I can imagine the impression it made on your guests.

"I shall be gone in ten minutes from now. I shall just have time to stick a postage stamp on this letter and drop it into a box, so as not to ask anyone else to do it. Please burn this letter. I have just heated the stove and am burning all that was precious to me in life: your handkerchief which, I confess, I stole. You left it on a chair at a ball in the Noblemen's Assembly. Your note—oh, how I kissed it!—in which you forbade me to write to you. A programme of an art exhibition, which you once, held in your hand and left forgotten on a chair by the entrance. It is finished. I have cut off everything, but still I believe, and even feel confident, that you will think of me. If you do—I know you are very musical, for I saw you

mostly at performances of the Beethoven quartets—if you do think of me, please play, or get someone else to play, the Sonata in D-dur No. 2, op. 2.

"I wonder how I shall close my letter. I thank you from the bottom of my heart because you have been my only joy in life, my only comfort, my sole thought. May God give you happiness, and may nothing transient or commonplace disturb your wonderful soul. I kiss your hands.

G.S.Z.

She went to her husband, her eyes red with crying and her lips swollen, and, showing him the letter, she said, "I don't want to conceal anything from you, but I have a feeling that something terrible has come into our life.

You and Nikolai Nikolayevich probably didn't handle the matter properly."

Prince Sheyin read the letter with deep attention, folded it carefully, and said after a long pause, "I don't doubt this man's sincerity, and what's more, I don't think I have a right to analyse his feelings towards you."

"Is he dead?" asked Vera.

"Yes, he's dead. I think he loved you and wasn't mad at all. I watched him all the time and saw his every movement, every change in his face. There was no life for him without you. I felt as if I were witnessing a tremendous agony, and I almost realized that I was dealing with a dead man. You see, Vera, I didn't know how to behave or what to do."

"Look here, Vasya," she interrupted him. "Would it pain you if I went to town to take a look at him?"

"No, no, Vera, please go. I'd like to go myself, but Nikolai's bungled the whole thing. I'm afraid I should feel awkward."

XII

Vera Nikolayevna left her carriage two blocks off Luteranskaya Street. She found Zheltkov's flat without much difficulty. She was met by the same grey-eyed old woman, very stout and wearing silver-rimmed spectacles, who asked as she had done the day before, "Who do you wish to see?"

"Mr. Zheltkov," said the princess.

Her costume—her hat and gloves—and her rather peremptory tone apparently impressed the landlady. She began to talk.

"Please step in, it's the first door on your left, and there—he is— He left us so soon. Well, suppose he did embezzle money. He should have told me about it. You know we don't make much by letting rooms to bachelors. But if it was a matter of six or seven hundred rubles I could have scraped it together to pay for him. If only you knew, madam, what a wonderful man he was. He had been my lodger for eight years, but he was more like a son to me." There was a chair in the passage, and Vera sank down upon it.

"I'm a friend of your late lodger," she said, carefully choosing her words. "Please tell me something about his last minutes, about what he said and did."

"Two gentlemen came to see him, madam, and had a very long talk with him.

Then he told me they'd offered him the position of bailiff on an estate. Then Mr. George ran out to telephone and came back so happy. And then the two gentlemen left, but he sat down and began writing a letter. Then he went out to post the letter, and then we heard something like a shot from a toy pistol. We paid no attention to it. He always had tea at seven o'clock. Lukerya, the maid, went to knock at his door, but he didn't answer, and she knocked again and again. We had to force the door, and there he lay dead."

"Tell me something about the bracelet," Vera Nikolayevna commanded.

"Ah, the bracelet—I quite forgot. How do you know about it? Before writing the letter he came to me and said, 'Are you a Catholic?' 'Yes,' I said. Then he says, 'You have a nice custom'—that was what he said—'a nice custom of hanging rings, necklaces, and gifts on the image of the Holy Virgin. So won't you please hang this bracelet on your icon?' I promised."

"Will you let me see him?" asked Vera.

"Of course, madam. There's his door, the first on the left. They were going to take him to the dissecting-room today, but he has a brother who asked permission to give him a Christian burial. Please come."

Vera braced herself and opened the door. The room smelled of incense, and three wax candles were burning in it. Zheltkov was lying on the table, placed diagonally. His head rested on a very low support—a small soil cushion that someone seemed to have pushed under it purposely, because that did not make any difference to a corpse. His closed eyes suggested deep gravity, and his lips were set in a blissful, serene smile, as if before parting with life he had learned some deep, sweet mystery that had solved the whole riddle of his life. She remembered having seen the same peaceful expression on the death-masks of two great martyrs, Pushkin and Napoleon.

"Would you like me to leave you alone, madam?" asked the old woman, a very intimate note in her voice.

"Yes, I'll call you later," said Vera, and she at once took a big red rose from the side pocket of her jacket, slightly raised the head of the corpse with her left hand, and with her right hand put the flower under his neck. At that moment she realized that that love of which every woman dreams had gone past her. She recalled what General Anosov had said, almost prophetically, about everlasting, exclusive love. And, pushing aside the hair on the dead man's forehead, she clutched his temples with her hands and put her lips to his cold, moist forehead in a long, affectionate kiss.

When she was leaving the landlady spoke to her in her ingratiating accent.

"I can see, madam, that you're not like others, who come out of mere curiosity. Before his death Mr. Zheltkov said to me, 'If I happen to die and a lady comes to look at me tell her that Beethoven's best work is—' He wrote it down for me. Here, look."

"Let me see it," said Vera Nikolayevna, and suddenly she broke into tears. "Please excuse me—this death shocked me so I couldn't help myself."

She read the words, written in the familiar hand: "*L. van Beethoven. Son. No. 2, op. 2. Largo Appassionato.*"

XIII

Vera Nikolayevna came home late in the evening and was glad not to find either her husband or her brother in.

However, Jennie Reiter was waiting for her; troubled by what she had seen and heard, Vera rushed to her and cried as she kissed her large beautiful hands, "Please play something for me, Jennie dear, I beg of you." And at once she went out of the room and sat on a bench in the flower-garden.

She scarcely doubted for a moment that Jennie would play the passage from the sonata asked for by that dead man with the odd name of Zheltkov. [Derived from *zheltok*, yolk.—*Tr.*]

And so it happened. From the very first chords Vera recognized that extraordinary work, unique in depth. And her soul seemed to split in two. She thought that a great love, of the kind which comes but once in a thousand years, had passed her by. She recalled General Anosov's words, wondering why Zheltkov had made her listen, of all Beethoven, to this particular work. Words strung themselves together in her mind. They fell in with the music to such an extent that they were like the verses of a hymn, each ending with the words: "*Hallowed be thy name.*"

"I shall now show you in tender sounds a life that meekly and joyfully doomed itself to torture, suffering, and death. I knew nothing like complaint, reproach, or the pain of love scorned. To you I pray: '*Hallowed be thy name.*'"

"Yes, I foresee suffering, blood, and death. And I think that it is hard for the body to part with the soul, but' I give you praise, beautiful one, passionate praise, and a gentle love. '*Hallowed be thy name.*'"

"I recall your every step, every smile, every look, the sound of your footsteps. My last memories are enwrapped in sweet sadness—in gentle, beautiful sadness. But I shall cause you no sorrow. I shall go alone, silently, for such is the will of God and fate. '*Hallowed be thy name.*'"

"In my sorrowful dying hour I pray to you alone. Life might have been beautiful for me too. Do not murmur, my poor heart, do not. In my soul I call death, but my heart is full of praise for you: '*Hallowed be thy name.*'"

"You do not know—neither you nor those around you —how beautiful you are. The clock is striking. It is time. And, dying, in the mournful hour of parting with life I still sing—glory to you.

"Here it comes, all-subduing death, but I say - glory to you!"

With her arms round the slender trunk of an acacia and her body pressed to it, Princess Vena was weeping. The tree shook gently. A wind came on a light wing to rustle in the leaves, as if in sympathy. The smell of the tobacco-plant was more pungent. Meanwhile the marvellous music continued, responding to her grief:

"Be at peace, my dearest, be at peace. Do you remember me? Do you? You are my last, my only love. Be at peace, I am with you. Think of me, and I shall be with you, because you and I loved each other only an instant, but for ever. Do you remember me? Do you? Here, I can feel your tears. Be at peace. Sleep is so sweet, so sweet to me."

Having finished the piece, Jennie Reiter came out of the room and saw Princess Vera, bathed in tears, sitting on the bench.

"What's the matter?" asked the pianist.

Her eyes glistening, Vera, restless and agitated, kissed Jennie's face and lips and eyes as she said, "It's all right, he has forgiven me now. All is well."

1911

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Ivanovich Kuprin was born in 1870, in the small provincial town of Narovchata. His father, an official of modest means, died when the boy was about a year old. Soon the family moved to Moscow. Kuprin's mother was compelled to send him at the age of seven to an orphans' school; three years later he entered a military school.

In 1889 the eighteen-year-old Kuprin, then a military cadet, had published in a newspaper a short story, "The Last Debut," and was placed under arrest, because cadets were not allowed to write anything for the press. In 1893, after an unsuccessful attempt to enter the General Staff Academy, he gave up his military career and became a "free man."

Penniless he arrived in Kiev. There came years of "unemployment, wandering, dire poverty." In his "Autobiography" he says: "I found myself in a strange city without money, without relatives or acquaintances. Worst of all, I had no special training, or any real knowledge of life."

He wrote short stories and poetry, which were published in newspapers and magazines, and worked as a reporter, clerk, estate bailiff, actor in a provincial company, land surveyor, and porter.

In 1896 his first major work, *Moloch*, was published.

A year later his short stories appeared in a collection.

That was when he met Maxim Gorky. Gorky invited him to contribute to the Znanye Company literary collections, in which many progressive Russian authors published their works. After the publication of *The Duel*, a story dedicated to Gorky, Kuprin wrote to him: "I owe to you all that is bold and impetuous in my story. If you only knew how much I have learned from you and how grateful I am for it."

In the years preceding the first Russian revolution (1905), Kuprin became increasingly popular as a writer. His literary work, his humane sentiments, and his improving artistic skill earned him high praise from progressive critics.

But in the years of reaction, which set in after the defeat of the revolution of 1905, Kuprin drifted away from Gorky and associated with decadent writers, who tried to discredit the democratic tradition in literature and advocated art for art's sake.

Kuprin's reaction to the Great October Socialist Revolution was sympathetic, but he did not grasp its significance. He was afraid of what seemed to him "elemental" in the movement of the people, and he doubted whether he would be able to work as a writer in the new, Soviet Russia.

From 1920 to 1937 he lived in Paris. While abroad he hardly wrote anything, except a few chapters of *The Cadet*, an autobiographical novel. Throughout those years he was aware of the mistake he had made, and longed to go back to his country. "My heart aches and yearns for my homeland, unabatingly.... It is only in Russia that I can work for her...." he said.

In 1937 Kuprin came back to his country. "I am happy," he said, "to hear at last my own Russian language spoken all around me.... During the last years ... I have keenly felt and realized my heavy guilt towards the Russian people, who are doing a wonderful job—building a new life." He planned to write new books about the Soviet people, about their creative effort, but illness prevented him from

doing so. He died in 1938.

А. И. КУПРИН
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