

◆ KAROLINA PAVLOVA ◆

Of mixed German, English, French, and Russian descent, Pavlova was born in 1807 in Moscow, into the family of a physics lecturer; she grew up trilingual, and received a good education at home. An early romance with the Polish poet Mickiewicz was blighted when the Jänisch relatives refused to allow the marriage; in 1837, Karolina married the minor prose writer Nikolai Pavlov. The Pavlovs' residence was soon to become a literary and political salon, which at first operated on cross-party lines. Pavlova herself, who was already the author of translations and of poetry in French and German, began writing original poetry in Russian in the late 1830s; she was soon enjoying a considerable reputation. From the mid-1840s, however, Pavlova's position began to be increasingly isolated and embattled. The formal inventiveness and linguistic austerity of her mature work was poorly understood; the polarization of the intelligentsia into 'Slavophile' and 'Western' groups led to Pavlova's increasing identification with the former group, perceived as reactionary by the Westerners; and in the early 1850s, Pavlova's marital conflicts with her husband began to attract general censure, she being alleged to have 'mistreated' him. In 1853, Pavlova left Moscow for Dorpat, where her son was being educated; in 1858, she took up residence in Dresden, where she was to remain until her death. The whereabouts of her grave is unknown.

*The Crone*

(Russian text p. 411)

I

'Young man, do not hurl yourself  
Along the road so wide,  
Do not rush to gallop so  
Past me, horseman bold!

Cease to stare in impudence,  
Be sure to mark my words:  
For I know that silently  
A thought gnaws at this youth.

## ◆ KAROLINA PAVLOVA ◆

*At the Tea-Table*

Die Gräfin spricht wehmüdig:  
 'Die Lieb' ist eine Passion!!'  
 Und präsentiret gütig  
 Die Tasse dem Herren Baron.

(Heine)

I would prefer there to be no finished stories: it is the ending that spoils everything. If you storytellers have been able to show me living people and make me feel for them, why should you all without fail do something that makes those people uninteresting to me? Why this desire to leave me with nothing to dream about? A finished tale—why, that's like nothing so much as a garden with a high stone wall that keeps me from seeing into the distance—

(A madman's ratiocinations)\*

The conversation had turned into an argument. Bulanin, seized by all the ardour of a 25-year-old's convictions and by the heat of the debate, had forgotten the proprieties so far as to raise his voice.

The Countess glanced at him and smiled.

'No,' he continued, tossing his long hair back off his face, 'I admit no such necessity. I find the social position of women improper, even indecent. My heart shrinks to see it.'

'Won't you have some tea?' asked the lady of the house.

'Please. No, it's simply barbaric! I see no moral reason why a woman should blindly obey her husband and bear his insults; that is the most painful kind of dependency. Why should they not be equals?'

The Countess glanced at him again, but without smiling this time. 'It would certainly be hard to find any justification in logic for the situation,' she muttered under her breath.

'*Vae victis!*' said the man of about 40 sitting next to her.

'What does that mean?' asked his other neighbour, a charming brunette

in a pink dress. 'See how happy I am to admit to you that I understand no Latin!'

'It means a great deal,' he replied. 'It means, among other things, that if France declared war on China, none of us would be surprised to discover that the French had beaten an army led by some Li or other.'

'*Tant de choses en deux mots,*' said the pink lady with a laugh; '*c'est une belle langue que la langue turque!*'\*

'French can also express all that in a single word,' he added. '*Parceque.*'

'Don't you think', asked the lady of the house quietly from behind her silver samovar, 'that the Chinese would be different if they were brought up differently?'

'Even so,' he replied, 'it would be next to impossible for them to turn into Frenchmen, I think. And what would be the point of remaking them? I have visited China, and I assure you that the Chinese are very charming, and especially the women, with their broad faces, slanted eyes, and bound feet, their indolent mannerisms and childish amusements. I find it all most appealing.'

She cast a quick glance at him and bit her lip.

'But surely, Aleksei,' objected Bulanin, who had caught a few words of this sally, 'you have to acknowledge the influence of a good education? Or do you place no value on upbringing? Do I understand you as asserting that it is impossible to make a person behave more nobly, to inculcate a serious outlook on life in him, or even to correct his shortcomings?'

'All I say', Aleksei Petrovich said calmly, 'is that you can't transform a feminine nature into a masculine.'

'But what I think', Bulanin continued vehemently, 'is that all the shortcomings of women depend on their upbringing. Under other circumstances they would probably be much closer to perfection than men, but we develop only the most childish proclivities in them, and then most courteously damn them as children.'

'There's some truth in that, after all,' observed the Countess, turning to Aleksei Petrovich. 'You must, surely, admit that the education of women is absurd in the highest degree—no, it is more than absurd; it seems designed to fly in the face of common sense. One might suppose that women, or most of them, were brought up by their worst enemies, when the conduct of those who take care of them is so strange. A woman cannot acquire wealth in the way a man can, and the law almost entirely deprives her of her patrimony; and so a craving for luxury and the habit of considering wealth a necessary condition for existence are instilled in her. She cannot propose

to a man; so from her very childhood spinsterhood is held up before her as a shameful misfortune; she is made incapable of independence, and taught to regard it as something indecent. A frivolous decision can make her wretched for life; so she must be schooled to frivolity and whim. A single moment of passion is enough to ruin her irrevocably; knowing that, her guardians foster in her coquetry and a proclivity for dangerous games, and remove everything that might direct her towards serious occupations. Is that not so?'

'You are very eloquent,' replied Aleksei Petrovich with a smile, 'and your outburst is well-founded; but permit me to remark that it none the less upholds my opinions concerning the charming weakness of the feminine nature; after all, you yourself affirm that your sex can withstand no negative influence. You talk about the upbringing of women, but is not the upbringing of men, in general, a thousand times worse? Are men subjected to fewer harmful influences? Do we not undergo many more dangerous temptations and opportunities for ruining ourselves than you?'

'Whilst remaining steadfast?' interrupted the Countess ironically. 'That would be rather a bold assertion.'

'And a thumping falsehood to boot,' he added.

'So where does the moral strength of men lie; wherein are their advantages?'

'You answer that question yourself, Countess, when you choose to seek the company and even the friendship of a man whom you know to have taken part in drinking-bouts with his friends. You would not allow a woman about whom that was said to cross your threshold.'

'And so what do you conclude from that?'

'The same thing that you do: that a woman is not a man, that it is more difficult to ruin him than her, and that his moral nature, as well as his physical nature, is sounder than a woman's.'

'At any rate,' Bulanin said, raising his voice once more, 'we have to admit that women are superior in the matter of mankind's best quality: feeling. A woman is always moved by a noble act; her heart will always respond to honest candour, to a confidence.'

'I dare not take exception to that in the presence of so many ladies,' Aleksei Petrovich pronounced.

'What? You question even that?' exclaimed Bulanin.

'God forbid!' replied Aleksei Petrovich. 'I agree that one can on occasion move a woman by dint of magnanimity and candour, assuming that one has the skills to do it. But by no means always.'

'Always! Always!' the other repeated.

The sceptic was silent.

'Prove the opposite,' went on Bulanin. 'Prove it with an example.'

'There are very many such examples.'

'Share at least one with us.'

'Splendid!' the Countess said, turning to her neighbour. 'You have led yourself into a story. Let that be your punishment. Kindly begin. Give us, as Monsieur Bulanin has demanded, a convincing example that might support your heretical views.'

'And not one that you have just invented,' added the lady of the house.

'I can tell you a true story, if you would like to hear one,' said Aleksei Petrovich; 'I can recount a factual case, of which I heard from a most reliable source.'

'Excellent! We're listening.'

'You will permit me not to use real names?' Aleksei Petrovich continued.

'We will,' replied the lady of the house, 'but perhaps you will whisper them in our ears later on.'

Smiling, Aleksei Petrovich began:

A few years ago, if a newcomer to Moscow happened to be in company, and, having his curiosity stirred by a name that he frequently heard mentioned, to ask, 'What sort of fellow is Khozrevsky?' one of two answers would be sure to follow, depending on whether he had addressed the question to a lady or to a gentleman. A gentleman would usually say unceremoniously, 'An arrant fool' A lady, however, would answer, 'C'est un excellent garçon.'

At one of those Moscow salons where a number of guests will gather on certain *jours fixes*, these two different opinions happened one day to be advanced in two opposite corners of the room; in one corner, a stiff and proper Muscovite said to the man he was standing next to, a man of about 35, with a striking appearance, and a swarthy expressive face, 'Khozrevsky—*c'est un rien du tout*.' He has no estate, no decent family connections either, no looks, and he's an utter blockhead. Yet he is received everywhere, and he seems to be a great favourite with the ladies, God knows why.' At the same time, in the opposite corner, a lady whose appearance was still very attractive, despite her mature years, was saying to her cousin the Princess, a graceful young widow who had come to Moscow for the winter from her Tambov estate, 'Khozrevsky, ma chère amie, is a fine man, and, believe me, he is not nearly as stupid as people will tell you. The

attacks on him are unfair. Of course, he's no brilliant salon conversationalist, no dandy, *c'est un homme sans prétentions*, but he has some unusual qualities, and he is not so much simple as merely shy; *et puis, il a une si haute opinion des femmes!*<sup>o</sup> I shall present him to you now; he's sure to be here. But don't judge by your first impressions; you have to get to know him well to appreciate him.'

During this conversation, a new guest came into the salon, a young man whom there was absolutely no reason to notice. 'There he is,' said the lovely widow's cousin. 'There he is,' said the very proper Muscovite to the man he was talking to. 'See what a figure he makes; nothing to envy, you'd think. But just watch how the ladies receive him.' They moved out of their corner, and the swarthy-faced man stopped opposite the Princess's armchair. If her marvellous black brows quivered slightly, there was no reason why that barely noticeable movement should have been attributed to his appearance. Meanwhile, her cousin was responding to a polite bow from the approaching Khozrevsky. 'Good day, Trofim Lukich. I am delighted to see you, just as always. Now I am going to give you cause to thank me; I shall present you to my cousin, about whom I've told you so much. *Ma chère Aline*, Trofim Lukich Khozrevsky. Be sure not to frighten him too much.'

'*Suis-je si formidable?*' asked the Princess with a laugh.

'Sometimes,' replied Nastasya Pavlovna. 'When you take a notion to amuse yourself with someone, you become quite inhuman.'

'A fine introduction,' interrupted the Princess, 'and a proper encouragement to the timid. Is that not so, Monsieur Khozrevsky?'

'I am not frightened, Princess,' replied Khozrevsky in a quiet voice. 'I doubt that I shall be your victim.'

'What makes you so sure of that?' asked the bewitching widow, resting her dangerous gaze on him.

'A nice understanding of myself,' replied Khozrevsky.

'Really?'

'Of course, Princess. Who lowers himself to attack the fallen?'

'Sit down next to me,' she said, indicating a chair, 'and imagine that we have known each other for ages; that is the best way of avoiding the unbearable formality of a first meeting, and talking without constraint.'

Khozrevsky settled in the chair she had indicated, but with such a meek look that, when seated, he seemed much more respectful of the Princess than those who were standing in her presence.

'Do you live here in Moscow?' she asked.

'Ever since I came back from abroad.'

'You spent a long time there?'

'Three years.'

'Mostly where?'

'Longest of all in Paris and in Italy.'

'Italy is the best place, don't you agree?'

'Italy is a country just like any other.'

'In some respects, of course,' she said with a smile. 'However, it is also the land of elegance, the land of the arts.'

'I am no artist, and I have no appreciation of art,' replied Khozrevsky humbly.

'One cannot help feeling art's influence, whether one knows how to appreciate it or not,' the Princess went on. 'Were you in the Vatican?'

'I spent a morning there.'

'Can it really have made no impression on you? Impossible. I have seen many visitors to the Vatican, and I have never seen anyone leave there unmoved; all of them, if only unconsciously, recognized the force of genius; all of them felt that strange fatigue which is also a proof of the power that elegance has over us. We are not capable of looking at beauty for long; it overwhelms us with its majesty. The soul gets tired.'

'My feet got tired,' said Khozrevsky.

The Princess burst out laughing.

'Your candour will do you irrevocable harm in Alina's mind,' remarked Nastasya Pavlovna. 'She is utterly devoted to art; why, she is a very fine painter herself.'

'I would admire the Princess's pictures', pronounced Khozrevsky modestly, 'only because it is she who painted them.'

'And not because of their own merits?' asked Alina ironically.

'I make so bold as to remark', Khozrevsky objected bashfully, 'that there are many good pictures.'

'But few women like Alina,' added Nastasya Pavlovna. 'I have guessed your thoughts, have I not?'

'I would not venture to speak so directly,' replied Trofim Lukich.

'And how do you know whether there are many women like me or not? And how, in five minutes flat, have I managed to demonstrate to you my superiority over others?' rejoined the Princess in a lightly mocking tone.

Khozrevsky raised his eyes to her and lowered them again.

'Princess,' he replied, 'you are trying to force me into another absurdity. I know my own stupidity; and in any case, why should I be ashamed of it? Are we not all more or less on a level? After all, compared with you

everyone is stupid,' he added, getting up to yield his chair to an approaching lady.

'*Au revoir*,' the Princess said to him. '*Je suis toujours chez moi dans l'avant-soirée.*' I shall be expecting you, and you are too courteous to make me wait for you in vain, *n'est ce pas?*'

Khozrevsky gave a silent bow, then walked away.

The Princess armed herself with her lorgnette and began inspecting the salon so intently that her behaviour seemed less than entirely natural.

'Will you excuse me if I take advantage of the unexpected chance that brings us together here?' A question brought her to herself.

The Princess glanced around. The swarthy man who had been a witness to her conversation with Khozrevsky was sitting in the seat that Nastasya Pavlovna had just vacated.

'C'est vous, Monsieur Wismer!' she said. 'I didn't recognize you just now.'

'I should not have been surprised if you had not recognized me at all, Princess,' replied Wismer. 'It would be no more than natural. But when I noticed the animation with which you were talking about Italy a moment ago, I dared to hope that you had kept some memory of even those circumstances of your time in Rome that were least important to you.'

All this was said with extreme courtesy; only the Princess detected a certain underlying intonation. She gave a small, unfriendly smile.

'You are no doubt unaware,' she said, 'that I am gifted with a most enviable and rare ability: I remember only what has given me pleasure.'

'In that case, Princess, I must rank as a stranger, and must ask your permission to introduce myself. My name is Yury Wismer. Having noticed just now your amiable indulgence of a new acquaintance, I am myself emboldened.'

'But in order that one should become acquainted, one condition is surely necessary?'

'May I know what that might be?'

'A mutual desire to make friends, which I have no sound reason to assume applies in our case.'

'On my part, Princess, desire is very keen. You do not know me: I am an eccentric person, and like everything that is extraordinary, that stands out from the usual order of things.'

'Excellent. But if you do not find my complete indifference to eccentric people outside your order of things, then I must warn you that there is nothing about me that could possibly interest you.'

'You cannot be your own judge, Princess. What amazes others seems

simple and easy to your exceptional intellect. You do not understand that others do not even dare think about the things that you do in jest.'

The responses followed one another as swiftly as the sword-thrusts of two antagonists. Those present observed only light-hearted salon banter; but in fact a merciless duel was taking place.

However, the Princess now began to retreat.

'Your opinion is very flattering, but you must realize that I cannot share it,' she said.

'Your modesty only affords new proof that I have made no mistake in your extraordinary gifts,' Wismer went on implacably. 'Like all great artists, you are dissatisfied with yourself, realizing that you have the power to achieve incomparably more than you have already.'

The duel was continuing; Wismer now had the upper hand.

'You, it seems, claim to divine all the thoughts and feelings of those you meet?' The Princess, resorting to extreme measures, raised her eyes to her opponent, accompanying her reply with a glance that served as an unexpected commentary to her curt speech.

But her opponent would not surrender.

'Providence has granted every creature some means of self-defence,' he replied with a laugh. 'Why should you wish that I alone should be unarmed? My capacity to guess the secret motives and thoughts of the people I deal with is the only defence I have.'

'But if we suppose there is no danger?'

'Hm!' said Wismer.

'However,' she went on, now in a half-jesting tone, 'you must admit that every person—except of course the Pope, if you happen to be a Catholic—is capable of mistakes.'

'Certainly.'

'Et vous n'êtes pas le pape.'"

And she made a light, graceful, almost affable gesture of her shapely hand; at that minute her white glove had a hint of the flag that a besieged fortress runs up when it desires to begin negotiations.

'Princess,' said Wismer, half-ironically and half-seriously, 'permit me to congratulate you on your successes in the art of war. I see that you have been refining your skills, although they were no less than superb before; but you must remember that I am a seasoned warrior myself. I know that there are cases where all means of destroying the enemy are permissible, even those which you are now using. Forgive me, though, if I do not yield.'

The Amazon drew herself up under this blow.

'Monsieur Wismer,' she said, 'it would be much more to the point, I think, if you were to congratulate me on something else, and namely on the accuracy of my instinct, which appraised your abilities and sensed in advance the degree of development they would reach. You have fully justified my expectations, and attained a degree of perfection even beyond that which I anticipated. I see that it is impossible for any woman to deal with you. But whether you are entitled to be proud of that, I cannot say.'

She stood up.

'Princess,' said Wismer, also standing and lowering his voice, 'I understand all the enormity of my guilt; I know that I have inflicted on you the sole insult for which all a lady's generosity can find no excuse. I know that a woman can forgive a man who wounds her, even one who betrays her, but never one who sees through her. I have no right to your mercy and must bear your anger resignedly.'

Their eyes met. For a full minute, a mute battle, a last fierce clash, took place between them.

'Bonsoir, Monsieur Wismer,' said the Princess easily, showing the stoicism that only a society woman is capable of attaining. '*Sans rancune,*'<sup>o</sup> she added, extending her hand to him.

Wismer's fingers touched the cold kid leather of her gloves, and an ambiguous smile flashed across his lips, contradicting the amiability of the gesture.

'Who was that talking to you? A foreigner, I suppose,' an elegant old lady observed to Princess Alina, who had just joined her.

'No, a Russian,' replied the Princess. 'It was Wismer, the painter. I met him in Rome. He is a talented man.'

'Ah!' said the old lady, who would have reacted with the same profound spiritual composure to the report that Wismer had no talent at all.

The next morning Nastasya Pavlovna came out of a dressmaker's on Kuznetsky Most, and ran into Khozrevsky.

'Trofim Lukich! Where can you have been?'

'Visiting your lovely cousin,' he replied, with a most respectful bow.

'A charming woman, isn't she?'

'Very. But a woman should be charming; that is what pertains to her.'

'Yet some women are particularly charming, even more so than others,' said Nastasya Pavlovna.

'Yes, without themselves being aware of the fact,' Khozrevsky said, as if this were a novel observation.

'Be careful, though,' she added with a laugh. 'Don't fall in love *pour tout de bon* with Alina. You're in danger.'

'Why should you care whether I am in danger or not?' he replied. 'Whom can that interest?'

'Good-bye!' she said with a benevolent smile and, having seated herself in her carriage, gave a nod of farewell.

A few days later found Princess Alina in her study, with a small group of men sitting round her. She had just given them an excellent dinner, and servants were handing round the coffee. The conversation was lively, and the Princess had little work to do in keeping it going. Everyone there knew the conventions of life in society. Nobody dines anywhere for nothing. In a princely home one pays for dinner just as one does in a hotel; the difference is that the payment is of a more demanding kind, namely, as witty a conversation as one can manage, full of anecdotes and *bons mots*.

The Princess seemed even more attractive than usual that day. It was no coincidence that she liked to receive visitors in her study; the setting suited her, and she it. It is always a pleasure for me to remember the Princess's study; so much in it was eloquent of her taste and *savoir-faire*; it was at once so elegant, and so natural and unaffected, so luxurious and so simple, giving unforced proof of an artistic talent, and a knowledge of art, that are rare in a woman. None of the remarkable objects drew attention to itself or obtruded on the eye.

The company that day was appropriate too: guests *à deux fins*,<sup>o</sup> aristocrats posing as artists, and artists posing as aristocrats. Even Khozrevsky was there, though Heaven knows why. The discussions and arguments flowed on all kinds of subjects. Finally, the talk turned to a certain incident that was preoccupying all Moscow: an engagement which had suddenly been broken off, for reasons that no one could discover.

Someone remarked, 'And they say that they love each other.'

'That is, they claim to,' said the Princess.

'How so, claim to?' asked two or three guests with one voice.

'Have you ever seen', she replied, 'how children play at buying and selling, giving one another pebbles that they arbitrarily call money? In the same way, we arbitrarily substitute words and tokens for the love that is denied us. But sometimes we are stupider than children, and get more carried away, so that we begin believing that our pebbles have real value; until we come to our senses again, and are shamed by our behaviour. I have seen any number of cases of love in that arbitrary sense, but never even one case of genuine love, and nobody else seems to have seen one either. But what do you think, Monsieur Khozrevsky?'

'I don't know, Princess,' was the reply, 'only it seems to me that if there is a name for something, then that thing must exist.'

'On the contrary,' she rejoined sharply, 'where a word exists, the thing itself very often does not, and vice versa.'

'I don't understand that,' said Khozrevsky, 'and I think it would be difficult to prove.'

'It's not difficult at all,' the Princess went on. 'You'll notice that a nation often has no name for its most fundamental trait. There is no word for *ennui* in English, and so Miss Edgeworth had to use the French word for the title of her novel.' And the French, for their part, have no word for "one-sidedness". The entire nation is so naturally one-sided that they don't even notice it and give no thought to having a word for it.'

A very grand gentleman sitting next to the Princess began applauding with his fingertips, and a young man said, 'Here's another proof of the correctness of your opinion, Princess: Russian has no word for "gracefulness", the prime attribute of Russian woman.'

'But on the other hand,' she replied, 'the Germans have no fewer than two words for gracefulness.'

There was a burst of laughter.

'Where are you going?' the Princess asked the grand gentleman, who had just risen from the armchair next to her.

'I am expected over at my club. *Bon soir, chère Princesse.*'

And the other guests took their hats too.

'You're all going to the Elskys,' I suppose?' asked the lady of the house.

'Of course. You too, Princess?'

'No.'

'Where are you going to spend the evening, then?'

'Here, in this room. I don't feel like going.'

'You can't mean that! It would be a crime for you to keep away. Everyone will be there.'

'*Raison de plus,*'<sup>o</sup> she replied. 'I wish you a splendid evening.'

They went out, and Khozrevsky, making to follow them, bowed to the Princess.

'I expect that you are going to the Elskys' too, Monsieur Khozrevsky?'

'I feel ridiculous in admitting to any resemblance between us, Princess, but if it were not for that, I would tell you that I have no desire to go there either.'

'Then stay here a while. We can have a nice conversation.'

He obeyed. An hour and a half later, when the Princess rang for tea, Khozrevsky was still sitting alone with her in her beautiful study.

If you were to ask me now what Princess Alina liked in Trofim Lukich, I would be forced to reveal a truth that ladies themselves wish to conceal, though I cannot say why, since it can hardly be unknown to anyone. Begging the pardon of members of the fair sex, both present and absent, I have to say that no one is less inclined to feelings of equality than a woman; nothing bores the ladies so much as being on the same moral level as us. Every woman admits to herself that, when she becomes intimate with a man, she wants him to be either much higher or much lower than she; it is only genuinely agreeable to meet a man who surprises her, or one whom she surprises. On the evening when she remained alone with Khozrevsky, the Princess enjoyed the latter pleasure to the full. She had never encountered such naïve wonderment, such simple-minded veneration. And besides, after all the egotistical strivings, the indefatigable ingenuities of her guests, her companion's complete lack of pretension was both soothing and gratifying. The conversation (actually, it consisted almost entirely of a monologue) ran along smoothly. Before her modest listener, the Princess flaunted her talents, her learning, her views on philosophy, her mental profundities, her convictions, her emotions, the strength of her character—the whole of her diverse arsenal. She overwhelmed the poor fellow, bombarding him with her intellectual abundance, blinding him with her brilliance, and stunning him with her enormous superiority. She spoke extremely well, and he sat listening with the same unconditional faith with which pagans would harken to the dicta of the Pythia<sup>o</sup> or, to be more accurate, with which a child will listen to a fairy-tale. When he emerged on to the street from the Princess's house, Trofim Lukich was smiling complacently.

From that day on, Khozrevsky began to visit the Princess's house as of right; but he made such modest use of that right that a servant would often arrive with a message such as, 'The Princess ordered me to invite you to pay a call this afternoon'; or, 'The Princess ordered me to inform you that she will be at home this evening and wishes to see you.' In the latter case Khozrevsky, appearing in response to the invitation, would usually find the Princess alone, and they would converse just as they had on that first occasion. Once more he would sit before her like a schoolboy in the presence of his teacher, listening as raptly as if he took the lovely widow for one of those strict tutors who keep repeating to their charges, 'Be quiet when you're talking to me!' In the presence of the naïve young man's limited intellectual abilities, the Princess's genius was in the happy position of a beauty at the looking-glass; she saw in Khozrevsky only her own

reflection. In this way, several weeks passed. The talk in society was that Princess Alina had been seized by a fit of melancholy. Certainly, she was less often to be seen at the most fashionable balls and receptions. The Princess's doctor said that her nerves were distraught. Since her maids were gossiping in their attics that for some time there had been no pleasing the Princess, a situation that often does symptomize distraught nerves, the doctor was probably right. The Princess herself said that she was terribly bored, something that Moscow society could readily understand. And so everything dragged on as it always does, continuing to continue, with cold and snowstorms outside, and dinners and receptions and rumours and gossip in.

But everything in this world comes to an end, even the Moscow winter. In only two weeks, the whole aspect of earth and sky changed completely. Suddenly, in the way that is typical for our city, the wet snow vanished from the streets and the grey clouds from the sky, and spring, that marvellous improvisation of Northern nature, entered the white stone capital.

Along with this general transformation came a change in Moscow society's own pastimes; the first warm days were greeted by that time-honoured ceremony, promenading upon the Tverskoi Boulevard.

One fine morning, the boulevard was bright with the colourful apparel of the fair sex, and the dark vestments of the other, whilst equipages bearing loads of ladies and misses streamed continually towards the long avenue. A marvellous pair of black horses came dashing up, drawing Princess Alina's carriage behind them. Five or six young men who were standing in a knot nearby made haste to bow as her widowed Highness, accompanied by Nastasya Pavlovna, went past their scout corps. Even less than any other woman could the Princess pass without attracting looks from, and stimulating rumours among, these stiff and proper young men.

'How elegantly she dresses!'

'What does she not do elegantly?'

'I'll wager it's all nonsense.'

'What's nonsense?'

'That she's interested in that fool Khozrevsky.'

'Maybe it's nonsense, but it may not be.'

'For Heaven's sake, what could she possibly see in him?'

'That's exactly it. Nothing.'

'That's no reason for her to like him.'

'On the contrary, it's a very good reason: she's been fed on nothing but spiced cake and sweets, and Khozrevsky is like a piece of black bread to her.'

'Bah! The usual Moscow fairy stories!'

'Wismer! Wismer! Come over here. We're quarrelling about a subject close to your heart.'

'And what might that be?' asked Wismer, responding to the call.

'We were talking about your rival.'

'What rival?'

'Khozrevsky.'

'Why should I have the honour of being that gentleman's rival?'

'No pretences. Everyone knows that you're an admirer of Princess Alina!'

'Who does not admire her?'

'They say that she prefers Khozrevsky to you.'

'I say as much myself.'

'But you're chasing after her as hard as you can all the while. You seek her out everywhere; yesterday, at the concert, you never once left her side, and you've certainly come here today hoping to find her.'

'That may be. Is the Princess here?'

'Yes, see, there she is, standing with the Elskys. Holding the pink parasol.'

'Well then, in my character as her devoted admirer, I will go and pay my respects.'

'You're head over heels in love with her, Wismer.'

Wismer smiled, and walked off towards the pink parasol, beneath which the Princess's white hat and light grey dress could be glimpsed.

The scout corps had also begun moving forward, blending into the colourful crowd. Not long afterwards, the glorious dress with its silvery tint, in company with that superb and most conspicuous of hats, the white *chef d'œuvre* of a Parisian milliner, and the pink parasol, could be seen approaching from the opposite end of the boulevard. Beside them, Wismer's swarthy face stood out clearly. He was leaning towards his elegant companion, and conversing animatedly; laughing, she answered him, whilst all the while toying impatiently with her lorgnette, using it to scan the crowd on all sides as though she were seeking or expecting something—deliverance, perhaps.

On one of the numerous little green benches that are set out in rows for the comfort of the public, Khozrevsky was sitting, next to a little old man who belonged to the aristocracy of Moscow, as anyone could see immediately by the way he was leaning on the cane positioned between his legs, nodding to acquaintances, and adjusting his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and by the arrogant curl of his lips when he spoke. When the Princess first appeared, Trofim Lukich hastily rose from his seat and, as she passed, gave her a bow filled with the most infinite respect. Now the two cousins, with their

persistent companion, appeared once more near the benches occupied by the spectators. Wismer was still deep in conversation with the Princess; her eyes, glittering restlessly, suddenly lighted on Khozrevsky, who was approaching her, diffident as always. He was not the man who could help her, if indeed she needed help; if she was looking, at that moment, for a man clever enough to guess that she needed rescue, and capable of rescuing her, the innocent Trofim Lukich had certainly appeared at the wrong moment. She continued to sweep her eyes about as Khozrevsky murmured, in his customary humble tone, 'Excuse me, Monsieur Wismer. I must tell you that I have done something foolish that may displease you.'

Wismer glanced at him, and smiled involuntarily. 'How is that?'

'Excuse my asking,' Khozrevsky went on, 'but did I not hear you say yesterday that you would like to see the Dürer painting that Count Semyon Ignatevich has just brought back with him from abroad?'

'No, I said no such thing.'

'Then I really have done something foolish, and I do beg your forgiveness. I was sure that I had heard you express that wish, and I told the Count so just now. He has sent me to tell you that he would be extremely glad to have your opinion as to whether his painting is in fact an original; the Count is setting off for his Oryol estate later today, and so he begs you to go with him this minute, and take a look at it. The Count is sure that you will agree to give him and yourself that pleasure.'

Wismer went over to the bench, from where the old aristocrat was gazing at him affably, and the Count stood up and took his arm.

Princess Alina looked at Khozrevsky with a strange expression in her lovely eyes, as if his speech to Wismer had outdone the efforts of the world's greatest orators; and she smiled so affectingly that Heaven knows what Nastasya Pavlovna must have thought.

Trofim Lukich, who no doubt had failed to notice the Princess's look of amazement, and did not suppose himself the object of her charming smile, took two more turns along the boulevard with the bewitching cousins, then helped them into their carriage. As he did this, the Princess gave his hand an involuntary squeeze.

He walked home deep in thought. Was he perhaps pondering the reason for that unexpected pressure?

Outside the house, a bright torrential spring rain, as sudden and short-lived as a woman's whim, was pouring merrily. The door from the Princess's study on to her balcony was open, and inside, near the door, the Princess was once again sitting alone with Khozrevsky; this had become an almost

daily occurrence. She had seriously applied herself to the task of developing and re-educating him. To be an instrument of enlightenment was for her a new, and therefore an amusing, occupation; and she had begun to see some success in her efforts: Trofim Lukich really was becoming more alert; the education was doing him good. Little by little, the Princess's pedagogical exercises had become as necessary to her as the cigarettes she smoked. If a sluggish Hollander can fill his whole life with fussing over tulips, it is not surprising that the impressionable Princess should have become more and more engrossed by her concern for Khozrevsky. But someone skilled in psychology might have suggested that she was following a direct route to a result that she could not foresee. A certain tender predilection for the works of one's own hand is characteristic of mankind: Pygmalion, that prototype of authors, serves as an example of how far such a natural attachment can go. And ladies, those pre-eminently sentimental beings, are still more gifted with the capacity to acquire a violent interest in the objects of their labours; experience compels us to believe, indeed, that no lady has engaged in the praiseworthy labour of perfecting those around her with impunity. The performance of good deeds is an activity that is fraught with peculiar dangers; not for nothing do the perspicacious French say that 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'. Was there a degree of danger, in this instance, for Princess Alina? The question apparently never entered her head. Was there any danger in the matter for Khozrevsky? She probably never asked herself this second question either, but that was for another reason; because she had already answered it in her mind *a priori*, and in the positive. That Khozrevsky could not obtain enlightenment without paying a price for it, the Princess considered to be in the natural order of things, indeed inevitable; and certain indications allowed her to assure herself that she was not mistaken in this assumption. At the same time, it would be difficult to say in what way her later conversations with Khozrevsky differed from her very earliest; but in such cases precisely what can *not* be defined is what can be seen most clearly. With each passing day that indefinable thing became clearer, and not only to the experienced Princess, but even to any accidental witness of these sessions. When Khozrevsky's lovely mentor spoke, eloquent as always, the eyes of her student were more attentive than his ears; at times he followed her so assiduously with his gaze that he scarcely heard her at all, and replied completely at random. But the Princess indulgently forgave him his erroneous answers, and took no offence at his distracted state.

Distraction was indeed excusable during the Princess's instruction, and

Trofim Lukich had a worthy object of his admiration. Here she was again, sitting so gracefully amidst her lovely surroundings. Beside her rose a bank of many-coloured, sweet-smelling hyacinths; exotic plants arched their broad leaves over her head. Reposing on a small divan, she was toying with a Chinese fan. She was discoursing on certain strange things that had happened during the reign of Louis XIV, and speaking, in particular, about the terrible Marquise de Brinvilliers.<sup>o</sup> She recounted the whole of that monstrous history, and the innumerable evil deeds committed by the Marquise, who had used a subtle poison furnished to her by her lover, the depraved Sainte-Croix, in order that she might murder her father, brothers, and sister, and so inherit their estates; the Princess described how the woman had developed a terrible passion for murder, and how she had begun poisoning people for no reason at all; she told Khozrevsky of the death of the villainous Sainte-Croix, and the execution of the Marquise—and of how, suddenly, after her execution, the mysterious poisonings had inexplicably begun again, occurring now in all strata of society, so that fathers began to fear their own sons, and brothers their brothers; and she told him how at last they had tracked down the old woman who had sold the poison, and found, at her home, a register filled with the names of noble personages who had resorted to her terrible art. The Princess recounted her tale masterfully: how well she developed her frightening theme, the capacity of those in cultivated circles to turn to bestial savagery, to feel a growing inclination for evil-doing, and to commit their crimes for pleasure's sake. Khozrevsky sat before her, giving her his deepest attention; he saw how the lace triangle thrown over his teacher's black hair emphasized the marvellous oval of her face, how charmingly she would knit her fine brows from time to time, and how beautiful was the hand that rested on the dark velvet of her pillow.

'And what is most striking in the history of these vile murders', the Princess went on, 'is the view of them held in the society of that time. They called that poison "inheritance powder", *poudre de succession*, which to my mind is a most repulsive manifestation of the national character; and, in exactly the same way, I hold that the most terrible of all the cruel deeds committed during the first French Revolution was the fashion of appearing in society with one finger smeared in blood, not to speak of the establishment of balls *des victimes*. The organization of festivals for the wives, children, brothers, and sisters of those who have been guillotined is an indication of a national character in comparison with which cannibals are to be praised for their morality, is that not so?'

The Princess glanced enquiringly at the motionless Khozrevsky, awaiting his opinion. It was slow in coming. He was deep in thought.

'I think', he said at last, 'that I should spend less time here.'

And he took his hat and went out, forgetting his bow. But the Princess was not offended even by that lapse in good manners.

Later that same evening or, to be more exact, early the following morning—that is, between the hours of two and three—Princess Alina's porter, who had been dozing, was woken by the loud clatter of a carriage, which broke off suddenly just by his own *porte-cochère*. He jumped up from his chair and rushed to open the door. The Princess flashed past him, throwing down her hooded cloak, which the footman who was following her failed to catch before it reached the floor, and ran up the wrought-iron staircase. In the ante-room upstairs, another servant, rubbing his eyes like the first, jumped up as his mistress appeared and, still half-asleep, struggled to grasp her order: 'Light a fire in the study!' The Princess's maid, Marfa Terentevna, who had also been roused by the carriage's noisy approach, hurried into her mistress's bedroom to undress her; but her haste was in vain. The Princess had not gone into her bedroom. The zealous maidservant found this so curious that she ventured to creep up to the study door several times in order to peer at what her mistress was doing. Still in her gauzy evening gown, the Princess was pacing back and forth across the room rapidly, a scowl etched deep on her face. Finally, she seized a candle, went over to the desk, picked up a pen, and started to write. A few minutes later, Marfa Terentevna was almost bowled right over, as the Princess got up, then rushed through the door into the bedroom, and flung the note down on the dressing-table, saying abruptly, 'Have this sent first thing in the morning to Yury Petrovich Wismer. Find out where he lives. They know at the Elskys. Undress me.'

Now more than ever, the course of Marfa Terentevna's duties was to offer her ample and unpleasant proof that her mistress's nerves were distraught.

The spring sun seemed to sense that an interesting scene was building up in the elegant study, so great were its efforts to peek in under the drawn pink curtains. The Princess sat alone, in her usual spot, by a small malachite table.

'Yury Petrovich Wismer,' announced the servant, pulling aside the *portière*.

'Show him in,' said the Princess, and turned to face her visitor.

He came in slowly, and made her a sedate bow. The Princess gestured with her hand in greeting, indicating to him an armchair opposite her *chaise-longue*. He sat down in silence.

'I was forced to ask you to come and see me,' she began by saying. 'You will have received my note.'

He nodded his head in reply.

'Monsieur Wismer.' (This normally so practised society lady was feeling some uncertainty about how best to set in motion the plan that she had worked out in advance for this conversation.) 'Monsieur Wismer, I wanted to ask you how long you intend to go on persecuting me.'

'In what way?' he enquired.

'When I ask a direct question, it would appear to require a direct answer. Intelligent people have no need to pretend; we cannot talk civilly in that way.'

'Civilly!' Wismer repeated, with a strange smile.

'Well, uncivilly, then, if you wish,' she said, looking him straight in the eye. 'But if we are to be enemies, let us at least be honourable enemies.'

'Which is to say?'

'You understand me perfectly well. I cannot take a step without running into you; I have to defend myself from you everywhere, bear your importunate gaze, your indecent meddling in my conversation with others, your oblique insults. Can such behaviour be worthy of a noble person? Is this really what is done in good society?'

'You are right, Princess,' replied Wismer in his pleasant voice. 'In good society things are not done that way. No: barefaced lies, hypocrisy, and innuendoes, shameless manipulation of others' emotions, vile treachery, cold-blooded crime—that is how things are done in good society, is that not so?'

'Let us put aside Byronism and high-flown rhetoric. I cannot bear phrase-mongering. Let us speak and act simply. I am asking you what your purpose is? What do you want from me?'

'Nothing, Princess, except what I am already achieving.'

'Monsieur Wismer!' Then she checked the angry tide that was rising in her soul. A minute of silence followed.

'You hate me.' And in what a masterful tone this was said, with what skill and grace did she lean back, stretched out in her armchair, so that her whole figure became an expostulation, seeming to end her speech with the words, 'Can you really hate me?'

Wismer cast a glance over that marvellous figure, as he might have looked at one of his models.

'How mistaken a man can be,' he said. 'I assumed that you had invited me to come and see you, Princess, so that you could thank me.'

This was so unexpected that she made an involuntary gesture, something that happened to her extremely rarely.

'To thank you? ...'

'I imagined that you might value all my acts of courtesy towards you.'

The Princess's anger flared; again, she came very close to giving free rein to the feelings that were raging inside her.

'Go on,' she said bitterly. 'Why shouldn't a man insult a woman in every way that he can, why shouldn't he pour mockery and rudeness on her, especially when he knows that he can do so with complete impunity? Go on, I'm curious to learn how far you will go. Take advantage of your opportunity.'

Wismer got up, took a quick turn around the room, came over to the Princess again, and sat down. The ironic smile had disappeared from his face. He bent forward a little, meeting her gaze with a hard gaze; then he began speaking in a different voice, coldly and curtly.

'So it pleases you to settle accounts with me? By all means. Four years ago, the brilliant Princess began toying with the poor artist; she, having nothing better to do, began performing her experiments on him; and all for a simple reason: to amuse herself. It was dull in Rome. There were few people with whom she cared to associate. She seized on the diversion that she had come upon by chance, and gave herself up to the pleasant exercise of driving a man from ecstasy to despair ten times a day, disenchanting him and enchanting him all over again. It's all quite easy to understand, I'm sure you'll agree. She was a mistress in the art of enchantment; besides, she derived enjoyment, and amusement, from practising that art. Then one day he came to see her, pale and in distress, carrying a letter. His mother in Russia was lying on her death-bed, and asking for her son. The Princess sensed an opportunity to make her sport even more amusing, and set about performing new experiments. After all, why give up a game when it becomes most interesting? Perhaps the aristocratic lady would have valued the amusement less had she not received the news that a relative of her own had died; now she must keep to the house for three weeks, and give no parties. However, she found a way to pass the days of her involuntary seclusion without suffering from boredom. She took an oath that she would not permit the son to go to his dying mother—and she kept that oath.'

Wismer paused to draw breath. He spoke with a strange calm and, as he spoke, seemed to become steadily more composed.

'She kept her oath. He was not a bad son; but she was practised in her arts, and applied her utmost efforts to her task. Her artistic inclinations were

well developed; the harder the task, the more she enjoyed it. And it was hard; day after day she had to exert all her skill, charming away hour after hour, fascinating him, deceiving him, making a fool of him, driving him mad. But the very effort of it all entertained her. She made scenes, employing every available effect; she swore oaths on all that was sacred. Then, one evening, returning home from a visit, the son found a telegram on his table informing him that his mother had died. The next day, the Princess had trouble handling him, but she was still determined to have her own way. She had to resort to strong measures: she wept (which she could do superbly), she fell to her knees before him and insisted that he must do as she said. But excuse me—there is something else I should mention. Just then, a friend of the man with whom she was toying so charmingly, his only friend, happened to arrive in Rome. His arrival was opportune: the Princess had begun to tire of her game. A new scheme had presented itself, and not a moment too soon. One can easily understand why she did not let that chance slip either. In any case, how can you demand that someone should not make use of his talents? You see, I don't blame her in the least, on the contrary; I find her actions very natural. As I said, she had highly developed artistic instincts, and the drama in the idea of making rivals and enemies of two intimate friends attracted her. Her contrivances were so masterful that only a few weeks later the two friends found themselves standing face to face with pistol in hand, aiming at each other's breasts.<sup>9</sup> The Princess had reason to be proud of her success. So, the two men came closer and closer, terribly close, and the man who had abandoned his dying mother—it was he who had challenged the other to the duel—fired his pistol at his friend.'

And again Wismer fell silent for a minute, then went on speaking, neither raising nor lowering his voice. The cold intonation of his words made them peculiarly effective.

'The shot found its mark; the friend fell to the ground. But the Princess had made a small blunder: she had failed to grasp how a man may be affected by shedding the blood of a friend, by the very sight of that blood. The murderer flung himself on his fallen antagonist, and his antagonist embraced him closely, clasping him to his wounded breast. God had mercy on the criminal; his friend lived, he was given medical treatment and saved from death; and through his salvation, his murderous rival was saved in his turn. The shot had broken the enchantment; the evil spell was dissipated, as if the thunderous voice of God had spoken. The two friends left Rome together.—But permit me to finish. The first man and the Princess met

again. By chance, that man had come into possession of a certain thing that might cause the Princess unpleasantness: a trifling thing, a brief note in her handwriting. Oh, no! not the sort of note that one might suppose... The Princess could never have been accused of lack of caution; she would never, under any circumstances, have been capable of writing anything that might harm her reputation even in the slightest degree. The letter of which I am speaking is a most innocuous document, only four lines of spiteful gossip, in which the Princess very wittily ridicules an old aunt, relating all kinds of hilarious things about the lady. The Princess's ridicule was caustic, since at the time she could afford to laugh at her aunt with complete impunity; after all, even her superb intellect could not have foreseen that this witch, this dried-up old maid, as the letter has it, would turn out to be a person of importance to the Princess; that both the old woman's bachelor brothers would die of cholera and that, as a result, the old aunt would come into possession of a huge estate, which stood to be inherited by the Princess after the death of the aunt. Now, given those entirely unexpected circumstances, one can see that the old letter might become rather dangerous for its author. One could almost guarantee, in fact, that if it were handed over to the aunt, the witty niece would be deprived of her inheritance. But why should the niece be reproached? She hardly deserves it; after all, she could not be expected to guess the future. Now the letter is in the hands of the very man with whom the Princess formerly chose to amuse herself. So permit him to allow himself some small amusement in his turn. You and I have completely exonerated the pastimes of a certain aristocratic lady; let us admit that even a plebeian may occasionally have a fancy for a pleasant diversion. A patrician lady was once seized by a whim to torment a poor man; should that poor man not now be entitled to a whim of his own? His whim is a very modest one: he permits himself to be a small inconvenience to the brilliant Princess, a slight unpleasantness for her, something on the order of a pebble in her shoe. He gets satisfaction from forcing her to endure his presence, his gazes, his respectful bows. She enjoyed the sight of his torments; now he enjoys the sight of her vexation. It is all quite natural. Now I make so bold as to ask what you wish from me.'

The Princess had heard all this out looking directly at Wismer and, frozen in her lovely pose, was leaning against the back of her *chaise-longue*, her arms folded, and half-bared by the broad lace sleeves that cascaded from them. She sat quite motionless; certainly, her little foot may have clenched convulsively in its velvet slipper, but it was hidden by the long folds of her *peignoir*.

'You are not only a good painter, but a remarkable story-teller as well,' she said in well-restrained tones. 'Your story is very effective; indeed, it might vie with the best works of fiction. However, I have the impression that you were attempting more than a display of your talent for authorship; in so far as I can tell, you seem to have had the intention of recounting true facts. If that is so, I am permitted to demand that there be no embellishments. And if I am to suppose that we are not joking...'

'I fancy that we are not,' Wismer said.

'If,' she went on, 'we are now bringing our case to judgement, and are speaking unconstrained by the considerations of propriety, then permit me to ask you this: who made you the judge of another's conscience? Who gave you the right to rummage in another person's thoughts, to interpret his actions? Have you looked into the soul of the woman that you described? Yes, she would not let a son go to his mother; for that, certainly, she may be indicted. But who can know, except she herself, why she tried to hold him back? Was it really a game, or was she swept away by her emotions? Who can decide? You can say: this is what she did, but how dare you say; this is what she thought, what she desired, what she felt? How dare you say that her tears were a lie? She could not resolve to relinquish the company of, the daily meeting with, a man whom she considered her friend. Call that egotism if you like, she will not quarrel; reproach her for behaving thoughtlessly, she will accept your reproach. But what justice is there in making her answer for another's deeds? Shifting one's guilt to someone else is simply a convenient way of appeasing one's own conscience.'

The Princess's voice had altered, become uneven. She was sitting differently in her chair, no longer leaning against the back now; she had lowered her arms, and her eyes glittered.

'You dwell on what she did. She does not expect that you will excuse it; she admits her feminine weaknesses, perhaps she is atoning for them. Did you see her after the duel? Do you know whether she suffered or not? Are you sure that the memory does not torment her to this very day? Are you sure that she does not reproach herself? That she is incapable...'

Wismer rose, picked up an embroidered pillow from the sofa, and placed it at the feet of his interlocutor. 'You will see, Princess,' he said, straightening up again, 'that I am no longer the boor that I was in Rome. I let you fall to your knees before me then, and did not attempt to find a pillow for you.'

She shuddered. The cautious, calculating, sly being of the past had disappeared, leaving only a woman who had been cruelly insulted.

'I did not suppose,' she uttered with trembling lips, 'that you could make

the thought that I am partly in your hands a pleasant one for me. But now I wish that not only my wealth, but my life depended on you, for that would allow me to express to you even more effectively how repulsive you are to me; I would find it even more pleasant to prove to you that my repulsion for you outweighs any sense of danger; I would tell you to your face that a man who behaves to a woman as you do to me is worthy of contempt. I can only thank you for so debasing yourself in my eyes.'

'I regret, Princess,' replied Wismer, 'that you have betrayed your usual character, and have let yourself get carried away by anger and impetuosity. Your words are premature, you must acknowledge; you should not have permitted yourself to utter them when you did.'

Saying that, he put his hand in his pocket, and laid on the Princess's little table a thin piece of paper covered with writing.

'This is what you should have waited for. Now you can give free rein to your hatred of me, in perfect safety. I will listen in silence.'

Even before the paper had reached the table, the Princess had recognized the writing; her head drooped involuntarily. They were both silent.

Wismer picked up his hat.

'*Je vous salue, Monsieur,*' said the Princess indistinctly.

Standing before her, he looked down on the proud aristocrat, who was trying in vain to collect herself; with a formal bow he answered, '*Nous sommes quittes, Madame!*'

Since this tale is not my own invention, but a true occurrence, which I am relating just as I myself heard it, I must regrettably manage without the convenient omniscience of novelists. I cannot, as they do, read through my characters' fleshly covering into their souls, or see through walls into their locked chambers, or disclose events to which there are no witnesses. What the Princess's thoughts and actions were, alone in her study after Wismer left, I cannot say, and so I am in no position to reveal it to you. I only know that when Khozrevsky came to see the Princess later that same morning with a book he had promised her, he found her pacing rapidly back and forth about the room. On seeing him, she came up to him with such alacrity, and took his hand in such a firm grip that he raised his eyes to look at her, and could not restrain the question, 'But Princess, what can be the matter?'

'Nothing. My nerves are distraught. Sit down,' and she flung herself into her armchair.

'I have brought...' began Trofim Lukich, setting the book down on the table.

'Merci,' she interrupted.

Silence followed.

'It is a very clever book, they say,' Khozrevsky began again. 'Not that I have read it myself...'

'Never mind the book!' said the Princess abruptly. 'There's no getting away from cleverness.' It becomes unbearable, a punishment for us!'

'You would not say that, Princess,' her modest visitor permitted himself to object, 'if you sensed a lack of cleverness in yourself.'

'What help is my intellect to me?' she answered brusquely. 'Why should I prize it? No matter how clever I was, would I find any source of support in it? Will it protect me against insult? What benefit do I get from it?'

'That everyone is amazed by you, Princess.'

'And respect me so much the less.'

'How can that be, Princess!'

'Do you really not know that to praise a woman's mind is to abuse her? Is everyone not convinced that where there's cleverness there's no heart? Has it not been decided that a clever woman is a sort of monster who can feel nothing? Ask anyone, they'll all tell you so.'

'But surely no one would dare hold an unfavourable opinion of you, Princess?'

'Indeed? You should try listening to them. Try this: tell them all that I have never known any prompting of the heart, any rush of passion; that I am incapable of disinterested feeling, that I do not understand how anyone could perform a noble act, that I am always and in every thing calculating, that I am a creature without soul and without conscience. Just see whether anyone disputes it. They are all ready to tell me so to my face. Who can prevent them?'

Silence fell again. The Princess tore at the silk tassel of the cord that held her *peignoir* around her slender waist. Khozrevsky looked at her in surprise. She was making a strange impression on him, a new impression; at that minute his liking for her changed in character, becoming, if anything, stronger than before. In her face, her gestures, in the bitter intonation of her voice, there was something attractive and unfamiliar—naturalness. Perhaps for the first time in her conscious life, the Princess was no longer in perfect control of herself; she was no longer observing herself. And for the first time in her life she felt herself to be helpless. The young man—whether he understood the nature of his feelings or not—kept his eyes fixed on this new woman, of whom he knew so little, who was suffering, weak, and in need of his protection.

'Princess,' he said at last, 'you are distraught, and so you are seeing everything in a gloomy light. You cannot complain of your fate; your position is enviable.'

'Very!' she interrupted with a nervous laugh.

'You have everything that can be desired: beauty; all possible gifts and advantages; wealth; freedom.'

'Yes, complete freedom to die from boredom and vexation. Nobody cares a straw about that.'

'Everybody longs to claim you as an acquaintance, a friend.'

'Yes, everyone who enjoys parties and good dinners.'

'All the celebrities in Moscow, all the remarkable and talented people, all the artists, gather around you; and you enjoy their company.'

'Yes! Yes! I do,' she replied, becoming more and more unable to restrain her irritation. 'I enjoy myself tremendously!'

Observing the failure of his efforts to calm her angry Highness, Trofim Lukich fell silent.

'And you hold the same opinion yourself,' said the Princess suddenly, glancing at him; 'you too think that pride and egotism are my only emotions, don't you?'

'Why should you care about my opinion, Princess?' enquired Khozrevsky. 'Can I be your judge?'

'But you do think that. You too find me repulsive,' she went on, gazing into his eyes, though in them she read a clear refutation of that assertion.

'Princess! You cannot mean that seriously,' objected Khozrevsky. 'You know—'

She gave him no chance to finish. 'Oh, God! Yes, I know. You value my talents, my erudition, my intellectual capacities, everything that all the others value; but you too look on me as a brilliant monster, and cannot admit that I have a heart or affections, or anything that distinguishes a woman. Well? Admit it.'

Khozrevsky remained silent. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

'Isn't that so? Tell me, tell me like an honest man.'

'Princess,' he replied, 'you command me to speak according to my conscience: I must obey. I must forget the fact that you will be angry with me, and the effects that anger will have on me. I am not so stupid as to be mistaken in myself; I know that the opinion of a man like me can mean nothing to you; I understand that only a momentary whim has made you demand that I should tell you my honest opinion of you now. Your whim will cost me dearly, but I must submit. Princess! You know my awkwardness;

you know that I cannot express myself as I should. When you require me to speak the truth, I can only do so directly. And so I admit I assumed the general notion about you to be correct.'

'Ah!' exclaimed the Princess.

'You did seem to me too clever,' Khozrevsky went on haltingly. 'It seemed to me that every other quality in you must surely be suppressed by your inordinate cleverness; that, finally, you could not possibly be endowed with all the virtues, could not be perfection itself; that it would be quite impossible to expect in you warmth of feeling, or the customary blind magnanimity of womankind; I thought that you were capable of acting only according to the dictates of intellect and reason.'

'So that is what you think?' asked the Princess, not lowering her gaze.

'I did think that, yes.'

'And now?'

'And now I think that I was mistaken.'

'In what respect?'

'Princess, you understand me perfectly as it is. Do not force me into explanations; I lack the gift of words.'

'But you can at least tell me what you think of me now.'

'To speak of that would be uninteresting for you, Princess; for me it would be painful.'

'But suppose that I want to know?'

'You do know.'

The Princess thought it over. 'And so,' she said after a short silence, 'you assumed that I could only act by calculation, and that I understood only my own advantage?'

'Princess... Of course, I should not have thought it; but people said such things so often in my presence...'

'Yes, all my good friends, my admirers; that's their delightful opinion of me. But you needed no other proof?'

'It is notorious that your marriage was not a love match, Princess.'

'No, I married because I wanted a title,' she replied with a bitter smile. 'That was the general verdict; and also that I toy with everything and everyone, and that anything in me that appears to come from the soul is false! And, as a result of that general verdict, everyone has the right to insult me and abuse me.'

She fell silent again, and settled back in her armchair. The unhappy Khozrevsky did not dare break that menacing silence.

'Princess!' he said at last.

She ignored him.

'Princess!' repeated the young man, not daring to look directly at the angry lady. 'I have ruined myself; I knew what would happen; but you wanted that, and I could only do your will. You ordered me to cut my throat, and I did as you wished.'

The Princess rested her penetrating gaze on him in silence, lost in thought; then suddenly she got up from her armchair.

'Very well,' she whispered. 'I'll show them. They'll see, they'll see, perhaps it won't be what they expected... and then perhaps... we'll see.'

Trofim Lukich took his hat, not knowing what he should do. 'Princess!' and, raising his humble eyes to her, the poor man added, 'I see that you cannot forgive me; I understand that. I am banished from your house. It is all over for me.'

'Khozrevsky,' she said, extending her hand to him, 'come and see me this evening.'

As he approached the Princess's house that evening, Trofim Lukich stopped, then turned down the next street along, needing to calm his throbbing heart. He walked up and down the pavement ten times from end to end; his abstraction was so striking that passers-by turned to look at him. But the numbers of passers-by on Moscow streets are not large, and Khozrevsky was not distracted by them. The Princess's words, 'Khozrevsky, come and see me this evening', could mean something extraordinary; but they could also mean nothing, as was infinitely more likely. The poor man had not spent time in the best society for nothing. He had suffered many cruel insults and bitter experiences. In the early days of his intimacy with the bewitching Princess, he had kept telling himself, with no hint of vexation, as something completely simple and natural, that he could never mean any more to her than the parrot, his rival, which, like him, also occupied her idle moments, and which she petted with as innocent an affection as she did Trofim Lukich; no, Princess Alina could never, even for a single moment, have the feelings for Trofim Lukich that woman has for man. One may suppose that he was telling himself the same thing now, but in a spirit of utter dejection. Between those early days, when he had serenely recognized his insignificance in the eyes of the proud beauty, and this present hour of timid recollection, had any sense of dazzling possibility ever flashed through his mind? Had he ever dreamed of a wealthy home where he might be master, freely entering the study of its lovely mistress, calling her by name, 'Alina'? Had a sly imp ever whispered in his ear that axiom of Prince Talleyrand's, '*Tout arrive?*' It was difficult to tell.

But it was easy to guess that Khozrevsky was not listening to some imp's insolent mephistophelean whisper now; he was hearing the naïve speech of a young heart, afraid to read meaning into that fateful phrase, 'Khozrevsky, come and see me this evening'; a heart that was trying to stand firm, not daring to comprehend that the Princess might be in that state of mind in which women carry out astonishing acts and reckless exploits.

In a high state of agitation, Trofim Lukich mounted the stairs of the princely home; some two hours later, down he came again, still more agitated now, and with the appearance of a man to whom Heaven knows what has happened.

What had happened was that the Princess had said, 'Khozrevsky! You love me and dare not show it. You are a good man—I am yours.'

And along Tverskoi Boulevard, through the salons and the clubs, ran the rumour that Princess Alina was betrothed to Khozrevsky, greatly engaging Moscow society, for want of any other news. The rumours were various; but the joy at finding something to talk about was unanimous.

'Alina has acted splendidly,' Nastasya Pavlovna replied in answer to an old lady whom she had met in a shop selling Russian wares. 'She has demonstrated that she knows how to value the love of a worthy man and that she places deep feeling above all else. I approve her action without reservation; this is her reply to the accusation that she has no heart. Her passion is a noble one, and she will not repent it. Khozrevsky deserves his happiness.'

In another room of the same shop, three young ladies were buying embroidery thread and whispering. 'You know that she's marrying him because her aunt ordered her to?'

'Yes, I heard that too. So it's true?'

'It's true. The old woman is absolutely mad about Khozrevsky; she told the Princess that she would disinherit her if she chose another husband. So what could she do? They say she's looking very thin.'

'Well, she's certainly found herself a fine catch, I must say!' exclaimed a young husband, sitting at dinner tête-à-tête with his wife, and helping himself to a large slab of rare roast beef. 'Just imagine, she's head over heels in love with him; they say she even proposed to him herself. Well, it's a remarkable choice she's made! There's feminine genius for you!'

'She couldn't be acting more cleverly,' was the view of a rich tax collector, expressed over cards at his club. 'There's a double advantage in it for her: she gains a fool of a husband who won't interfere in anything she does, and an estate manager who won't steal, at one and the same time. She's a woman of astonishing judgement!'

'It is a real romance,' a lady in her middle years informed her guests as she poured the tea. 'They say that Khozrevsky came into her study with a loaded pistol, and threatened to shoot himself before her very eyes, and she was so delighted that she agreed to become his wife on the spot!'

'I can't believe it,' said one of her guests. 'A vulgar trick like that would never fool Princess Alina; she could never have yielded to it.'

'But listen,' replied his hostess, 'suppose that Khozrevsky really did mean to shoot himself? Can we rule that out?'

'I would not put it past him at all,' remarked another guest. 'He is quite stupid enough.'

'His stupidity has served him well, though, when you think how he's come up in the world,' a clever man put in.

'*Mon cher,*' cried a haughty dandy, in the midst of lighting a cigar as he left the Troitsky tavern with a bevy of companions, '*C'est tout simplement une envie de se jeter par la fenêtre; maladie de femme.*"

On a warm May evening, Marfa Terentevna was in the Princess's dressing-room, filling trunks and boxes with superb *toilettes*. The Princess had decided that she should be married at her estate; they were due to leave for there on the following day. Marfa Terentevna, as she busied herself with the necessary preparations, was quite out of sorts; having an aristocrat's soul lodged in her serf's body, she disapproved of her mistress's *mésalliance* more fiercely than anyone else, and now she was giving vent to her disapproval by muttering under her breath. The worthy serving-woman was in the bitter grip of an *idée fixe*; she saw herself, thanks to the Princess's ignoble whim, reduced from a silk dress to a peasant sarafan.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the object of Marfa Terentevna's grumbles was sitting in her study, alone with Khozrevsky. Trofim Lukich appeared to be deep in thought; certainly, he was even more silent than usual; but no doubt that was how the feeling of happiness manifested itself in him, as it does in many lower organisms. The Princess was reading aloud, as she did in almost every tête-à-tête with her betrothed. That evening, she was acquainting him with George Sand's novella *Simon*,<sup>10</sup> which also concludes with a rather eccentric marriage. She read with animation, admiring the energetic character of Fiamma as if it were her own portrait.

'What a masterful sketch of a woman!' said the delightful bride-to-be, interrupting her reading, 'and what a true understanding of noble, honest love, of respect for oneself and for another! What are you thinking about?' she asked the silent Khozrevsky.

'About a great deal, Princess.'

'Can you not confide in me even a little of that great deal?'

'I am thinking about you, Princess.' (She smiled.) 'I am thinking', he went on, 'that you may be much better than I am.'

'In looks?' she asked, laughing.

'In every way,' he replied, quite seriously.

'If that's the way things are,' she retorted gaily, 'there's nothing to be done. You must bear your misfortune with fortitude.'

He rested his gaze on her; at that moment she was so charming.

'Princess,' he said suddenly with resolve, 'I have a duty that I must carry out.' He fell silent, then began speaking again. 'Once before, you demanded that I speak the truth, and I saw that you were capable of hearing it. I must not hide it from you now.'

The Princess gazed at his face, then set the book down on the table.

'We must be perfectly honest in our relations with each other,' Khozrevsky went on.

Once again there was a moment of silence.

'I am listening,' she said.

Khozrevsky gazed at her with a strange look on his face. 'You have done what was not expected of you,' he said, and his voice had an unusual note. 'You chose me, who had none of the qualities that make people distinguished in the world: neither wealth, nor noble birth, nor influence in society. You showed much unselfishness in that. But that is not all; you acted in a still more extraordinary way when you decided to become the wife of a man whom everybody called stupid. You yourself must be convinced that I am a complete simpleton. But you are mistaken in that, Princess, just as everyone else is. I myself decided that I would pass for a fool; I have made every effort to encourage that opinion of myself, and it has taken a good deal of cleverness to do it.'

The Princess fixed a gaze of astonishment on him, and he went on.

'Hear me out. I must tell you about many things of which you are unaware. For you, the word "need" suggests an idea at once vague and fluid. You cannot grasp the exact meaning of the word; indeed, only those crushed under its weight know that. There are a great many such people. The plight of those who must struggle day after day, and exhaust themselves, finding no help anywhere, is a stale topic—one which cultivation makes us consider shameful—and we talk as little as possible about such things, the more so since talking about them is quite useless; it simply bores people. As a child, I racked my brains over the business of finding daily bread for me and my widowed and impoverished mother; with that idea always in my

head, I sat in school from morning until evening, then worked all night at my books, applying myself to my task with an iron will, and sacrificing my health, to gain knowledge that proved useless to me. My situation was utterly banal, no different from that which overtakes hundreds of thousands of others. Everything followed its natural order; gifted with intelligence and understanding, with an education that had developed my abilities, and a readiness to work until I collapsed, to take up any kind of thankless and painful work, at 20 I stood face to face with destitution, and could see no salvation.

'I don't know how I can make you understand, even in part, the inner state of a man for whom, day and night, waking and sleeping, at work or at rest, the same question is always buzzing in his head: "How shall I manage? Where can I turn?" Just imagine being told, on the very day of a magnificent ball to which you have been looking forward for months, that the marvellous gown that you had ordered, and which had been meant to eclipse the apparel of all your rivals, will not be ready; imagine that you have no other gown that you could possibly wear to the ball, and that it is essential to you that you go; imagine how you would ask yourself ceaselessly, "What am I to do?" Of course, I hope that you will never suffer any such misfortune, but I have to invoke such a possibility, since that is the only means of making my story at least partially comprehensible to you.'

'I was born in a *guberniya*<sup>1</sup> capital, and in all probability should have expected to die there, having no relations who could smooth my way for me, and no other source of support. It was imperative that I find such a source; I had to seek patronage. See, Princess, every minute I have to use words that you must find mysterious. You only know how to give patronage, how it is sought, Princess. But how people wait in the ante-rooms, then haltingly make their pleas, to hear always the same curt answer, that, "regrettably, there is nothing to be done"; and then, after receiving that answer, how they must make their bow, and then leave the room, walking past the insolent footmen sprawling on chairs in the hall, forced to bear their impudent smiles, and then return to their poor hovel, to face their expectant mother, who has still not broken herself of the habit of hoping—this is what I know.'

'By now I had begun to understand where the problem lay, and what my greatest misfortune was—a misfortune to which I had been condemned from birth. In my first school, the boys, their spite inspired by the fact that I was a better student than they, would grin and call me "the bright boy". That was my nickname at school, too; everyone picked it up and used it as a

term of abuse. I could not conceal my disdain for my schoolmates' ignorance; it gave me pleasure that I, the poorest of all, should be first in every class. And having forced them to yield to me, day after day, over several years, having, by dint of my diligence and good behaviour, compelled my teachers constantly to hold me up as an example and to praise me, having conclusively demonstrated my intellectual and moral superiority to everyone I knew—I then, in my naïvety, would go and petition their fathers to be my protectors, to put in a good word for me, to give me a place.

'An elderly bachelor whom I often went to see, a lawyer, was the first to make me understand all this. My late father, in the days of his prosperity, had helped this old man a great deal; and now he in his turn considered it his obligation, should he ever run into me, to invite me over to visit him, and to take tea with him.

"You know, my boy," he said to me once, on an occasion when he was carrying out the duty that his conscience had laid upon him (this was a day when I had, incidentally, said farewell to yet another hope for the future), "you'd best not fret yourself so. Nothing will come of all this; you'll never have any luck."

"It does seem so, Matvei Artemevich," I said sadly.

"You'll never make it, my dear fellow," he went on. "You're not the right sort, you know. You're very clever, and you flaunt your brains. More brains than sense, that's you; or you'd have guessed what to do by now."

"So what should I do?" I asked.

"Remember that fairy-tale?" he replied. "The one that starts 'Once upon a time there were three brothers; the elder two were clever boys, but the third was a fool'?"

"Yes," I said bitterly, "and the fool was the lucky one. When I was a child, I would get angry when I listened to that story, and I never believed what it said; but now I've been forced to."

The old man looked at me from behind the samovar, with a cunning look in his sharp old eyes.

"But was Ivanushka really such a fool? He was making fools of other people, but he had sharp enough wits himself, didn't he? He was only pretending to be stupid, surely? He'd caught on that that was the surest way, hadn't he? That's no idle tale, my boy; if you once took its moral into account, things would start to go better for you, and you could get yourself off the rocks. Cleverness is all very well for the rich, but it doesn't become us poor fellows. I tell you, my boy, that's how it is."

I took his words to heart. I thought things over for a few days, and came

up with an irrefutable axiom: when a man demonstrates he is cleverer than most people, he also demonstrates that most people are stupider than he. And that helped me grasp something rather simple and obvious—that this demonstration of superiority is unlikely to inspire most people with any great enthusiasm, or any particular affection for the man who has contrived it. Discovery followed on discovery; I grasped that, if it is unpleasant for us all to feel that we stand lower than others, it is, conversely, more than moderately pleasant to feel that we stand higher; we cannot say to ourselves, "Why, the poor man is so stupid!" without satisfaction, since that proposition is inevitably accompanied by another: "That means that I am clever." And at that point I realized that people are instinctively well disposed towards those who afford them that satisfaction, and feel an involuntary benevolence for them; and I repeated to myself the old man's words, "That's how it is."

'But all these discoveries and logical conclusions led nowhere. For me everything was over. No matter what I might do, no matter to what boundless humility I might condemn myself, no matter what vow of unconditional obedience I might impose on myself, matters could not be mended; the general opinion of my character was firmly fixed. There is nothing more unshakeable in the entire universe than public opinion in a small city. Khozrevsky was an insufferable, an unworthy, a dissolute, a malicious, and a dangerous man; so much was decided, so much was immutable. Everyone pitied the mother to whom God in his wrath had given such a son.'

'There is nothing strange and nothing new in all this. It is a question of variations on the plot of *Woe from Wit*.<sup>6</sup> The chief variation was a dispiriting one for me, however. No matter how people cursed Chatsky, he never went hungry; and that seemed to me a significant difference between him and me. He left his enemies behind; I had nowhere to go.'

'And so a year went by—that's quickly said! I had to find some way of avoiding imminent disaster, I had to think of something: there was nothing to be thought of. As I sat at night in my dark cubby-hole, straining my wits to futile exertions, a certain old fable became a terrible truth; I saw before me the living Sphinx, as she appeared to Oedipus; her eyes glared ferociously into mine, as she insisted: "Solve the riddle, or I shall tear you to pieces!" The riddle was this: how might one find some reliable way of furnishing an indigent man with sustenance? That is the riddle over which our entire generation labours in vain, and over which successive generations will labour in vain.'

'One morning, Matvei Artemevich came to see me with a proposal: would I like to make a little money for myself by carrying out a simple commission? The errand in question was that I should take a stack of papers to a rich landowner at his nearby estate; I was to acquaint him with their contents, and explain anything else that might need explaining, and then bring back the landowner's reply to Matvei Artemevich. At the time the old man had nobody at hand capable of the task except me, so I could do both of us a good turn by undertaking it. I agreed joyfully, and set out that same day.

'You will know the name of the man I was going to see; it was Count Nikanor Glebovich Kholkovsky. You may have run into him abroad. You will know that he was brought up in Paris, and spent his youth there, and that he married a Frenchwoman. He visits Russia only occasionally, when he cannot avoid it. On this occasion, he was repaying his debt to his native land by appearing there in order to collect the quit-rent from his three thousand souls,<sup>o</sup> and was hoping to spend the shortest possible time in the country before leaving for Paris once more. He had left his wife in Petersburg, and was making a tour of his estates in the company of his 10-year-old son, Count Kholkovsky, a most amiable child, who, though he could not pronounce his own name, looked with great pity on all the unhappy souls deprived of the right to call themselves, as he did, *le comte Kolkonsky*.

'I arrived at the count's estate late one evening, and reported to its owner the next morning. Count Nikanor Glebovich is known for his exquisite sense of good form, and for his impeccable manners. He treated me most affably and, having glanced briefly at the papers I had brought, asked me if I would leave them with him for the moment, and do him the honour of spending two or three days at his house, so that he would have a chance to make a thorough study of the matter, before giving me his considered answer. Then he invited me to share his luncheon, and began discussing all kinds of subjects. I noticed that he had something of a passion for oratory, and realized that it would not at all become me to interrupt the flow of his eloquence. He was evidently very pleased by my modesty, asked me about my studies, putting me through my paces a little, and ended the conversation by announcing that he greatly liked my turn of mind, and that, if he had only made my acquaintance a few days earlier, he would have asked me to agree to act as his son's tutor and travel abroad with the family; but, unfortunately, he could not offer me the position now, since he had already come to an agreement with another young man, whom he was expecting from Moscow at any moment.'

'When I had left the Count's study, I wandered for a long time around the vast park, deep in painful meditation. Another failure, another malicious trick of fate! If only I could have received that commission and met the Count a week earlier! It would have been my salvation, it would have given me the opportunity to provide for my mother, to lead a life of ease, to go abroad, to see Paris and Italy! It all could have happened so easily! But now this was never to be, because I had come five or six days too late! I could not shake off these bitter thoughts; they stirred in me anew with each step that I took, with each glance that I cast around: what a park! what a house! Comfort, a life amidst all the appurtenances of wealth, all the things that I had never dared to imagine for myself—and all this, as it now seemed to me, had been taken from me for ever! I spent a sleepless night.

'The next day, over dinner, I was to encounter the innocent cause of my sorrow, the new arrival with his degree from Moscow University, the happy man who was to travel with the Count's family. I have rarely met anyone with such an attractive appearance, such a clever and pleasant face. He and the Count struck up a very lively conversation, touching on all kinds of learned topics. The tutor spoke exceptionally well; he refuted the Count's opinions to great effect, whilst brilliantly demonstrating the correctness of his own. I was in no mood to compete with him, and sat listening in silence. I was ashamed that I was giving such an unfavourable account of myself; I tried to suppress the thoughts that weighed on my mind and take part in the conversation, but with no success.

'In the evening, sitting with us on the terrace, the Count once again tried to prove to us that Hamlet could not have been speaking of him when he affirmed that there were more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in philosophy. Count Nikanor Glebovich's hobby-horse was his own exact understanding of everything in the world. From psychology he turned—with amazing deftness—to politics, and from there to differences in national characters, and thence to the innate hatred that nation feels for nation. Speaking of the hostile feelings that all Frenchmen nurture for the English, he pointed to the song "Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre" as a remarkable manifestation of that feeling. Such mockery of the Duke of Marlborough was a most characteristic manifestation of the spirit of the French rabble, and was totally in accordance with the national character. And to this the Count added a few remarks about the profound meaning and significance of folk-songs.

'When he had finished speaking, the young Muscovite replied that he would permit himself only to object that the song "Malbrouck s'en va-t-en

guerre" was in no sense French, not at all ironic, and that it had nothing to do with the Duke of Marlborough; that, as had been recently demonstrated, it was derived from an ancient Spanish poem borrowed from the Moors, a song about a knight who had received the popular nickname "El Mambru", in Old French "Le Mambru", a word signifying a strong, powerfully built man, which had later become corrupted to "Malbrouck". He referred to the content of the forgotten ending of the song, and to the fact that a Spanish woman, Louis XIV's wet-nurse, had lulled him to sleep with it and so made it known in France; only the textual distortions that had come with time, and the ignorance of the French themselves, had caused this simple Moorish poetry with its mournful tune to be taken, later on, at the court of Marie Antoinette, for a Parisian satirical song—which might, of course, be described as something of a blunder. All this the young man explained superbly well, with great tact and propriety. But, having heard him out, the Count said offhandedly, "*C'est bien possible,*"<sup>o</sup> and rang for tea, after which we went our separate ways.

I spent the hours until midnight walking up and down the dark avenue of limes and along the terraces. This was the last time that I would be able to enjoy this lovely garden and breathe the clean air freely. Tomorrow I would have to go home, back to my stuffy back street, to my crowded room, to constant worry about every crust of bread, and all the other aspects of my unbearable existence. And to cap it all, I was nagged by the overwhelming awareness of how close I had come to having a chance to escape from all this. My heart grew heavier and heavier. Good Lord! some people really were lucky, and not just fools. That young man was one; his studies, his hard work, had not been in vain, his labour had not been wasted, nor his cleverness proved useless; he had found people who appreciated him. And what a stupid fellow I had seemed beside him, and all at the very moment when I could least afford a false step! If I had displayed a little of my own learning, perhaps the Count would have recommended me to his acquaintances; that had been my only chance to get somewhere, and I had let it slip—there would be no other. It was painful to think of.

I spent the next morning alone with the Count, having a final discussion of the business on which I had been sent to him. When everything concerning the affair had been said and all had been decided, the Count suddenly turned to me and said, "Do you want to come with me? I've dismissed the young man we had dinner with yesterday. I can't bear gentlemen who know everything better than others and want to be cleverer than everybody else. People with such a high opinion of themselves are

unbearable. I noticed your modesty, and it pleases me; in fact, you please me very well on the whole. I can offer you a life of ease and a salary of a thousand silver roubles a year, which, I may say, is more than I intended paying. Think it over, then give me your answer. I shall be most grateful to you if you agree." And with that he shook my hand, and I left the study, stunned by the thought that everything I had dreamed of had suddenly fallen into my hands, and all thanks to the ditty "*Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre*".

I walked without heeding where I was going, feeling the need to escape to some distant spot, away from other people. I crossed the entire park, a field, a copse; there, in the wilderness, I sat down and began to come to my senses, and ponder the course of events.

I understood what had happened; it wasn't difficult to grasp. The Count, like many others, Counts and non-Counts alike, wanted to employ as tutor for his son a man without gifts, without character and opinions, without talent or abilities. The Count wanted to be a Count in an intellectual sense as well as a social sense; he could not bear the thought that those who surrounded him might be superior, and he felt an innate repulsion towards cleverness in others, as some people are repelled by cats or spiders. I understood what I was condemning myself to if I decided to remain with him. The condition was to renounce an essential right of humanity, the right to the expression of my thoughts; I would have to deny myself intelligent communication with other people; I would have to hide, as if it were something disgraceful, all that was best in me, everything of which I could be proud; I would have to display myself to all I knew as an ignoramus, and bear their flagrant disdain; I would have to buy myself a secure existence at the cost of my moral dignity. I had been given a few hours in order to think about this proposition, and decide whether to accept it or not.

You already know that I did accept it; to confess this to you is perhaps no less painful to me now than it was to decide on my humiliation in the first place.

In that moment, one on which my entire future depended, my thoughts became strangely lucid, as happens in times of great danger. I grasped all life's practicalities; I pondered everything, weighing it coolly and dispassionately. Could I subdue misfortune by my own efforts and make my way in the world? Yes, you can be born in the provinces, without social advantages, with an outlandish name such as Trofim Lukich, you can be an impoverished orphan without a single protector, and yet despite all that win

yourself a reputation and prosperity, forcing people to make way for you against their will. A man of genius can do that; many such men have done so, and many are doing so now. But I was no genius; I had only my intellect, and a reasonably good education. That is not enough; if you are to rise to the top, having only those qualities, you must also abandon your honour. I could not bring myself to become a rogue. There remained only poverty, poverty lasting until the end of my life, as I had known it from the beginning. The gentlemen who make a pleasant pastime of talking about those in need soothe their sensibilities with the consolation that habit eases the most painful situations. But those compassionate gentlemen are mistaken. One cannot become accustomed to torment; the longer it continues, the worse it becomes. You have no doubt heard that a drop of water falling every second on a man's head is the most terrible torture that exists. Need dripped constantly, unbearably, on my head. There are, certainly, examples of people who have borne torture without weakening in spirit; but the strength of others gives out, their will grows exhausted, and at last they give in. Galileo renounced his convictions; I renounced my intellectual significance. I agreed to cut out the tongues of my thoughts and feelings. I thought of my mother; I was being offered a way to save her, and give her a life of tranquillity. She was never to realize what I had traded for that life.

'I spent three years in the Count's home, without my resolve once wavering. At first things were difficult; later, though, they became easier. I became adapted to my role, and began to act it with skill. I disciplined myself so that I could see on the face of everyone who spoke to me the imprint of the thought: "How stupid he is!"—and see it without vexation. I found it amusing to dupe others, and mislead them into complacent smiles. I realized that the people who live in Paris and London were just like the people in the town where I was born, and that it pays to give way before others' self-esteem, wherever you are. I learned by experience that people extend a helping hand only to those whom they can look down on. The Count continued to be delighted with me, and became a tireless protector to me. When his son had moved on into the care of others, he obtained me another position, and procured me the patronage of influential people. From the moment when I ceased to distinguish myself, I began to gain a reputation as a man distinguished by his amiability. I became convinced of the truth of Matvei Artemevich's opinion, that this was the "surest way"; and so I continued to play Ivanushka the fool.'

'I am not making excuses for myself. Perhaps I would have found another

means of salvation if I had had the firmness of character to wait for it. It would have been more worthy of a man who respects himself to refuse the comforts of a humiliating life, to refuse to give in, and to struggle manfully with misfortune; it would have been nobler to take up day-labour, to break rocks on the highway. More than once I have felt so much, and I feel it more bitterly now than I ever did before; I never expected that I might have to stand before a woman who was prepared to sacrifice to me all the advantages which she had been taught to value. No, I did not foresee that. You must understand what it costs me to admit to an act that borders on the shameful. I have condemned myself to this admission, to this most difficult, but most honourable act; this confession is a great punishment that I have laid on myself, by means of which I settle accounts with my conscience.'

Khozrevsky fell silent, and remained sitting as he had been before, trying to master himself; he glanced at the Princess as if there were something else he wanted to say, but he said nothing. The Princess also sat in silence. Two or three long minutes passed. The Princess raised her head.

'I will give you my answer tomorrow,' she said, and stood up; then she rang the bell.

A servant came in, and Khozrevsky left.

The next morning Khozrevsky was given a narrow pink note which contained only two lines: 'I cannot bring myself to be the wife of a man who is so skilled in the art of deception.'

He read those words once, then again, and then burst into loud laughter.

'It serves me right,' he said, throwing the letter down on the table. 'For once I have committed an act of stupidity; rather than keeping my intellect on its leash, I have directly expressed what was in my heart.'

Having got to the end of his long story, Aleksei Petrovich contentedly sipped the dregs of his cold cup of tea.

'So what happened after that?' enquired the lady of the house. 'We're all waiting for the ending.'

'I regret that I must leave your expectations unsatisfied,' said Aleksei Petrovich. 'I cannot give you any ending; neither Khozrevsky, nor Wismer, nor Princess Alina went to an early grave, nor did she marry either one of them.'

'So what is your story supposed to prove?' asked the Countess.

'Absolutely nothing,' he replied.

'Do you think', she went on, 'that if it had been the other way around,

and a woman had been in Khozrevsky's place, and a man in the Princess's,  
he would have acted differently?'

'I don't know,' said Aleksei Petrovich.

(*September 1859*  
*Dresden*)

*Translated by Diana Greene and Mary Zirin*