

THREE DEATHS

A Story

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I.

It was autumn. On the highway two carriages were passing, with their horses on the trot. In the front carriage two ladies were sitting. One was a pale, lean lady, the other a radiantly ruddy and plump chambermaid. Her short, dry hair peeped out underneath her faded hat, and her red hand in a torn glove by fits and starts adjusted it again. Her high bosom, covered with a heavy kerchief, breathed health ; her quick black eyes now watched the vanishing fields through the windows, now timidly looked at the lady, now restlessly surveyed the corners of the carriage. Before the chambermaid's nose was swinging the master's hat, hanging down from the netting ; on her knees lay a pup ; her legs were lifted up on account of the boxes which were lying on the floor, and her feet softly drummed upon them, keeping time with the jolting of the springs and the clattering of the panes.

Folding her hands upon her knees and closing her eyes, the lady feebly swayed on the pillows placed at her back, and, slightly frowning, inwardly cleared her throat. On her head there was a white nightcap and a blue ker-

chief, tied over her tender, white neck. A straight part, disappearing under the cap, divided her blond, extremely flat, pomaded hair, and there was something dry and dead in the whiteness of the skin of that broad part. A flabby, somewhat sallow skin hung loosely over the thin and beautiful contours of her face and was crimsoned on her cheeks and over her cheek-bones. Her lips were dry and restless, her scanty eyelashes did not curl, and her cloth travelling capote made straight folds over her sunken breast. Although the lady's eyes were closed, her face expressed fatigue, irritation, and habitual suffering.

The lackey, leaning on his seat, was dozing on the box. The post-driver, shouting, briskly urged on his large, sweaty four-in-hand, occasionally looking at the other driver who was shouting from behind in the calash. The parallel, broad tracks of the tires fell evenly and fast on the dirty, chalky road. The sky was gray and cold ; a damp mist drizzled down on the fields and on the road. The carriage was close and smelled of eau de Cologne and dust. The sick

woman drew back her head and softly opened her eyes. Her large eyes were sparkling and of a beautiful dark hue.

« Again, » she said, nervously, with her beautiful, lean hand pushing aside the end of the chambermaid's cloak, which had barely touched her foot. Her mouth was drawn in a sickly curve.

Matréna lifted her cloak with both her hands, raised herself on her strong legs, and seated herself farther away. Her fresh face was covered with a crimson blush. The beautiful dark eyes of the patient eagerly watched the movements of the chambermaid. The lady leaned with both her arms against her seat, and also wished to raise herself in order to sit up higher, but her strength failed her. Her mouth was bent awry, and her whole countenance was marred by an expression of impotent, malignant irony.

" If you only offered to help me !— Ah, it is unnecessary ! I can do it myself, only, please, don't put any of your bags, or anything, behind my back ! — Don't touch me, if you can't do any better ! "

The lady closed her eyes, and, again quickly raising her eyelids, cast a glance at the chambermaid. Matréna looked at her, and bit her red lower lip. A heavy sigh rose from the sick woman's breast, and, without ending, changed into a cough. She turned aside, frowned, and with both her hands clasped her breast. When the cough stopped she again closed her eyes and sat motionless. The carriage and calash drove into a village. Matréna put her stout hand out from the kerchief and made the sign of the cross.

" What is this ? " asked the lady.

" A station, madam."

" Why are you making the sign of the cross, I ask ? "

" There is a church here, madam."

The patient turned to the window and began slowly to cross herself, looking with widely open eyes at the large village church, around which the carriage of the patient was driving.

The carriage and calash stopped at the station. From the calash stepped the patient's husband and a doctor, and both walked over to the carriage.

" How are you feeling ? " asked the doctor, feeling her pulse.

" Well, my dear, are you tired ?" the husband asked, in French. "Don't you want to step out?"

Matréna, picking up the bundles, pressed herself into a corner, in order not to interfere with the conversation.

" Nothing, — just the same," replied the patient. " I will not get

out."

Her husband stood awhile and then went into the station-house. Matróna jumped out of the carriage and ran on tiptoe over the mud to the gate.

" My not feeling well is no reason why you should not have your breakfast," the patient, softly smiling, said to the doctor, who was standing at the window.

" They none of them care for me," she added to herself the moment the doctor stepped aside and in a trot ran up the stairs of the station. " They are well, so it is all right. Oh, my God ! "

" Well, Eduard Ivanovich," said the husband, meeting the doctor, and rubbing his hands with a merry smile, " I have sent for the lunch-basket. What do you think about it ? "

" That's all right," replied the doctor.

" Well, how is she ? " the husband asked, with a sigh lowering his voice and raising his brows.

" I told you that she could not reach Italy. God grant she may reach Moscow, especially in this weather."

" What am I to do ? Ah, my God ! My God ! " the husband closed his eyes with his hands. " Bring it here," he added, addressing the man who brought in the lunchbasket.

" You ought to have remained there," replied the doctor, shrugging his shoulders.

" But tell me, what could I do ? " retorted the husband. " I used every possible means to keep her back : I spoke of the expense, and of the children, whom we had to leave, and of my affairs, – she would not listen to anything. She is making plans for her life abroad, as though she were to live. If I were to tell her of her condition, I should only kill her."

" She is already killed, – you must know that, Vasili Dmitri ch. A person can't live when there are no lungs, and new lungs won't grow out again. It is sad and hard, but what is to be done ? It is your business and mine to make her end as quiet for her as possible, that is all. A confessor is needed here."

" Ah, my God ! Think of my condition ! How can I remind her of the last will ? Come what may, I shall not tell her. You know how good she is – "

" Still, try to persuade her to stay until the winter roads are open," said the doctor, significantly shaking his head, " or something bad may happen on the road – "

" Aksyusha ! Oh, Aksyusha ! " screamed the inspector's daughter, throwing a jacket over her head, and trudging through the dirt of the back porch, " come, let us look at the Shirkin lady ! They say that they are taking her abroad on account of her lung trouble. I have never seen yet how people look when they have consumption."

Aksyusha jumped out on the threshold, and both, taking each other's hands, ran out of the gate. They slackened their steps, as they passed by the carriage, and looked through the lowered window. The patient turned her head to them, but, noticing their curiosity, she frowned and turned away from them.

" Sakes," said the inspector's daughter, swiftly turning her head around. " What a great beauty she used to be, and see what she is now like ! It is just terrible. Did you see, did you see, Aksyusha ? "

" Yes, how lean she is ! " Aksyusha agreed with her. " Let us go and see again ! We will pretend we are going to the well. You see, she has turned her face away, but I saw her. How pitiful it is, Masha ! "

" How muddy it is ! " replied Masha, and both ran back through the gate.

"I must look terrible," thought the patient. "If I could only get abroad immediately ! There I shall quickly recuperate."

"Well, how are you, my dear?" said the husband, walking over to the carriage and munching at something.

"Always one and the same question," thought the patient, " and he himself eats ! "

" So so," she said, through her teeth.

"Do you know, my dear, I am afraid you will feel worse from travelling in such weather, and Édouard Ivanovich says so, too. Had we not better return ? "

She kept sullen silence.

" The weather will improve, the roads will get settled, and you will feel better ; we should then all of us travel with you."

"Excuse me. If I had not paid attention to you before, I should now be in Berlin, and might have been well by this time."

" What is to be done, my angel ? You know it is impossible. But now, if you stayed another month you would improve wonderfully, and I should be through with my affairs, and we could take the children with us - "

" The children are well, and I am not."

" Don't you see, my dear, in this weather, you might get worse on the road, while, otherwise, you would at least be at home."

" What of home? To die at home?" the patient replied, in a passion. But the words " to die " apparently frightened her, and she looked imploringly and interrogatively at her husband. He lowered his eyes and was silent. The patient's mouth suddenly assumed childish curves, and tears coursed down from her eyes. Her husband covered his face with his handkerchief and silently walked away from the carriage.

" No, I will travel," said the patient, lifting up her eyes to the sky. She folded her hands, and began to lisp incoherent words. "My God' For what?" she said, and the tears flowed more copiously. She prayed long and fervently; but in her breast was the same painful and oppressive feeling ; in the sky, in the fields, and on the road was the same gray gloom ; the same autumnal mist, neither thickening, nor lifting, drizzled down on the mud of the road, on the roofs, on the carriage, and on the sheepskins of the drivers, who, conversing in strong, cheerful voices, were greasing and hitching up the carriage.

II.

The carriage was hitched up, but the driver hesitated. He went into the drivers' room. It was hot, close, dark, and oppressive in the hut, and there was there an odour of human evaporations, baked bread, cabbage, and sheepskins. There were several drivers in the room ; the cook was busy at the oven ; a sick man was lying on the oven, wrapped in sheepskins.

" Uncle Fédor ! Oh, Uncle Fédor ! " said the young driver, in sheep-fur coat and with the whip stuck in his belt, upon entering the room and turning to the sick man.

" What do you want of Fédor, lazybones ? " called out one of the drivers. " They are waiting for you in the carriage."

" I want to ask him for his boots ; I have worn mine out," replied the lad, tossing up his hair and straightening his mittens in his belt. "Is he asleep? Oh, Uncle Fédor ! " he repeated, walking over to the oven.

" What is it ? " was heard a feeble voice, and a lean, red face bent down from the oven. A broad, emaciated, and pale hand, covered with hair, was drawing a camel coat over the angular shoulder, covered by a dirty shirt. " Let me have a drink, my friend ! "

The lad handed him a dipper with water.

"Say, Fédor," he said, hesitating, "I suppose you do not need your

new boots now ; let me have them ! I suppose you are not going to wear them."

The sick man, dropping his feeble head on the shining dipper and wetting his scanty, sprawling moustache in the dark water, drank weakly and eagerly. His matted beard was not clean ; his sunken, dim eyes were with difficulty raised upon the face of the lad. Taking his head away from the water, he wanted to lift his hand in order to wipe off his wet lips, but he could not, and so wiped them on the sleeve of his coat. He was silent and breathed heavily through his nose, looking straight at the driver's eyes, and collecting his strength.

" Maybe you have promised somebody else ? " said the lad, " then it is in vain. The trouble is it is wet outside, and I have to work out, so I thought I would ask Fédor for his boots, – maybe he does not need them. If you need them yourself, say so."

Something began to gurgle and growl in the sick man's breast ; he bent over and began to choke with a guttural, unyielding cough.

" What does he need them for ? " the cook suddenly screamed so as to be heard by all. " He has not come down from the oven for more than a month. Do you hear how he coughs ? It gives me a pain inside just to listen to him. What use can he make of the boots ? They will not bury him in new boots. It has long been time for him, God forgive me the ' sin ! Just hear how he suffers. He ought to be taken to some other hut, or somewhere ! They say there are such sick-houses in the city, but here he takes up a whole corner, and that's the end of it. I have no room at all. And they demand cleanliness, too."

" Oh, Seréga! Go on the box, the people are waiting," the post elder shouted through the door.

Serega wanted to leave without waiting for an answer, but the sick man gave him to know with his eyes, while coughing, that he wanted to answer him.

" Take my boots, Seréga," he said, suppressing the cough and resting a little. " Only, listen, buy me a stone when I am dead," he added, with a rattle in his throat.

" Thank you, uncle ! I will take them, and, upon my word, I will buy you a stone."

" Boys, you have heard what he has said," was all the sick man was able to say. He again bent down and began to strangle.

" All right, we have heard it," said one of the drivers. " Go, Seréga, take your seat, for there the elder is running again. The Shirkin lady, you know, is ill."

Seréga briskly pulled off his torn, disproportionately large boots and flung them under a bench. Uncle Fédor's new boots exactly fitted

his feet, and Seréga, looking at them, went out to the carriage.

" What fine boots ! Let me grease them," said the driver, with the axle-grease in his hand, just as Seréga, climbing on the box, was adjusting the reins. " Did he give them to you for nothing ? "

** Do you begrudge them to me ? " replied Seréga, rising a little and wrapping the skirts of his camel coat around his legs. " Come now ! Oh, there, my darlings ! " he shouted to the horses and swayed his little whip, and the carriage and calash, with their passengers, portmanteaus, and boxes, swiftly rolled over the wet road, disappearing in the gray autumnal mist.

The sick driver was left in the close room upon the oven. He got no relief from his coughing, with difficulty turned himself on his other side, and grew silent.

People came, went away, dined in the room until evening, but nothing was heard of the sick man. Before night, the cook climbed on the oven and fetched down from over his legs a sheepskin fur coat.

" Nastasya, don't be angry with me," muttered the sick man, - " I shall soon clear away from your corner."

" All right, all right, never mind," said Nastasya. " What is it that hurts you, uncle ? Tell me ! "

" My whole inside. God knows what it is."

« I suppose your throat is hurting you from the way you cough ?

" It pains me everywhere. My death is near at hand, that's what it is. Oh, oh, oh! " groaned the sick man.

" Cover up your feet like this," said Nastdsya, on her way down, pulling the camel coat over him, and climbing down from the oven.

In the night the lamp burned dimly. Nastasya and some ten drivers slept on the floor and benches with mighty snoring. Only the sick man feebly groaned, coughed, and turned around on the oven. Toward morning he grew entirely quiet.

" I had a wonderful dream last night," said the cook, stretching herself the next morning in the dim twilight. « I saw Uncle Fedor getting down from the oven and going out to chop some wood. ' Nastdsya, let me help you,' says he; and I said, 'You have not the strength to chop wood/ but he seized the axe and began to chop so fast, so fast that only the chips flew. ' You have been ill/ says I. ' No/ says he, ' I am well/ and he swung the axe so that I was overcome with terror. I screamed, and I awoke. I wonder whether he is dead. Uncle Fédor ' Oh, uncle ! "

Fédor made no reply.

« He must be dead ! I will go and see, » said one of the drivers, waking up.

A lean hand, covered with reddish hair, was hanging down from the oven : it was cold and pale.

" I will go and tell the inspector : I think he is dead, " said the driver.

Fédor had no relatives, – he was from some distant place. On the next day he was buried in the new cemetery, back of the grove, and Nastdsya for several days told everybody of her dream, and that she was the first to think of Uncle Fédor.

III.

Spring came. Over the wet streets of the city hasty rivulets murmured between manure-covered ice-heaps ; the colours of people's clothes were bright, and the sounds of the strollers' voices were merry. In the little gardens back of the fences the buds of the trees were swelling, and their branches could just be heard swaying in the fresh breeze. Everywhere flowed and dripped transparent water-drops. The sparrows squeaked discordantly and fluttered about on their little wings. On the sunny side, on the fences, houses, and trees, everything was in motion and sparkling. There was joy and youth in heaven, upon earth, and in the hearts of men.

In one of the chief streets, before a large, lordly house, fresh straw was strewn ; in the house was that same dying patient, who was hurrying abroad.

At the closed door of the room stood the patient's husband and an elderly woman. Upon a couch sat a priest with downcast eyes, and holding something, wrapped in the chasuble. In the corner, in an easy chair, lay an old woman, the patient's mother, weeping bitterly. Near her a chambermaid held a clean handkerchief in her hand, waiting for the old lady to ask for it ; another was rubbing the old woman's temples with something, and sprinkling something on her gray hair under her cap.

" Well, Christ aid you, my dear, " said the husband to the elderly woman who was standing at the door, " she has such confidence in you, and you know how to speak with her, so persuade her, my dear, please do ! " He was on the point of opening the door for her cousin ; but she held him back, several times put her handkerchief to her eyes, and tossed her head.

" Now, I think I do not look as if I had been crying, " she said, and, opening the door herself, went in.

The husband was in great agitation, and seemed to be quite distracted. He started in the direction of the old lady, but, when

he came within a few steps of her, he turned back, several times paced up and down the room, and walked over to the priest. The priest looked at him, raised his eyebrows to heaven, and sighed. His thick, gray-spotted beard also rose and fell.

" My God ! My God ! " said the husband.

" What is to be done ? " said the priest, sighing, and again his eyebrows and beard rose and fell.

" And her mother is here ! " said the husband, almost in despair. " She will not live through it. She loves her, she loves her so, – how she – I do not know. Father, try to calm her, and to persuade her to leave ! "

The priest got up and went up to the old lady.

" That is so, nobody can appreciate a mother's heart," he said, " but God is merciful."

The old lady's face suddenly began to jerk, and she was attacked by hysterical hiccoughs.

" God is merciful," continued the priest, when she quieted down a little. " Let me inform you, in my parish there was a patient, – he was much worse off than Marya Dmitrievna, – well, a simple burgher cured her with herbs in a short time. This burgher now happens to be in Moscow. I told Vasili Dmitrievich, – you might try him. At least, it would be a consolation for the patient. Everything is possible with God."

" No, she will not live," muttered the old lady. " God is taking her instead of me." Her hysterical hiccoughs increased to such a degree that she fainted.

The husband of the patient covered his face with his hands and ran out of the room.

In the corridor, the first person he met was a six-year-old boy, chasing a younger sister as fast as he could.

" Don't you wish to have the children taken to their mamma ? " asked the nurse.

"No, she does not want to see them, – it irritates her."

The boy stopped for a moment, looking fixedly into his father's face, then suddenly stamped his foot and with a merry laugh ran ahead.

" She pretends to be the black horse, papa ! " shouted the boy, pointing to his sister.

In the meantime the cousin was sitting in the other room near the

patient and in an artful conversation trying to prepare her for the thought of death. The doctor was mixing a medicine at another window.

The patient, dressed in a white capote, and bolstered up by pillows, was sitting on the bed and silently looking at her cousin.

" Ah, my friend," she said, unexpectedly interrupting her, " do not prepare me. Do not regard me as a child. I am a Christian. I know all. I know that I have but a short time left to live ; I know that if my husband had listened to me before, I should now be in Italy and, possibly, no, certainly, well by this time. All told him so. Well, what is to be done? Evidently this is God's will. All of us have sinned much, I know that ; but I hope for God's mercy, - all will be forgiven, no doubt all will be forgiven. I try to understand myself. I have many sins to answer for, my dear. But, oh, how much I have had to suffer for them ! I have endeavoured patiently to bear my suffering - "

" Shall I call in the father, my dear ? You will feel more at ease after communion," said her cousin.

The patient bent her head in token of consent.

" O God ! Forgive me, sinful woman," she whispered.

Her cousin went out and beckoned to the father.

" She is an angel ! " she said to the husband, with tears in her eyes. The husband burst out into tears ; the priest went through the door; the old woman was still in a swoon, and in the first room everything grew absolutely quiet. Five minutes later the priest issued from the room and, taking off the chasuble, straightened out his hair.

" Thank God, she is calmer now," he said. " She wishes to see you."

The cousin and the husband went in. The patient was weeping softly, looking at the holy image.

" I congratulate you, my dear," said the husband.

"Thank you ! How well I feel now' What inexpressible joy I am experiencing now," said the patient, and a soft smile played on her thin lips. " How merciful God is ! Is it not so ? He is merciful and all-powerful ! " She again, with an expression of eager entreaty, looked with her tearful eyes at the image.

Then she suddenly seemed to recall something. She made signs to her husband to come nearer.

" You never want to do what I ask you," she said, in a feeble and displeased voice.

Her husband, craning his neck, listened to her humbly.

" What is it, my dear ? "

" How many times have I told you that these doctors know nothing, that there are simple healing women who cure – The father told me – a burgher – Send for him ! "

" For whom, my dear ? "

" My God, he does not want to understand me ! " The sick woman frowned and closed her eyes.

The doctor walked over to her and touched her pulse. It was beating perceptibly slower and slower. He winked to the husband. The patient noticed this gesture and looked about her in fright. Her cousin turned away and burst out into tears.

" Do not weep ! Do not torment yourself and me," said the patient, " for that takes my last quiet away."

" You are an angel ! " said her cousin, kissing her hand.

" No, kiss me here ! Only dead people are kissed on the hand. My God ! My God ! "

That same evening the patient was a corpse, and the body in the coffin stood in the parlour of the large house. In the large room with the closed doors a sexton sat all alone, reading the psalms of David through his nose and in an even voice. The bright flame of the wax tapers in tall silver candlesticks fell upon the pale brow of the deceased woman, upon her heavy wax-like hands, and upon the petrified folds of the shroud, rising terribly at the knees and toes. The sexton read evenly, without understanding his words, and the words sounded strangely and died away in the quiet room. Occasionally the sounds of children's voices and their treads reached him from a distant room.

" Thou hidest Thy face, they are troubled," so ran the psalm. " Thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to dust. Thou sendest forth Thy spirit, they are created and renew the face of the earth. The glory of the Lord shall endure for ever."

The face of the deceased woman was stern and majestic. There was no motion, neither in the clean, cold forehead, nor in the firmly compressed lips. She was all attention ! But did she at all understand these great words now ?

IV.

A month later, a stone chapel rose over the grave of the deceased woman. Over the driver's grave there was still no stone, and only

the light green grass sprouted on the mound which served as the only token of the past existence of the man.

" It will be a sin, Seréga," once said the cook at the station, "if you don't buy Fédor a stone. You kept saying that it was winter, but why do you not keep your word now ? Wasn't I a witness to it ? He once came to you to ask for it ; if you do not buy it, he will come again and will choke you."

"But I do not deny it," replied Seréga. " I will buy a stone, as I said I would, and I will give a rouble and a half for it. I have not forgotten it, but I must fetch it from town. The first time I am there, I will buy it."

" You ought to put up a cross at least, that's what," interposed an old driver, " for it is bad to leave it as it is. You are wearing his boots."

« Where shall I get the cross ? I can't dress one out of a billet of wood."

" What nonsense you talk ! You can't dress one from a billet ! Take an axe and go early in the morning into the grove, and then you will be able to dress one. Cut down an ash, or something like that, and there you have a cross. What sense is there in filling the forester with brandy? You can't be ready to treat them for every trifle. The other day I broke an axletree, so I trimmed me a fine new one, and nobody said a word to me about it."

Early in the morning, just at daybreak, Seréga took an axe and went into the grove.

On everything lay the cold, dull shroud of the still settling dew, not illuminated by the sun. The east was visibly growing brighter, reflecting its feeble light on the vault of heaven veiled by thin clouds. Not one blade of grass underfoot nor one leaf in the upper branches of the trees were stirring. Only the occasional sounds of wings in the thick foliage of the trees or a rustling sound on the ground broke the silence of the woods. Suddenly a strange sound, unfamiliar to Nature, was borne through the forest and died away in the clearing. But the sound was heard again and was evenly repeated below, upon the trunk of one of the immovable trees. One of the tops shook in an unusual way ; its juicy leaves whispered something, and a whitethroat, which was sitting on one of its branches, twice flitted about, uttering a whistling sound, and, jerking up its tail, seated itself on another tree.

The axe sounded duller and duller below; the sap-filled chips flew upon the dew-covered grass, and a slight crackling was heard above the strokes. The tree trembled in all its body, bent down and swiftly straightened itself, swaying frightened on its root. For a moment everything was silent ; but the tree bent down once more, there was heard a crackling in its trunk, and, breaking boughs and lowering its branches, it crashed with its top against the damp

earth. The sounds of the axe and of the steps died down. The whitethroat whistled and flitted higher up. The twig which it brushed with its wings swayed to and fro a little while and came to a rest, like the others, with all its leaves. The trees still more joyously displayed their motionless branches in the newly cleared place.

The first rays of the sun, piercing the translucent cloud, gleamed in the heaven and flashed through earth and sky. The mist began to quiver in waves in the ravines; the dew, sparkling, played on the verdure; translucent, whitened cloudlets scudded over the deepening azure of the vault. Birds stirred in the thicket and, as though lost, twittered about some happiness ; the lush leaves joyfully and calmly whispered to each other in the tops, and the branches of the living trees slowly, majestically rustled over the dead, prostrate tree.