FATHER VASILY: A FRAGMENT

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It was autumn. Before daybreak a cart rattled over the road, which was in bad repair, and drove up to Father Vasily's double-fronted thatched house. A peasant in a cap, with the collar of his kaftan turned up, jumped out of the cart, and, turning his horse round, knocked with his big whip at the window of the room which he knew to be that of the priest's cook.

" Who's there?"

" I want the priest."

" What for?"

" For some one who is sick."

" Where do you come from? "

" From Vozdrevo."

A man struck a light, and, coming out into the yard, opened the gate for the peasant.

The priest's wife — a short, stout woman, dressed in a quilted jacket, with a shawl over her head and felt boots on her feet — came out and began to speak in an angry, hoarse voice.

" What evil spirit has brought you here? "

" I have come for the priest."

" What are you servants thinking about? You haven't lit the fire yet."

" Is it time yet? "

" If it were not time I shouldn't say anything."

The peasant from Vozdrevo went to the kitchen, crossed himself before the ikon, and, making a low bow to the priest's wife, sat down on a bench near the door.

The peasant's wife had been suffering a long time; and, having given birth to a still-born child, was now at the point of death.

While gazing at what was going on in the hut he sat busily thinking

how he should carry off the priest. Should he drive him across the Kossoe, as he had come, or should he go round another way? The road was bad near the village. The river was frozen over, but was not strong enough to bear. He had hardly been able to get across.

A labourer came in and threw down an armful of birch logs near the stove, asking the peasant to break up some of it to light the fire, whereupon the peasant took off his coat and set to work.

The priest awoke, as he always did, full of life and spirits. While still in bed, he crossed himself and said his favourite prayer, “ To the King of Heaven,” and repeated " Lord have mercy on us ” several times. Getting up, he washed, brushed his long hair, put on his boots and an old cassock, and then, standing before the ikons, began his morning prayers. When he reached the middle of the Lord’s Prayer, and had come to the words, " Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us,” he stopped, remembering the deacon who was drunk the day before, and who on meeting him muttered audibly, “ Hypocrite, Pharisee.” These words, Pharisee and hypocrite, pained Father Vasily particularly because, although conscious of having many faults, he did not believe hypocrisy to be one of them. He was angry with the deacon. “ Yes, I forgive,” he said to himself; " God be with him,” and he continued his prayers. The words, “ Lead us not into temptation,” reminded him how he had felt when hot tea with rum had been handed to him the night before after vespers in the house of a rich landowner.

Having said his prayers he glanced at himself in a little mirror which distorted everything, and passed his hands over his smooth, fair hair, which grew in a circle round a moderately large bald patch, and then he looked with pleasure at his broad, kind face, with its thin beard, which looked young in spite of his forty-two years. After this he went into the sitting-room, where he found his wife hurriedly and with difficulty bringing in the samovar, which was on the point of boiling over.

“Why do you do that yourself? Where’s Thekla ? ”

" Why do you do it yourself? ” mocked his wife. " Who else is to do it? ”

“ But why so early? ”

" A man from Vozdrevo has come to fetch you. His wife is dying.”

“ Has he been here long? ”

“ Yes, some time.”

“ Why was I not called before? ”

Father Vasily drank his tea without milk (it was Friday) ; and then, taking the sacred elements, put on his fur coat and cap and went out into the porch with a resolute air. The peasant was awaiting for him

there. " Good-morning, Mi-tri," said Father Vasily, and turning up his sleeve, made the sign of the cross, after which he stretched out his small strong hand with its short cut nails for him to kiss, and walked out on to the steps. The sun had risen, but was not yet visible behind the overhanging clouds. The peasant brought the cart out from the yard, and drove up to the front door. Father Vasily stepped quickly on the axle of the back wheel and sat down on the scat, which was bound round with hay. Mitri getting in beside him, whipped up the bigbarrelled mare with its drooping ears, and the cart rattled over the frozen mud. A fine snow was falling.

II

Father Vasily's family consisted of his wife, her mother— (the widow of the former priest of the parish), and three children — two sons and a daughter. The eldest son had finished his course at the seminary, and was now preparing to enter the university; the second son — the mother's favourite, a boy of fifteen — was still at the seminary, and his sixteen-year-old daughter, Lena, lived at home, though discontented with her lot, doing little to help her mother. Father Vasily himself had studied at the seminary in his youth, and had done so brilliantly that, when he left in 1840, he was at the top of his class. He then began to prepare for entrance into the ecclesiastical academy, and even dreamt of a professorship, or of a bishopric. But his mother, the widow of a verger, with three daughters and an elder son who drank — lived in the greatest poverty. The step he took at that time gave a suggestion of self-sacrifice and renunciation to his whole life. To please his mother he left the academy, and became a village priest. He did this out of love for his mother though he never confessed it to himself, but ascribed his decision to indolence and dislike for intellectual pursuits. The place to which he was presented was a living in a small village, and was offered to him on condition that he would marry the former priest's daughter.* The living was not a rich one, for the old priest had been poor and had left a widow and two daughters in distress. Anna, by whose aid he was to obtain the living, was a plain girl, but bright in every sense of the word. She literally fascinated Vasily and forced him to marry her, which he did. So he became Father Vasily, first wearing his hair short and afterwards long, and he lived happily with his wife, Anna Tikhonovna, for twenty-two years. Notwithstanding her romantic attachment to a student, the son of a former deacon, he was as kind to her as ever, as if he loved her still more tenderly, and wished to atone for the angry feelings which her attachment to the student had awakened in him.

It had afforded him an opportunity for the same self-sacrifice and self-denial; the result of which was that he gave up the academy, and felt a calm, almost unconscious, inner joy.

Ill

At first the two men drove on in silence. The road through the village was so uneven that al-

* The custom of giving a living to a son-in-law is universal in Russia. I he living is usually the dowry of the youngest daughter.

though they moved slowly the cart was thrown from side to side, while the priest kept sliding off his seat, settling himself again and wrapping his cloak round him.

It was only after they had left the village behind, and crossed over the trench into the meadow that the priest spoke.

“ Is your wife very bad? " he asked.

" We don’t expect her to live,” answered the peasant reluctantly.

“ It is in God’s, not man’s hands. It is God’s will,” said the priest. " There is nothing for it but to submit.”

The peasant raised his head and glanced at the priest’s face. Apparently he was on the point of making an angry rejoinder, but the kind look which met his eyes disarmed him — so shaking his head he only said: “ It may be God’s will, but it is very hard on me, Father. I am alone. What will become of my little ones? ”

" Don’t be faint-hearted — God will protect them.” The peasant did not reply, but swearing at the mare, who had changed from a trot into a slow walk, he pulled the rope reins sharply.

They entered a forest where the tracks were all equally bad, and drove along in silence for some time, trying to pick out the best of them. It was only after they had passed through the forest,

J ‘T and were on the high road which led through fields bright with springing shoots of the autumn-sown corn, that the priest spoke again.

" There is promise of a good crop/' he said.

" Not bad,” answered the peasant, and was silent. All further attempts at conversation on the part of the priest were in vain.

They reached the patient’s house about breakfast-time.

The woman, who was still alive, had ceased to suffer, but lay on her bed too weak to move, her expressive eyes alone showing that life was not yet extinct. She gazed at the priest with a look of entreaty, and kept her eyes fixed on him alone. An old woman stood near her, and the children were up on the stove. The eldest girl, a child of ten, dressed in a loose shirt, was standing, as if she were grown up, at a table near the bed, and resting her chin on her right hand, and supporting the right arm with her left, silently stared at her mother. The priest went to the bedside and administered the sacrament, and turning towards the ikon, began to pray. The old woman drew near to the dying woman, and looking at her shook her

head and then covered her face with a piece of linen; after which she approached the priest, and put a coin into his hand. He knew it was a five kopek * piece, and accepted it. At that moment the husband came into the hut.

" Is she dead? ” he asked.

" She is dying,” said the old woman.

On hearing this the girl burst into tears, muttering something. The three children on the stove began to howl in chorus.

The peasant crossed himself, and going up to his wife, uncovered her face and looked at her. The white face was calm and still. He stood over the dead woman for a few minutes, then tenderly covered the face again, and crossing himself several times, turned to the priest and said,—

" Shall we start? ”

" Yes, we had better go.”

" All right. I’ll just water the mare.” And he left the hut.

The old woman began a wailing chant about the orphans left motherless, with no one to feed or clothe them, comparing them to young birds who have fallen from their nest. At every verse of her chant she breathed heavily, and was more and more carried away by her own wailing. The priest listened, and became sad and sorry for the children and wanted to help them. He felt for his purse in the pocket of his cassock, remember-

* About three half-pence.

ing that he had a half-rouble (about a shilling) coin in it, which he had received from the landowner at whose house he had said vespers the evening before. He had not found time to hand it over to his wife, as he always did with his money; and, regardless of the consequences, he took out the coin, and showing it to the old woman, put it on the window-sill.

The peasant came in without his coat on and said that he had asked a friend to drive the priest back, as he had to go himself to fetch some boards for the coffin.

IV

Theodore, the friend who drove Father Vasily back, was a sociable, merry giant with red hair and a red beard. His son had just been taken as a recruit, and to celebrate the event, Theodore had had a drink, and was therefore in a particularly happy frame of mind.

" Mitri’s mare was tired out," he said; " why not help a friend? Why not help a friend? We ought to be kind to one another, oughtn’t we?

Now then, my beauty!” he shouted to the bay horse with its tightly plaited tail, and touched it with the whip.

“Gently, gently,” said Father Vasily, shaken as he was by the jolting.

" Well, we can go slower. Is she dead? ”

" Yes, she is at rest,” said the priest.

The red-haired man wanted to express his sympathy, but he also wanted to have a joke.

" God’s taken one wife, He’ll send another,” he said, wishing to have a laugh.

" Oh, it is terribly sad for the poor fellow! ” said the priest.

" Of course it is. He is poor and has no one to help him. He came to me and said, ∗ Take the priest home, will you; my mare can’t do any more.’ We must help one another, mustn’t we? ”

" You’ve been drinking, I see. It’s wrong of you, Theodore. It’s a working-day.”

" Do you think I drank at the expense of others? I drank at my own. I was seeing my son off. Forgive me, Father, for God’s sake.”

" It is not my business to forgive. I only say it is better not to drink.”

" Of course it is, but what am I to do? If I were just nobody — but, thank God, I am well off. I live openly. I am sorry for Mitri. Who could help being sorry for him? Why, only last year some one stole his horse. Oh, you have to keep a sharp eye on folk nowadays.”

Theodore began a long story about some horses

that were stolen from a fair; how one was killed for the sake of its skin — but the thief was caught and was beaten black and blue, said Theodore, with evident satisfaction.

" They ought not to have beaten him."

" Do you think they ought to have patted him on the back? "

While conversing in this manner they reached Father Vasily’s house.

Father Vasily wanted to go to his room and rest, but during his absence two letters had come — one from his son, one from the bishop. The bishop’s circular was of no importance, but the son’s letter gave rise to a stormy scene, which increased when his wife asked him for the halfrouble and found that he had given it away. Her anger grew, but the real cause was the boy’s letter and their

inability to satisfy his demands – due entirely to her husband’s carelessness, she thought.

THE END