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## THE BLIND MUSICIAN

### An Etude

Translated from the Russian by Helen Altschuler

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE SIXTH EDITION\*

[\* In which considerable changes and additions have been made.]

The present revision and enlargement of a story which has already appeared in several editions is rather a departure from the usual, I realise; and a brief explanation must be offered. My etude centres, as its basic psychological motif, around man's instinctive, organic craving for light. From this craving arises the spiritual crisis in the hero's development, and its eventual resolution. In criticism of the story, both printed and oral, I have repeatedly encountered an objection which at first glance may seem very well founded. The craving for light, my critics feel, cannot be predicated of the born blind; for they have never seen light, know nothing of it, and cannot, therefore, be aware the lack of it. This consideration does not seem to me convincing. None of us have ever flown like birds; yet we all know how long the sensation of flight persists in dreams—all through childhood and youth. Still, I must admit that my adoption of this motif was purely *a priori*, based on imagination rather than on concrete knowledge. It was not until several years after the first editions of the story had come out that I chanced, in the course of one of my excursions, upon an opportunity for direct observation. The two bell-ringers (one born blind, the other blind from childhood) whom the reader will find in Chapter VI; the contrast in their moods; their attitude towards the children; Yegor's talk of dreams—all this was noted in my memorandum book as I actually

observed it in the belfry of the Sarova Monastery, Tambov Eparchy, where, perhaps, the two blind bellmen are showing visitors up the winding stairs to this very day. From the hour when I observed it, that scene in the belfry—conclusive, to my mind, in the question under debate—lay more heavily on my conscience with each new edition of the story; and it was only the difficulty of return to a once finished work that prevented me from introducing it. Of the changes finally made in the present edition, the most important is the addition of this scene. As to the rest—once I had made the return, and my mind had fallen again into its former train of thought, there could be no question, of course, of a mere mechanical insertion of the one new bit. Other changes, throughout the story, were inevitable.

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## Chapter One

### I

A child was born, in the dead of night, to a wealthy family in the South-West Territory. The young mother lay sunk in heavy languor; but when the infant's first cry sounded, low and plaintive, she began to toss feverishly on her bed. Her eyes were shut, but her lips moved, whispering, and her pale face, still soft of outline almost as a child's, twisted as though in suffering and impatient protest—the expression a much-petted child might wear on its first contact with sorrow.

The midwife bent close over the whispering lips.

"Why? Why does he..." the mother asked, almost inaudibly.

The midwife did not understand. Again the child's cry sounded. An expression of bitter suffering passed over the mother's face, and a heavy tear welled from her eyes.

"Why? Why?" she whispered, faintly as before.

This time the midwife understood her question, and answered tranquilly:

"Why the child cries? It's always so. Don't you worry yourself about it."

But the mother was not to be soothed. She started at each new cry, demanding over and over again, with wrathful impatience:

"Why so ... so dreadful?"

The midwife heard nothing out of the ordinary in the child's cries; and the mother, she could see, was hardly conscious—did not, perhaps, even know what she was saying. Turning away from the bed, she busied herself with the infant.

The mother fell silent. Only, now and again, some grievous suffering, finding no outlet in words or movement, pressed great tears from her shut eyes. Through the heavy lashes they seeped, and rolled softly down the marble pallor of her cheeks.

Can the mother's heart have sensed the grim, the unalleviable tragedy that had come into the world with the new-born life—that hung over the infant's cradle, to follow him through all his life, to the very grave?

Or was it, perhaps, no more than delirium? Be that as it may, the child was born blind.

### II

No one noticed it, at first. The baby boy turned on the world the same dull, vague look as, to a certain age, all new-born infants do. Day passed after day, until the new life began to be reckoned in weeks. The child's eyes cleared. The dullness lifted, and the pupils seemed to focus. But he did not turn his head to follow the bright beam of light that came into the room in company with the cheery twitter of the birds in the luxuriant country garden, with the murmur of the green beeches swaying close by the open windows. The mother, now herself again, was the first

to look, in new alarm, into the baby's face—the first to notice its strange expression, its unchildlike gravity, immobility.

"Why does he stare like that? Tell me—oh, tell me why," she kept asking—seeking comfort, like a frightened dove, in the faces around her.

"What do you mean?" people would answer, unresponsive to her anxiety. "The child is like any child of the same age."

"But see how strangely his hands seem to grope."

"The child is too young to co-ordinate movements with visual impressions," the doctor explained.

"But why do his eyes look always straight ahead? Why does he never turn them? Is he—is he blind?"

And, once the fearful guess had burst from the mother's lips, no words could be found to console her.

The doctor lifted the child, turned it quickly to the light, and looked into its eyes. He seemed a little disturbed, and hurried away with no more than a few non-committal words and the promise to look in again in a day or two.

The mother trembled like a wounded bird. Sobbing, she pressed the child to her breast. But the child's eyes looked out as before, grave and unmoving.

In a day or two, as he had promised, the doctor came again—provided, this time, with an ophthalmoscope. He lit a candle and brought it up to the child's eyes; moved it away, and brought it close again. Many times over, he repeated his tests, his eyes fixed steadily on the child's pupils. And finally, deeply disturbed, he said:

"You were not mistaken, madam, to my great regret. The boy is blind. And beyond all hope of cure."

The mother received his verdict with quiet melancholy.

"I have known it a long time," she answered softly.

### III

The family to which the blind child had been born was not a large one. There were the mother and father; and there was "Uncle Maxim", as he was called by everyone in the house and many outside it. The father was a country landowner, very much like a thousand other country landowners in the South-West Territory. He was good-natured—one might call him even kind; treated his labourers well; and was tremendously fond of mills, one or another of which he was perpetually constructing or reconstructing. This occupation took up so much of his time that his voice was seldom heard in the house except at those hours of the day that were set aside for breakfast, dinner, and the like domestic occasions. Coming in, he would invariably ask, "And how are you today, my love?"—after which he would sit down to his meal and hardly speak till it was over, except, perhaps, now and again, for some announcement concerning the virtues of oak shafts and cog-wheels. A simple, peaceful existence, and not one, of course, to influence to any great degree the formation of his son's character and mentality. But Uncle Maxim—that was a different matter. Ten years or so before the events just described, Uncle Maxim had been known as the most dangerous wrangler not only in the vicinity of his own estate, but even at the Kiev "Contracts".

[ "*Contracts*"—the local term for the once wide-famed Kiev Fair.] It had puzzled everyone to understand how Pani Popelskaya, nee Yatsenko—such a respectable family, in every way—could have come by so dreadful a brother. One had never known what tone to take with him, or how to please him. To the gentry's civilities, he had returned disdainful insolence; yet from peasants he had endured rudeness and liberties that would have provoked the mildest of the gentry to use his fists. Finally, however, to the infinite relief of all sober-minded folk, he had got terribly angry with the Austrians over something or other, and left for Italy; and there he had joined up with just such another brawler and heretic as himself—one Garibaldi, who, as the gentry whispered in pious horror, had sworn brotherhood with the devil, and cared not a snap for the very Pope. Of course, Maxim had doomed that wayward, schismatic soul of his for all eternity—but, on the other hand, the "*Contracts*" had become appreciably more peaceful, and many ladies round about had been relieved, at last, of the constant fear for their sons' safety.

The Austrians, evidently, had got angry with Uncle Maxim, too. The battle accounts in the *Courier*, traditional newspaper of the Polish landowners in these parts, had mentioned him now and again as one of the most reckless of Garibaldi's followers; and one day this same *Courier* had informed its readers that Maxim had gone down, with his horse, in the field of battle—whereupon the infuriated Austrians, long eager for a chance at this pestiferous Volhynian (in his fellow-Volhynians' imaginations, more or less the only prop that kept Garibaldi from collapse), had slashed him into mincemeat.

"A bad end, Maxim's," the gentlefolk had thought to themselves, ascribing his fall to St. Peter's special intercession in behalf of his successor—Christ's vicar on earth. Maxim had been considered dead.

As it turned out, however, the Austrian sabres had failed to drive Maxim's indomitable soul from his body, badly though they had marred his limbs. Garibaldi's fire-eaters had borne their worthy comrade out of the fray and put him into hospital; and, some years later, he had suddenly arrived at his sister's home and there settled down for good.

Duels, now, were not for him. His right leg was gone, so that he could not walk without a crutch; and his left arm was too maimed to do anything more than manage a stick. He was graver, too, and quieter—only, at times, his sharp tongue would lash out, unerring as once his sword had been. He no longer visited the "*Contracts*", and rarely appeared in society. The greater part of his time was spent in his library, in the reading of books that no one had ever heard of or knew anything about, except for a general suspicion that they must be altogether godless. He did some writing, too; but as nothing from his pen ever appeared in the *Courier*, people attributed no great importance to his literary activities.

At the time when the new young life came into being in the little country home, the silver was beginning to show on Uncle Maxim's close-cropped hair and his shoulders had hunched up with the constant pressure of the crutches until his body seemed almost square. People who did not know him well were often afraid of him—awed by his queer figure and gloomy frown, by the loud tapping of his crutches, and the dense clouds of tobacco-smoke that issued from the pipe he never tired of smoking. And only his closest friends knew the kindly warmth of the heart that beat in the invalid's mutilated body; only they guessed at the tireless mental labour that went on in the big, square-hewn head, under the thick bristle of close-cropped hair.

But not even his closest friends could know what problem it was that occupied his mind at this period in his life. They knew only that Uncle Maxim would often sit for hours on end, enveloped in a blue haze of smoke, his eyes clouded and his shaggy eyebrows glumly drawn. What the crippled fighter was thinking was that life is struggle, with no room for invalids. He was out of the ranks for good—a burden for the baggage train, and nothing more. He was a knight whom life had struck from the saddle and thrown to earth. Was it not a cowardly thing to lie there, grovelling in the dust, like a trampled worm? Was it not cowardly to clutch at the victor's stirrup, begging to be left the miserable scraps of existence still remaining?

But while Uncle Maxim considered this searing thought, weighing and balancing the arguments *for* and *against* with cold, steady courage, a new being appeared in the household— an invalid from its very coming into the world. At first he hardly noticed the blind child. But it was not long before he began to ponder, with philosophic interest, over the strange resemblance between the child's fate and his own.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, one day, with a sidewise glance at the infant, "there's another invalid—this youngster. If you could put the two of us together, you'd get one proper man out of us, maybe."

And from that time on his eyes turned to the child more and more often.

## IV

The boy had been born blind. Who was to blame for his misfortune? No one. Not only had there been no shade of "evil intent" on anybody's part, but the very cause of the misfortune lay concealed somewhere deep down in life's mysterious intricacies. Yet, with her every glance at the blind boy, the mother's heart contracted with bitter pain. She suffered as any mother would, of course, because of her son's deficiency, in heavy foreboding of the griefs that life would hold for him; but, aside from this, in the depths of her heart she carried the aching realisation that the *cause* of his misfortune lay in some evil *potentiality* in those who had given him life. And that was sufficient to make this tiny being, with the beautiful, but unseeing eyes, an unconscious despot to whose slightest whim the entire household was obedient.

It is hard to say what might have come of the boy in time, predisposed as he was by his misfortune to an undirected bitterness of spirit, and encouraged by his entire environment to the development of egoism—had it not been for the strange fate, and the Austrian sabres, that had compelled Uncle Maxim to settle down with his sister in the country.

Gradually, almost insensibly, the presence of the blind child in the house turned the crippled soldier's restless thoughts in a new direction. He would still sit puffing at his pipe for hours on end; but the dull, bottomless pain in his eyes had given place to a look of thoughtful, interested observation. And the more Uncle Maxim observed, the harder he puffed at that pipe of his, and the more often his bushy brows frowned in displeasure. At length, one day, he made up his mind to interfere.

"This youngster," he began, issuing ring upon ring of smoke, "he'll be unhappier than me, by far. He'd have been luckier never to be born."

The young mother bowed her head, and a tear dropped on to her sewing.

"It's cruel of you to remind me of it, Max," she answered faintly. "So cruel, when you know there's nothing we can do,"

"It's only the truth I'm saying," Maxim returned. "I lack a leg and an arm, but I've got my sight. The youngster lacks sight, and in time he'll lack legs and arms as well, and all power of will besides."

"What makes you say that?"

"Do try to understand this, Anna," he said, more gently. "I wouldn't speak so harshly without reason. The boy is clearly very responsive. He has every chance, as yet, of developing his other capacities to a degree where they may compensate his blindness, at least in part. But development requires practice, exercise. And exercise results from necessity. Only from necessity. Whereas this foolish solicitude, that guards him against all necessity of effort, kills his every chance of fuller development."

The mother was not stupid. She found the strength to overcome the spontaneous impulse that had sent her flying headlong to the rescue at the child's slightest cry. In the months that followed this conversation, the boy learned to crawl freely and rapidly about the house; to give his attention to every sound around him; to finger every object that came into his grasp, with an eager interest seldom to be observed in other children.

## V

He quickly learned to recognise his mother—by her gait, by the rustle of her dress, by a multitude of other signs that none but he could distinguish. No matter how many people there might be in the room, or how they might move about, he would go unerringly through the room to her. When she took him up, however unexpectedly, he always knew that it was she. When others lifted him, he would pass his fingers lightly over their faces, and would quickly recognise the members of the household—his nurse, and Uncle Maxim, and his father. But if the person who had taken him up was a stranger, the movements of the tiny fingers would grow slower. Gently, but very minutely, he would trace the outlines of the unfamiliar face, his own face set in a look of strained attention—as though his fingertips were "seeing" for him.

By nature he was a very lively, active child. But as the months passed by his temperament showed more and more the imprint of his blindness. His movements became gradually less impulsive. He developed a habit of hiding away in quiet corners, where he would sit for hours, hardly moving, his face set and strained as though he were listening for something. When the room was quiet, and his attention was not held by the changing sounds of talk and movement, he would seem to fall into thought, and an expression of bewilderment and wonder would cloud his handsome face, so unchildishly grave.

Uncle Maxim had been right. The boy's nature, responsive and richly endowed, came to his aid. By delicate receptive-ness of touch and hearing it strove, as it

were, to restore whatever might be restored of fullness of perception. His sense of touch was amazing. There were times when it seemed, even, that he had some understanding of colour; for his seeking fingers would linger on brightly coloured objects, and a look of extraordinary concentration would come into his face when he handled them. The most intensive development, however, as time made increasingly clear, was that of his sense of hearing.

He soon knew every room in the house by the sounds peculiar to it; knew the gait of every member of the household; knew the creak of his invalid uncle's chair, the dry, even sound of the thread when his mother was sewing, the monotonous ticking of the clock. Sometimes, crawling about the floor, he would pause to listen to some sound that no one else could hear, and stretch out his hand after a fly that was creeping up the wall paper. When the fly took wing, his expression, at first, would change to one of painful perplexity, because he could not understand where it had gone. As he grew older, however, such disappearances no longer caused him any perplexity. He would simply turn his head in the direction the fly had taken; for his hearing had grown so keen that he could distinguish the flutter of its wings.

The world around him—alive with movement, with sound and colour—reached the blind boy chiefly in the form of sound; and his conceptions of his surroundings were chiefly sound-conceptions. His face often wore a peculiar, listening expression, his chin the least bit forward and his slender-neck outstretched. His eyebrows became strikingly mobile. But his beautiful eyes remained unmoving. And this gave his face a look at once of childish sternness and of pathos.

## VI

The boy's third winter was drawing to its close. The snow was melting out of doors, and spring streams had sprung to noisy life. The boy had been sickly all through the winter, and confined to the house, without a breath of outdoor air; but now his health began to improve.

The storm-windows were removed, and the joy of spring burst into the house with redoubled vigour. The merry sun flooded the rooms with light. The beeches, still bare, swayed as always just outside the windows. And in the distance lay the black, bare fields, dotted here and there with white heaps of melting snow. In many spots the grass already showed, a pale, tender green. The very air was softer, easier to breathe. And the whole household felt a sense of renewal, a springtime surging of cheerful, vital energy.

To the blind boy, spring came only as hurried sounds, filling the rooms. He heard the rush of the spring waters, stream racing after stream, leaping among the stones, cutting their way through the soft, wet earth. He heard the beeches whispering by the windows. Their branches kept brushing together, and sometimes a twig would strike a window-pane and set it tinkling. He heard the hurried, insistent patter of a myriad falling drops, where the icicles that hung from the roof, caught by the frost at dawn, were now melting in the sun. *Sharp* and clear, these sounds came into the house—like round, swift pebbles, striking upon



his hearing. Sometimes, too, through these nearer sounds, came the call of the cranes, floating down to earth from distant heights and fading gradually into silence, as though melting away in the clear air.

These days of Nature's springtime animation brought to the child's face a look of bewilderment and distress. He would stretch out his neck and draw his brows, listening painfully—then, as though frightened by this confusion of sounds, suddenly stretch out his arms to his mother, and press close against her breast.

"What ails the child?" the mother wondered, and asked of everyone around her.

Uncle Maxim looked long and earnestly into the boy's face, seeking some explanation of his strange alarm. But he found nothing.

"He ... he can't understand," the mother said hesitantly, watching the child's expression of tortured question and bewilderment.

Truly, he was frightened and uneasy—now puzzling over the new sounds, now wondering that the old ones, to which he had grown used, had suddenly fallen still, disappeared, he could not guess where to.

## VII

The chaos of early spring was stilled. As the days went by, the hot sun, beaming down, brought Nature's labours more and more into their normal rhythm. Life tensed, as it were. Its advance grew swifter, gathering speed like an engine when the throttle is thrown open. The meadows turned green, and the scent of birch buds filled the air.

It was decided to take the boy out through the fields, to the bank of the near-by river.

The mother took him by the hand. Uncle Maxim, on his crutches, walked beside them. They went through the fields together towards a grass-grown hillock by the riverside, where the ground had been thoroughly dried by wind and sun. From the top of the hillock, a broad view opened out over the surrounding country.

To the mother and Uncle Maxim the day was so bright, as they set out, that they had to screw up their eyes against the glare. The sunbeams warmed their faces, but the spring wind, fluttering unseen, fanned away this warmth and replaced it with a refreshing coolness. There was something intoxicating in the air, something inducive of a sweet, sleepy languor.

The mother felt a sudden clinging pressure of the little hand she held. But the heady breath of spring had made her less sensitive than always to this signal of the child's uneasiness. She walked on, her face uplifted, drawing deep, eager breaths of the spring air. Had she looked down, even for an instant, she must have noticed the child's strange expression. His open eyes were turned straight to the sun, and his lips were parted, in a look of dumb amazement. He breathed in short, quick gasps, like a fish that has been jerked out of the water. At moments, a look of almost tortured rapture would break through his helpless bewilderment, passing over the little face in a sort of nervous spasm and lighting it up for an instant, only to be replaced again by that look of dumb amazement, of frightened, perplexed

inquiry. Only his eyes remained unmoved, unseeing, inexpressive.

They climbed the hillock, and sat down on its grassy top. The mother lifted the child to settle him more comfortably—and again he clutched at her hand, as though he were afraid that he would fall, as though he lacked the feeling of the firm earth under him. But again, absorbed by the spring beauty all about her, the mother did not notice his uneasiness.

It was midday, and the sun hung almost motionless in the blue heights. The river lay below, broad and deep, in the fullness of its spring waters. It had broken through its winter coat and carried it off, all but a few last floes of melting ice that still drifted here and there—white spots on the bright surface. The flooded water-meadows were like broad lakes; and white cloudlets—reflected, with the inverted blue arch of the sky, in their quiet depths—drifted about them and disappeared, like the melting ice-floes on the river. Now and again the breeze would set the water rippling, sparkling in the sunlight. Beyond the river, the fields lay black and wet and steaming, and through the quivering haze one glimpsed thatched hovels in the distance, and, farther still, the dim blue outline of the forest edge. The earth seemed to breathe, in long, sighing breaths, sending up fragrant incense in worship to the skies.

All Nature was one great temple, arrayed in readiness for holiday. But to the blind boy there was only darkness, vast, unbounded; a darkness that had come into unwonted agitation all around him, that moved, and rang, and rumbled, that reached out to him, urged upon him from every side new, never before experienced impressions, in such multitude as made his little heart beat fast and painfully.

With his first steps out of doors, when the hot day struck him full in the face, warming his delicate skin, he had turned his unseeing eyes instinctively towards the sun, as though in understanding that here was the centre, the focus to which all the world around him gravitated. The clear distances on every side, the blue vault above, the far circle of the horizon—of these he knew nothing. He knew only that something material, something gentle, caressing, touched his face and warmed it. And then something cool and light, but less light than the sunny warmth, took the soft warmth away and swept his face with a refreshing coolness. Indoors, the boy had learned to move freely about the rooms. Space, there, was empty. But here—here he was seized by something that came over him in sweeping waves, in inexplicable alternation: now gently caressing, now rousing, intoxicating. The sun's warm touch would be swiftly blown away, and the wind would seize his cheeks, his temples—would circle his head, from chin to nape, until his ears began to ring—would pull at his whole body, as though trying to lift him up and carry him off into that space his blind eyes could not see. It tugged at his consciousness, inducing forgetfulness, lassitude. And the child's hand clung hard to the mother's; his heart trembled, and almost stopped.

When they sat him down in the grass he felt a little easier, at first. The feeling of strangeness was still there, filling his whole being; but through it, now, he began to distinguish one and another of the sounds around him. The dark, caressing waves came over him as before. They seemed even to penetrate into his body; for his blood pulsed in his veins in rhythm with the coming and the going of these waves. But now they brought sound with them: a lark's clear trill; the soft murmur of a young birch in new leaf; a faint splashing in the river. A swallow circled giddily, somewhere very near, its light wings whistling; the swarming

midges droned; and at intervals, over all else, came the long and melancholy cry of a ploughman, urging on his oxen.

But the child could not grasp all these sounds together, in their oneness. He could not unite them, could not arrange them in proper perspective. They were all separate, coming into the sightless little head each by itself: some soft and vague, some loud, clear, deafening. Sometimes they all came at once, crowding unpleasantly on one another, in incomprehensible disharmony. And still the wind from the fields kept up its whistling in his ears. The waves came over him, faster, faster, and now their din dimmed all the other sounds, making them seem to rise from some other world than this—like memories of days already past. And as the sounds grew dimmer, a tingling lassitude seemed to pour into the childish breast. The boy's face twitched in the rhythm of these waves coming over him. His eyes closed, opened, closed again. His brows came into uneasy movement. Every feature showed his questioning, his arduous effort of brain and of imagination. Childish and weak as yet, and overburdened with new impressions, his consciousness began to tire. It still struggled, still tried to cope with the sensations and impressions flooding in upon it from every side—to keep its balance among them, to merge them into some sort of oneness and thus to master, to conquer them. But the task was too great for the child's unlit brain, deprived of the aid of visual perception.

And the sounds kept coming, flying, falling one over another; and they were still so ringing, all of them, and so unlike. The waves came rolling with greater and greater tension, coming up from the clamorous darkness around the child and going off into that same darkness, to be followed by new waves, and new sounds. Faster, higher, more and more torturing, lifting him, rocking him, lulling him. And again, over all this dimming chaos, the long and melancholy human cry. And then all was still.

Moaning softly, the child fell back into the grass. The mother turned, and cried out in alarm. He lay still in the grass, his face blanched. He had fainted.

## VIII

Uncle Maxim was very much alarmed by this development. He had been ordering books on physiology, psychology, and pedagogy, of late, and had thrown himself with his usual energy into the study of all that science had to offer concerning the mystery of a child's soul, its growth and development.

These new studies had more and more absorbed him, and as a result the old grim thoughts of his unfitness for life's struggle—"a burden for the baggage train", "a trampled worm, grovelling in the dust"—had long since been aired out of his square-hewn head. In their place had come a thoughtful interest—even, at times, rainbow dreams, that warmed his aging heart. Nature, he realised more and more clearly, while depriving his little nephew of sight, had yet been kind to him in other things. To all impressions from the outer world accessible to his senses, the child responded with remarkable fullness and vigour. And Uncle Maxim felt it his mission to develop the child's native abilities; to exert his own intelligence and influence in an attempt to counterbalance the blind injustice of fate; to fill his

empty place in the ranks with a new fighter for life's cause, a recruit not to be swayed by any influence but his.

Who could tell?—the old Garibaldian reflected. The spear and the sword, after all, were not the only means of struggle. Some day, perhaps, this child whom fate had so unjustly slighted would turn whatever weapon he might master to the defence of other unfortunates, victims of life's injustice. And then the crippled old soldier would not have lived in vain.

Even emancipated minds, back in the 'forties and 'fifties, were not altogether free of superstitious belief in that "mystery of Nature" known as predestination. It is hardly to be wondered, then, that as the child developed, evincing remarkable ability, Uncle Maxim came to regard his very blindness as a clear sign of such "predestination".

Yes, "Fate's victim, for the victims of Fortune"—such was the device that he would choose for his fosterling's battle standard.

## IX

For several days after that first spring outing the boy lay in his bed, delirious. And in all that time, whether he lay still and silent, or tossed and murmured, or seemed to be listening for something, that strange expression of bewilderment never left his face.

"Really," the young mother said, "he looks as if he were trying to understand something, and couldn't."

Uncle Maxim nodded thoughtfully. He realised that the child's strange uneasiness, and his sudden swoon, had been caused by a too great profusion of new impressions, which had overtaxed his imagination. Now, when the child began to convalesce, it was decided that these new impressions be admitted to him only gradually—piecemeal, as it were. At first the windows in his room were kept tight shut. Then, as he grew stronger, they would be opened now and again, for a short while at a time. Later, when he could walk, the mother took him about the house, then out to the porch, then down into the garden. And whenever the look of distress came into his face, she would explain to him what caused these sounds he could not understand.

"That's a shepherd's horn, off beyond the woods," she would say. "And there's a robin—you can hear it through the chirping of the sparrows. And now the stork's clattering its bill, up on its wheel. *[ In the Ukraine, and also in Poland, people set up old cart-wheels for storks to nest on, at the top of tall posts.* It only got back the other day, from oh! such distant lands, and now it's building its nest in the same place as last year."

The child would nod and press her hand, his face glowing with gratitude. And his expression, as he listened to the sounds around him, would be one of thoughtful, understanding interest.

Now he began to put questions about everything that caught his attention; and his mother or, more often, Uncle Maxim would tell him about the creatures or the objects that produced the sounds he heard. The mother's descriptions were more lively and vivid than Uncle Maxim's, and impressed themselves more sharply on the child's imagination; but they were often too great a strain upon his

understanding. The mother herself suffered. Her eyes would fill with helpless pain and sorrow. But, as best she could, she tried to give her child some understanding of shape and colour. The boy would sit listening intently, his eyebrows drawn, his forehead puckered in tiny furrows—his childish mind clearly straggling with a task beyond its power, his imagination striving fruitlessly to build up new concepts with the aid of what she tried to tell him. Uncle Maxim always frowned at these scenes; and when tears rose in the mother's eyes, and the boy turned pale with his effort to understand, Maxim would break in, silence his sister, and begin to talk himself, wherever possible confining his explanations to concepts of space and sound. The look of strain would fade from the child's face.

"Is it big, then? How big is it?"

They had been talking about the stork that stood lazily clattering its bill, up on its wheel.

He spread out his arms, as he always did when asking about the size of things, for Uncle Maxim to stop him when they were far enough apart. But his little arms went out and out, and still Uncle Maxim said:

"No, it's bigger than that. Much bigger. If we took it into the house and set it down on the floor, its head would reach higher than the backs of the chairs."

"So big!" the boy responded musingly. "But a robin, it's only like this"—and he brought his palms almost together.

"Yes, a robin's like that. But then, you see, the big birds never sing so well as the tiny ones do. Robins try hard to make everyone like their singing. Whereas a stork is a serious bird. Stands on one leg, up there in its nest, looking around it like a surly master watching over his servants, and grumbling just as loud as ever it pleases. It doesn't care a snap if its voice is hoarse, or if strangers happen to hear."

The boy would laugh merrily at such tales, and forget the distress and strain of his efforts to understand his mother's stories. But—it was those stories that attracted him, and he turned to his mother with his questions, rather than to his uncle.

## Chapter Two

### I

The child's world broadened. His sensitive hearing told him more and more of Nature. But darkness, deep, impenetrable, hung as always over and around him—a black cloud, weighing heavily upon his brain. It had hung over him from the day of his birth, and he might surely have grown accustomed, resigned to his misfortune. But he was not resigned. There was some instinct in his childish being that strove ceaselessly for freedom from the blackness. And this subconscious, but unintermittent quest for the light that he had never seen left its imprint more and more deeply on his face, in an expression of undefined and tortured effort.

Still, he too had his moments of unclouded pleasure, his bright childish raptures. These came when some powerful impression, accessible to his senses, brought him new knowledge of the unseen world. For Nature, in her might and grandeur, did not remain entirely a closed book to the blind child.

There was the day when they took him to a high rock overhanging the river, and he stood listening, with an altogether new expression, to the faint splashings of the water far below; and then the sound of the pebbles rolling from underfoot, dropping down the side of the rock, made him clutch at his mother's skirts with sinking heart. Always, afterwards, the concept of depth was associated in his mind with the murmur of water at the foot of the rock and the frightened scamper of falling pebbles.

Distance, to him, was the slow fading away of a song into nothingness. And when spring thunder rolled across the sky, filling all space with its rumbling, and then retiring, with a final wrathful roar, behind the clouds—at such moments the blind child would stand listening in reverent awe. His heart would swell, and in his mind would rise a poignant sense of the majesty and sweep of the heavenly vault above him.

Sound was thus the chief medium by which the outer world could reach his understanding. The impressions received through other senses served only to supplement his sound impressions, in which all his ideas of the world were shaped.

Sometimes, when the day was at its hottest, and all sounds were stilled; when human activity came to a standstill, and Nature lay in that peculiar hush in which one can sense no movement but the unceasing, soundless flow of vital energy—at such hours, sometimes, a new expression would transform the blind boy's face. It was as though he were listening, with strained attention, to sounds that none but he could hear—sounds rising from within, from the very depths of his being, called to the surface by the great stillness without. Watching his face, at such times, one had the impression that some dim thought was sounding in his heart in melody—vague as yet, and unformed.

## II

He was in his fifth year, thin and weakly. Indoors, he moved, even ran, about the rooms with perfect freedom. A strange, seeing how confidently he walked—never hesitating at a turn, never at a loss to find things that he wanted—might not have realised that he was blind; might have taken him simply for an unusually contemplative child, with dreamy eyes that seemed to look far out into vague distances. Out of doors, however, things were not so easy. He walked with a stick, feeling the ground with it before every step he took. When he had no stick, he would get down on hands and knees and crawl, swiftly investigating with his fingers every object encountered in his path.

## III

It was a quiet summer evening. Uncle Maxim was out in the garden. The child's father, as usual, was still away in some distant field. Everything was still. The village was sinking into sleep, and the talk in the servants' hall had died away. The child had been put to bed half an hour past.

He lay in his room, only half-asleep. For some days, now, the very thought of this quiet evening hour had called strange memories to his mind. He could not see the darkening sky, of course; could not see the swaying tree-tops outlined in black against its starry velvet, or the shadows that gathered under the shaggy eaves of barns and stable, or the blue blackness creeping over the earth, or the glinting gold of moonbeams and starlight. Yet, day after day, he would drop off to sleep under some beautiful spell that, in the morning, he could not explain.

It would come at the hour when sleep began to dull his senses, when he no longer consciously heard the murmur of the beeches at his window, or the distant barking of the village dogs, or the trilling of the nightingale beyond the river, or the mournful tinkle of tiny bells where a colt was grazing in the meadow; when all individual sounds seemed to fade and vanish. Merged in new, soft harmony, they would now seem to come again, all these sounds, and hover in his room, filling his heart with vague, but very pleasant fancies. When morning came, he would wake in a softened, tender mood, and question his mother eagerly:

"What was it, last night? What was it?"

The mother could not answer. Perhaps, she thought, the child had been having dreams. She would put him to bed herself, every evening, bless him devoutly, and linger by his side until he seemed asleep. She never noticed anything out of the ordinary. Yet, in the morning, he would speak again of a pleasant something experienced the night before:

"It was so fine, so fine! What was it, Mother?"

And so, this evening, she had decided to stay in the child's room and watch, in the hope of finding some solution to this riddle. She sat quietly beside the bed, knitting mechanically, listening to little Petro's even breathing. Soon he seemed fast asleep. But suddenly she heard him whisper through the darkness:

"Are you still here, Mother?"

"Yes, Petro."

"Do go away. It's afraid of you, and it doesn't come. I was almost asleep already, and it doesn't come."

This plaintive, sleepy whisper brought a strange feeling to the mother's heart. He spoke so confidently of his fancies, as though of something very real! Still, she got up, bent over the bed to kiss the child, and slipped quietly out of the room. She would go around through the garden, she thought, and creep up unnoticed outside his open window.

And as she was coming through the garden the mystery was suddenly solved for her. The soft strains of a village pipe came floating from the stable: a simple, unembroidered melody, mingling with the night's soft murmurings. Yes, clearly, it must be this music, coming at the magic moments just before sleep, that gave the child such pleasant memories.

She paused awhile to listen, charmed by the tender Ukrainian melody, then turned back, her heart at ease, to join Uncle Maxim in the garden.

How well Iochim played! Strange, that such tender, delicate feeling should come from so seemingly coarse a fellow.

#### IV

Yes, Iochim played well. Of the exacting fiddle, even, he was master; and, time had been, none could play a Cossack dance better than he, or a gay Polish *Krakowiak*, at the tavern of a Sunday. There he would sit, on his bench in the corner, his fiddle tucked under his shaven chin, his tall sheepskin hat jauntily tilted; and when he brought his curved bow down on the taut, waiting strings, not many in the tavern could sit still. Even the aged, one-eyed Jew who accompanied Iochim on the double-bass would get tremendously excited. His shoulders would twitch, and his bald head, in its black skull-cap, sway, and the whole of his thin little frame mark time to the sprightly melody, while his clumsy instrument seemed to strain almost to breaking point in the effort to make its heavy bass keep up with the fiddle's swift, light treble. What, then, remains to be said of the baptized—whose legs have always been prone to tap and swing at the first hint of gay dance music?

But Iochim fell in love with Marya, a servant girl on a neighbouring estate. And soon the merry fiddle lost all its charm for him. True, it had failed to win him cruel Marya's heart. She preferred a German valet's shaven features to the Ukrainian stableman's moustache and music. And from the day that Marya made her choice, Iochim's fiddle was never heard again at the tavern, nor yet at the young folks' evening gatherings. He hung the once-loved instrument on a peg on the stable wall, and did not seem to care when, one by one, what with the dampness and his neglect, its strings all snapped—snapped with such a loud and piteous twanging that even the horses neighed in sympathy and turned to stare at the fiddle's hard-hearted master.

From a Carpathian mountaineer passing through the village, Iochim bought a wooden pipe to replace his fiddle. Perhaps he felt that the pipe's sweet, plaintive



tones would be more appropriate to his bitter lot, more expressive of the melancholy that filled his rejected heart. But the mountain pipe failed to satisfy his need. He tried others—a good half-score of them. He did everything a man could do: scraped them, whittled them, soaked them in water and dried them in the sun, hung them up where the wind could blow at them from every side. But nothing did any good. The mountain pipes would not express the grief of his Ukrainian heart. They whistled when they should have sung, and squealed when he tried to make them hum. They simply would not lend themselves to Iochim's mood. And so, in the end, he flew into a temper and declared that there wasn't a mountaineer in the world who could make a decent pipe. No, he would have to make his pipe himself, with his own hands.

For days he wandered, frowning, through the fields and marshes. At every clump of willow he would pause, to pick and choose among the branches. Here and there, he would cut a branch or two; but none of them seemed really to satisfy him. His frown never relaxed, and he did not drop his search. But then he came upon a quiet river pool, where the lazy current barely swayed the white cups of the water-lilies, and luxuriant growths of willow, bending dreamily over the still, dark depths, kept out every breeze. Iochim pushed through the willows to the river-bank, and stood a while, looking about him. And suddenly—he could not have said why—he knew that here he would find what he had been seeking. His face cleared, and he pulled his clasp-knife free of its strap inside his boot-top. After a searching look up and down the line of rustling bushes, he made his choice, and strode up to a straight, slender trunk at the very edge of the steep bank. He flipped it with his finger, and watched it sway, lithe and resilient; listened a while to the murmur of its leaves, and threw back his head in pleasure.

"There it is," he mumbled happily. And all the other branches he had cut went flying down into the water.

The pipe turned out wonderfully well.

First he dried the willow bole. Then he burnt out its heart with a red-hot wire; burnt six round holes in its side, and cut a seventh, slanted opening; and plugged one end tight with a bit of wood, with a narrow, slanted slit in it. He hung the pipe up out of doors, and let it hang a whole week for the sun to warm and the wind to cool. And when he took it down he shaped it carefully with his knife, and smoothed it with glass, and gave it a good rubbing with a bit of coarse woollen cloth. At the top he made it round; but the lower half was faceted, and on the facets, with the aid of twisted bits of iron, he burnt all sorts of interlaced designs. When all was done, he tried a swift scale or two—and, with a muffled exclamation, hid the pipe hurriedly away in a safe corner, by his bed. No, it was not for the bustling daylight hours—his first trial of its worth. But when evening fell, its music came pouring from the stable— tender, dreamy, vibrant. Iochim was satisfied. The pipe responded as though it were a part of his own being. Its music seemed to issue from his own warm, grieving heart.

Every turn, every shade in his sorrow sounded in this wonderful pipe, to fly, note by note, into the still, listening evening.

Now Iochim was in love with his pipe, and celebrating his honeymoon with it. Through the day he did his work as always—watered the horses, harnessed them when needed, drove for *Pani* Popelskaya or for Uncle Maxim; and at times, when he glanced in the direction of the neighbouring village, where the cruel Marya lived, his heart would be very heavy. But when evening came all the world would be forgotten, and even the thought of Marya's dark eyes would haze over, somehow, losing its searing reality— would hover in a sort of misty veil, only so far perceived as to lend a wistful, dreamy flavour to the music of the wonderful new pipe.

And so, one evening, Iochim lay on his bed in the stable, in this state of musical ecstasy, pouring out his whole soul in vibrant melodies. He had altogether forgotten the hardhearted beauty—had forgotten, almost, his own existence—when suddenly he started, and sat up abruptly. Just as the music was at its sweetest, a tiny hand had brushed lightly, swiftly down his face, and over his hands, to the pipe. On the pipe it stopped, fingering it in eager haste. There was something alive, right there beside Iochim. He could hear the quick, excited breathing.

"The Lord preserve us!" he gasped—the usual formula for exorcising the powers of evil; and, to make sure, demanded sternly, "God's, or Satan's?"

But a moonbeam, glinting in at the open stable door, soon showed him his error. Beside the rough bed, his little hands eagerly extended, stood the manor folks' blind boy.

It was an hour or so later that the mother tiptoed into the nursery, to see how little Petro slept. His bed was empty. For a moment she was badly frightened; but she quickly guessed where the boy might be.

Iochim was very much abashed when, laying down his pipe for a breathing spell, he suddenly noticed his "gracious *pani*" in the stable doorway. She had evidently been standing there some time, listening to his music and watching her boy, who sat on Iochim's bed, wrapped in a big sheepskin jacket, still listening eagerly for the interrupted music.

## VI

From that time on, Petro went out to the stable every evening. It never occurred to him to ask Iochim to play in the day-time. To his mind, evidently, the bustle and movement of the daylight hours excluded all thought of these gentle melodies. But as evening drew on the child would be seized with a feverish impatience. Tea, and then supper, were of significance only as signs that the eagerly awaited time was near. And though the mother felt an unreasoning, instinctive dislike for this attraction that drew him so strongly, she could not forbid her darling the pleasure of spending the evening hours, before he was put to bed, listening to Iochim's music in the stable. These hours were now the happiest the child knew. The evening's impressions, as the mother saw with searing jealousy, would remain with him all through the following day. Not even her caresses could evoke his former undivided response. Even when he nestled in her

arms, his dreamy look would show that he was thinking of Iochim's music.

It was then that she recalled her own musical accomplishments. It was not so many years, after all, since she had come out of boarding school—*Pani Radetskaya's* establishment, in Kiev, where, among other "pleasant arts", she had been taught to play the piano. True, this was not too pleasant a memory; for it involved a lively recollection of Fraulein Klapps, the music teacher, an elderly German spinster, hopelessly thin, and hopelessly prosaic, and—what was worst of all—hopelessly cross. She had been very skilful, this acid-tempered lady, at "breaking in" her pupils' fingers and making them flexible; and wonderfully successful, too, in murdering any feeling the girls might have had for the poesy of music. That is a timid feeling, often; and Fraulein Klapps' very presence would have been enough to frighten it away—not to speak of her methods of teaching. And so, after leaving school, young Anna Yatsenko had never had the slightest inclination to go on playing. Nor had this changed with marriage. But now, as she listened to the music this simple Ukrainian peasant drew from his pipe, a new feeling—a lively feeling of melody—began to grow in her heart, side by side with her growing jealousy; and the memory of the German spinster began to fade. And, in the end, *Pani Popelskaya* asked her husband to buy her a piano.

"As you wish, my love," replied this model husband. "I had thought you weren't fond of music."

The order was sent off that very day. But it would take two or three weeks, at the least, before the piano could be purchased and brought out from town.

And still the pipe trilled its summons every evening; and the boy would run off to the stable without even stopping to ask permission.

The stable smelled of horses, fresh, fragrant hay, and leather harness. The horses would stand quietly munching, with an occasional rustle as they nosed at the hay in their mangers. When the pipe fell silent for a moment, the murmur of the beeches in the garden would come clearly through the evening hush. Petro would sit motionless, as under a charm, drinking in the music.

He would never interrupt. But whenever the music stopped, if it was more than for a minute or two, his charmed listening would give way to a strange, eager excitement. He would stretch out his hands for the pipe, and, with trembling fingers, press it to his lips; but his breath would come so short, in his eagerness, that at first he could produce only faint, quivering trills. Later, little by little, he began to master the simple instrument. Iochim would place his fingers, showing him how to produce each different tone; and, though his tiny hand could barely reach across the row of finger holes, he soon learned how all the notes were placed. Each note, to him, had its own countenance, its own individual nature. He knew, now, in which of the holes it lived, and how to bring it out. And often, when Iochim was playing some simple tune, the child's fingers would move in unison with his teacher's. He had gained a clear conception of the notes of the scale, their sequence and their location.

## VII

Three weeks passed, and, at long last, the piano arrived. Petro stood in the

yard, listening intently to the bustle. It must be very heavy, this "imported music", for the wagon creaked when the men started to lift it, and the men themselves kept grunting, and their breath came loud and laboured. Now they moved towards the house, with heavy, measured step. And at each step something above them hummed and moaned and tinkled in the strangest way. Then they set this queer "music" down in the drawing-room, and again it made that deep, dull, humming sound—as though it were threatening someone, in passionate anger.

All this induced a feeling very near to fright, and did not incline the child in favour of the new arrival—inanimate, perhaps, but clearly not sweet-tempered. He wandered away into the garden. There, he did not hear the workmen setting up the instrument in the drawing-room; did not hear the tuner, summoned from town, trying the keys and adjusting the wire strings. Only when all was ready did his mother send for him.

Now Anna Mikhailovna was ready to celebrate her triumph over the simple village pipe. Her piano came from Vienna, and it was the work of a famed master. Surely, now, Petro would stop running to the stable. Once again, all his joys would have their source in his mother. With a gay smile in her eyes, she watched the child come timidly into the room, with Uncle Maxim; gaily, she glanced at Iochim, who had asked permission to come and hear the "foreign music", and now stood bashfully in the doorway, his eyes on the floor, his forelock dangling. When Maxim and the child had settled themselves to listen, she brought her hands down suddenly on the piano keys.

It was a piece she had mastered brilliantly at Pani Radetskaya's boarding school, under the guidance of Fraulein Klapps. A tremendously loud composition, and quite complicated, demanding great flexibility in the player's fingers. At the public examination before leaving school, Anna Mikhailovna had earned herself—and particularly her teacher—great praise by her performance of this difficult work. And, though no one could be sure, of course, there were many who suspected that her capture of quiet *Pan* Popelsky had been accomplished precisely in the brief fifteen minutes it had taken her to play her piece. Today, she played it in the hope of quite another victory—to win back her old place in her son's little heart, beguiled from her by the love of a peasant pipe.

This time, however, her hopes were in vain. The piano came from Vienna; but it could not contend with a bit of Ukrainian willow. True, the piano had great advantages: costly wood, the finest of strings, the wonderful craftsmanship of its Viennese maker, the broad range of tone that it afforded. But the Ukrainian pipe had allies, too; for here it was in its own homeland, surrounded by its native Ukrainian countryside.

Until Iochim cut it with his knife, and burnt out its heart with red-hot wire, it had stood swaying on the bank of a little river the child knew and loved. It had been warmed by the same Ukrainian sun as he, and cooled by the same Ukrainian wind, until that day when the sharp eye of a Ukrainian piper had spied it out on its high bank. And, too, it was the harder for the foreign instrument to conquer the simple village pipe, in that the pipe had first sung to the blind child in the quiet hour when sleep was stealing over him—through the mysterious whisperings of evening, and the drowsy murmur of the beeches, with all Ukraine's Nature as accompaniment.

Nor could *Pani* Popelskaya rival Iochim. True, her slender fingers were swifter than his, and more flexible, and the melody she played more intricate and

colourful; and Fraulein Klapps had laboured earnestly to help her pupil master the difficult instrument. But Iochim had a native feeling for music. He loved and grieved, and in his love and grief turned to Nature for comfort. It was Nature that taught him his simple melodies: the murmur of the woods, the soft whisperings of the grass-grown steppelands; these, and the old, old songs, so infinitely dear, that had been sung to the rocking of the cradle when he was still a baby.

No, it was not so easy for the Viennese piano to conquer the simple Ukrainian pipe. Hardly a minute had passed before Uncle Maxim thumped loudly on the floor with his crutch. And, turning, Anna Mikhailovna saw on her son's pale face the same expression it had worn when he fell back into the grass on that memorable day of their first spring outing.

Iochim looked pityingly at the child, and—with a contemptuous glance at the "German music"—strode out of the house, his clumsy boots clattering loudly across the floor.

## VIII

This failure cost the poor mother many tears—tears, and shame. That she, "gracious *Pani*" Popelskaya, whom "the best society" had thunderously applauded—that she should be so cruelly defeated! And by whom? By that coarse stableman, Iochim, and his idiotic pipe! The angry blood came rushing to her face at the very thought of the contempt she had glimpsed in his eyes after her unfortunate concert. With all her heart, she hated "that horrid peasant".

Yet every evening, when her little one ran off to the stable, she would open her window and stand listening. At first it was with contempt and anger that she listened, seeking only to pick out the comic aspects of this "silly piping". But then, little by little—she could not herself have said how it came about—the silly piping began to hold her attention, and she would listen eagerly for the wistful, dreamy melodies. Sometimes, catching herself at this, she would wonder what it was that made them so attractive, that gave them their mysterious charm. And as time passed her question found its answer, in the blue of these summer evenings, in the blurred shadows of the twilight hours, in the amazing harmony of song and surrounding Nature.

Yes—she reflected, altogether conquered now—this music had something about it all its own, a genuine depth of feeling, a poetry and charm never to be mastered simply by rote.

True, very true. The secret of this poetry lay in the wonderful tie that binds the long-dead past with Nature, witness of this past—Nature, that never dies, and never ceases to sing to the heart of man. And Iochim, a coarse, horny-handed peasant, in clumsy boots, carried in his heart this wonderful harmony, this genuine feeling of Nature.

And *Pani* Popelskaya's aristocratic pride was humbled, in her heart, before this peasant stableman. She would forget his coarse clothing, and the smell of tar that hung about him—would remember nothing, through his soft melodies, but the kindly face, the gentle grey eyes, the bashful humour of the smile, half-hidden by the drooping moustache. There were still moments, however, when the angry

blood would flush her cheeks; for she could not but feel that, in the struggle to win her child's interest, she had put herself on an equal footing with this peasant, in his own field, and the peasant had won.

But, day after day, the trees murmured overhead, and evening lit the stars in the dark blue of the sky and poured soft, blue-black shadow over the earth; and, day after day, Iochim's songs poured their warm melancholy into the young mother's heart. More and more, she submitted to their power; more and more, she learned to understand the secret of their simple, unaffected, untainted poetry.

## IX

Yes, Iochim's power lay in the depth, the truth of his emotion. And she—had she no share of such emotion? Why, then, did her heart burn so, and beat so wildly in her breast? Why could she not keep back the tears?

Was it not true feeling—the burning love that filled her heart for her afflicted child? Yet he kept running from her side to be with Iochim, and she knew no way of giving him such pleasure as Iochim could give.

The hot tears would flow at every remembrance of that look of pain her music had brought into his face; and there were moments when she could barely repress the sobs that choked and tore her.

Unhappy mother! Her child's blindness had become her own incurable affliction. It was this that caused her exaggerated, almost morbid tenderness; this, engrossing her whole being, that rent her poor, sore heart by a thousand unseen ties at every sign of suffering in the child. And it was this that made her strange rivalry with a peasant piper—a thing that could ordinarily have caused no more than faint annoyance or chagrin—the source of such extravagant, such cruel suffering.

The passing days brought her no relief. But each day did bring definite gain. More and more, she began to sense within herself the rise of that same feeling of melody, of poetry, that charmed her so in Iochim's playing. And with this new feeling came new hope. There were evenings when she hastened to the piano, in sudden confidence—determined, with its ringing chords, to drown out the gentle pipe. But, every time, a sense of fear and shame restrained her from the attempt, turning her confidence into irresolution. She would recall the pain in her child's face, and the peasant's contemptuous look—and her cheeks would burn with shame in the dark drawing-room, and her hands flutter in timid longing over the silent keyboard, that she dared not touch.

Yet, as day succeeded day, she felt an increasing sense of a new power within her. And she began to try herself, at hours when the child was out walking, or playing by himself in some far corner of the garden. Her first attempts did not satisfy her. Her hands would not play what her heart felt. The sounds they produced seemed altogether alien to her mood. Gradually, however, the mood began to come through, with ever greater power and ease. The peasant's lessons had not been in vain; and the mother's poignant love, her sensitive perception of just what it was that had won her child's heart so completely, helped her to master these lessons quickly. Now her fingers no longer drummed out noisy, complicated

"pieces". Gentle melodies flowed from the keyboard, plaintive Ukrainian *dumkas*, filling the shuttered rooms, throbbing in the mother's heart.

And, at last, she gained the courage to enter into open struggle. A strange contest began, in the evening hours, between the drawing-room and Iochim's stable. As the soft trilling of the pipe began to float from the shadowed, straw-thatched stable, new sounds, full, resonant, would float out to meet it from the open windows of the drawing-room, glittering through the beeches in the bright moonlight.

Neither the child nor Iochim, at first, would listen to the "artful" manor music, so strongly were they prejudiced against it. The boy would frown at every pause in Iochim's piping, and cry impatiently,

"Why don't you play?"

But after a day or two of this Iochim's pauses became more and more frequent. Again and again he would lay down his pipe to listen, with rapidly increasing interest. The boy, too, began to listen, and no longer urged his friend to play. And a moment came when Iochim said wonderingly,

"Hear that, now—isn't it fine!"

And, still listening raptly, he took up the child and carried him through the garden to the open window of the drawing-room.

He thought that the "gracious *pani*" was playing for her own pleasure, and would not notice that she had listeners. But Anna Mikhailovna, too, had been listening, in pauses, for her rival, Iochim's pipe. She had noticed that it played no more. She saw her victory, and her heart beat high with joy.

With victory, all remnant of her anger at Iochim vanished. She was happy, and realised that she owed her happiness to him; for it was he who had taught her to win back her child. And if, now, she could give the child a wealth of new impressions, they would both have their teacher, the peasant piper, to thank.

## X

The ice had been broken. The next day the boy ventured, timid, but curious, into the drawing-room, which he had not entered since the day the strange new-comer, so noisy and bad-tempered, as it seemed to him, had been established there. The new-comer's songs, last evening, had conquered his delicate ear and overcome his prejudice. With only a faint trace of his earlier fear, he came towards the piano. A step or two away he paused, and stood listening. There was no one there. The mother, sewing in an adjoining room, watched him breathlessly, admiring his every movement, every change of expression in his nervous features.

From where he stood, he stretched out a hand and touched the polished surface of the piano—and at once drew timidly away. He tried again, and once again—then came up closer and began to examine the instrument carefully, moving all around it, bending to the floor to follow the lines of its legs. And finally his fingers touched the keys.

A faint, hesitant note trembled in the air. The boy stood listening long after all sound had vanished to the mother's ear. Then, absorbed, expectant, he pressed another key. After that, his hand swept across the keyboard, and he struck a new

note, in the highest register. He let each tone sound, and tremble, and die away before he touched another; and, as he listened, his face expressed not only intense interest, but enjoyment. He seemed to take pleasure in each individual note, with an artist's sensitive receptiveness to the elements of music, to the separate components of potential melody.

But in each note, besides its sound, the blind boy seemed to feel other distinctive features. When his fingers pressed a clear, joyful note of the upper register, his face, bright with pleasure, would turn upwards, as though following the airy sound in its skyward flight. When he struck a bass note, he would tilt his head downwards to catch the deep vibration, as though feeling that this heavy note must roll low, low, over the very floor, to vanish in the farthest corners of the house.

## XI

Uncle Maxim's attitude to all this musical experimentation was barely tolerant. Strange as it might seem, he could not altogether reconcile himself to the boy's leanings, so clearly manifested. On the one hand, of course, this passionate love of music indicated unquestionable talent, and pointed the way to an attainable future. But—on the other hand, the thought of such a future brought the old soldier a feeling of obscure disappointment.

Music, of course, was a great power too, he reflected. With music, one could sway the heart of the mob. Hundreds of fine ladies and dressed-up dandies would crowd to hear the blind musician. He would play them all sorts of ... um ... waltzes, and nocturnes (to tell the truth, Uncle Maxim's knowledge of music hardly went beyond this conception of "waltzes" and "nocturnes"), and they would dry their tears with lacy handkerchiefs. Ah, the devil damn it! That was not what Uncle Maxim had been hoping for. But—what was to be done? The boy was blind. Let him do what he could best succeed in. Only, if it had to be music, let it be song, at least. Song reached deeper than a mere meaningless tickling of the sensitive ear. A song told a story; it aroused the mind to thought, and the heart to courage.

"Look here, Iochim," Maxim exclaimed one evening, coming into the stable with Petro, "can't you drop that pipe of yours for once? It's well enough for shepherd boys, but you're a grown man, after all, for all that silly Marya's made such a calf of you! Ugh! You ought to be ashamed—moping because a girl turned up her nose! Shrilling away on a pipe, like a bird in a cage!" Iochim grinned, in the darkness, at Pan-Maxim's causeless anger. Of all this irascible peroration, only the reference to shepherd boys aroused him to mild protest. "Don't you think it, *Pan Maxim*," he said. "You won't find such a pipe as this in all the Ukraine. Shepherd boys!

Whistles, that's all they know how to make. A pipe like this... Just you listen!"

He stopped all the finger holes and blew two notes in octave, beaming with pleasure at the full, clear tone. Maxim spat.

"Ugh! God in heaven! The fellow's lost all the brains he ever had! What do I care for your pipe? They're all alike—pipes, and women, and that Marya of yours



to boot. Give us a song, if you know any. One of the good old songs.

There's some sense in that."

Ukrainian himself, Maxim Yatsenko was simple and unpretentious in his relations with the peasantry and the manor servants. He often shouted at them, true, but—inoffensively, somehow; and so they treated him with respect, but with no sign of fear.

"A song, is it?" Iochim returned. "Well, and why not? I used to sing, once, no worse than the next fellow. Only—our peasant songs—you might not like them, either."

This last was said with a hint of irony.

"Don't talk foolishness," Maxim exclaimed. "A good song—as if you could compare it with that piping of yours! If a man can sing, of course. Let's listen, then, Petro, while Iochim gives us a song. I wonder, though—will you understand it, youngster?"

"Will it be in serf talk?" the boy asked. "I understand that talk."

Uncle Maxim sighed. There was much of the romantic in his nature, and he had dreamed, once, of a revival of the old days of Cossack glory.

"Those are no serf songs, youngster," he told the child. "They're the songs of a free, strong people. Your mother's forefathers sang them, all through the steppes—along the Dnieper, and the Danube, and the Black Sea coast. Ah, well, you'll understand all that some day. What worries me now—" and his tone was suddenly uneasy—"what worries me now is quite a different thing."

Yes, it was a different understanding that he feared the boy might lack. The vivid pictures drawn by the old epic songs, he thought, could reach the heart only through visual concepts; and, lacking these, the boy's unseeing mind might be unable to master the language of folk poetry. But there was one thing Maxim had forgotten. Were not the ancient *boyans*, were not the Ukrainian *kobzars* and *bandurists*,\* in their majority, blind? [*Boyans, kobzars, bandurists—wandering minstrels.—Tr.*] True, in many cases it was simply the misfortune that came with blindness that drove them to take up the lyre or the *bandura*, as a means of begging alms. But not all, by far, of these wandering musicians were mere beggars, singing hoarsely for their bread. And not all of them, either, were old men when they lost their sight. Blindness blots out the visual world behind an impenetrable veil, that weighs down heavily, of course, upon the brain—an oppressive burden, hindering understanding. But there are things that come down by inheritance, and things that are learned through other senses and by other means than sight; and out of these things, for all the darkness, the brain creates a living world of its own—a shadowed world, perhaps; wistful, and melancholy; yet not devoid of a vague poetry.

## XII

Maxim and Petro settled down on a heap of straw. Iochim stretched out on his bench (such being the pose best suited to his mood) and, after a moment's reflection, began to sing. His choice—whether prompted by chance or by sensitive instinct—was very fortunate. It was a scene from the history of years long past:

*High, high on the hillside the reapers bend,  
Reaping the ripened grain....*

No one, surely, who has once heard this wonderful folk song, sung as it should be sung, can forget its melody: an old, old tune, high pitched, unhurried, tinged with the melancholy of historical reminiscence. There are no events in this song, no battle and bloodshed, no heroic deeds. It tells no story of a Cossack's parting with his sweetheart, no tale of daring raids by land, or voyages along the Danube and across the rolling blue of the sea. There is nothing in all the song but a fleeting picture, rising for an instant in a Ukrainian's memory—a wistful fancy, a fragment of a dream of the historic past. It rises suddenly, amidst the grey commonplace of the present day—dim, misty, tinged with the peculiar melancholy that breathes from memories of the vanished past. Vanished—yes, but not without trace! It still lives, this past, in the tall grave mounds where the bones of Cossack heroes lie buried, and where strange lights hover at midnight, and heavy groans are heard. It lives in legend, lives in this song, now less and less to be heard:

*High, high on the hillside the reapers bend,  
Reaping the ripened grain,  
And down below, down at the green hill's foot,  
The Cossacks go riding by,  
The Cossacks go riding by.*

On the green hillside, grain is being reaped. Down below, Cossack troops are riding by.

Maxim Yatsenko forgot the world around him. The rueful melody, so wonderfully at one with the content of the song, brought the scene vividly before him: peaceful hillside fields, in the chastened evening light; the bent, silent figures of the reapers; and down below, silent too, the horsemen, rank upon rank, merging as they pass by with the evening shadows gathering in the valley.

*Doroshenko himself in the fore,  
Leading his men, leading his Cossack troops,  
Leading them bravely and well.*

And the long-drawn-out notes rang and quavered and died away, only to ring once more, calling out of the darkness new and ever new figures of past history.

### XIII

The boy's face, as he listened, was sad and thoughtful. When the song dwelt on the hillside, and the reaping of the grain, he felt himself at the top of a high rock he knew, overhanging the river. Yes, that was the place. He knew it by the splashing of the river down below, where the waves struck, barely audibly, against the stones. And he knew about the reaping, too. He could hear the sound of the

sickles, and the rustle of the cut ears as they fell.

But when the song turned to what was happening down below, the blind child's imagination carried him down at once from the heights to the valley.

The sound of the sickles faded away; but the boy knew that the reapers were still there, up on the hillside. They were still there, but he could not hear them because they were up there so high, high as the pines whose rustling he could hear down at the foot of his rock. And here below, down at the riverside, came the quick, even beat of horses' hoofs. Many, many horses, their hoofbeats merging into dull thunder down here in the darkness. That was the Cossacks riding by.

The Cossacks—yes, he knew about them, too. "Old Cossack"—that was what everyone called old Fedko, when he turned up, from time to time, at the manor. Many a time, Fedko had held the blind boy on his knee and passed a trembling hand over his hair. And when the boy put up his own hand to feel Fedko's face, as he did with everyone, his sensitive fingers found deep furrows, and a long, drooping moustache, and sunken cheeks, wet with the involuntary tears of deep old age. That was the sort of Cossacks that he now imagined, down at the foot of the hill, as he listened to the song. Riding their horses—bent and old and long-moustached, like Fedko. Noiseless, shapeless shadows, advancing through the darkness, weeping as Fedko always wept—weeping, perhaps, because of this moaning song that hung over hillside and valley: Iochim's mournful song of the "careless Cossack lad" who left his young wife for war's adversities, for a pipe smoked on the march.

It needed only a glance to convince Maxim that, blind though the child might be, his sensitive nature fully responded to the poetry of the song.

## Chapter Three

### I

Under Maxim's plan the blind boy was left, in everything possible, to fend for himself. The results were excellent. Indoors, he made no impression of helplessness at all. He moved about confidently, and kept his room neat, and his clothes and toys in order. So far as was feasible, too, Maxim introduced physical exertion. The boy had a regular system of exercises; and when he was five Maxim gave him a little horse, a mild and harmless creature. The mother could not imagine, at first, how her blind child could possibly ride. It was pure madness, she told her brother. But Maxim threw all his powers of persuasion into play, and in two or three months the boy was riding freely, needing Iochim's guidance only where the paths turned sharply.

Thus, his blindness was not allowed to hinder his physical development; and, to the best of human ability, its effect on his character, too, was minimised. He was a tall child for his age, and finely built; rather pale, with delicate and expressive features. His black hair accentuated his pallor, and his big, dark eyes, almost unmoving, gave his face a peculiar expression that people would notice at first glance, and wonder at. A tiny crease that cut across his forehead; a habit of keeping his head inclined a little forward; a look of sadness that sometimes clouded his handsome features—such were the only outward effects of his blindness. His movements, in familiar places, were free and confident. Yet it was easy to see that his natural liveliness was under constraint; and there were times when it burst through in nervous fits of some intensity.

### II

Sound impressions had now definitely become dominant in the blind boy's life, the chief form in which his thoughts were shaped, the focus of his mental processes. He would remember songs because their melodies won his heart; and their content, to him, would be coloured with the melancholy, or the merriment, or the dreaminess of their music. More attentively even than before, he listened for the voices of Nature around him. And, fusing his own sense impressions with the loved melodies that had surrounded him from childhood, he was able, at times, to express himself musically, in free improvisations in which it would have been difficult to pick out what was his own, and what taken from the folk songs he knew so well. Not even he himself could distinguish these two elements in his music—so wholly were they merged within him. His mother was teaching him to play the piano, and he was quick to master all her lessons; but he did not lose his

love of Iochim's pipe. The piano was richer, fuller, stronger. But the piano was bound to the house, whereas the pipe could be carried along everywhere, and its music blended so completely with the steppe's soft breathing that Petro could not always have said what it was that brought the vague, new thoughts that filled his mind—the wind from far places, or the music he himself was playing.

This passion for music became the core of the boy's mental development, bringing interest and variety into his life. Maxim took advantage of it to give the boy a knowledge of his country's history, woven of sound. His interest seized by a song, the child would learn about its heroes and their stories, and through these—the story of his motherland. This, in its turn, aroused an interest in literature. And when the boy was eight Maxim undertook his first regular instruction. He had made a special study of methods for teaching the blind, and the boy derived much pleasure from his lessons. They brought a new element into life, a positiveness and clarity that served as a balance to the more vague sensations of music.

Thus, the days were well occupied, and there was no lack of new impressions. The boy's life might have been thought as full as any child's can be. He seemed not even to realise his blindness.

And still, there was a strange, unchildlike melancholy in his nature, coming often to the surface. Maxim attributed it to the lack of playmates, and did what he could to supply this need.

Little boys from the village were invited to come and play at the manor. But they were bashful and constrained. The unaccustomed surroundings—and, too, Petro's blindness—made them uncomfortable. They would huddle together, whispering timidly to one another when they could muster up the courage, and casting awed glances at the blind boy. Out of doors, in the garden or off in the fields, they would feel more at ease, and begin to play; but, somehow, Petro was always left out of these games. He could only listen, with wistful longing, to the merry tumult.

Sometimes Iochim would gather the children around him and tell them stories. He knew all sorts of jolly folk tales. The village youngsters, familiar from birth with the addle-pated imps and the artful witches of Ukrainian folklore, would break in with stories of their own, and the time would pass in lively talk and laughter. Petro always listened attentively, with evident interest; but he seldom smiled. Much of the humour, evidently, failed to reach him—and small wonder; for, after all, he could not see the glint in Iochim's eyes, or the laughter in his very wrinkles, or the way he twitched his long, drooping moustache.

### III

Shortly before the period we have been describing, there had been a change of possessor\* on a small neighbouring estate. [*Under a rental system widely in use in the South-West Territory, the tenant (or "possessor", as he is called) is somewhat in the position of an estate manager. He pays the owner a definite sum; and what he himself will make on the estate, once that sum is paid, depends upon his own ability and enterprise.*] In place of the former troublesome occupant, with whom even quiet *Pan* Popelsky had been drawn into litigation over a field some cattle had trampled, the estate was now held by an

elderly couple—one *Pan* Yaskulsky and his wife. These two, though their ages, put together, totalled over a hundred, had been married only a few years. *Pan* Yaskulsky had had a long, hard struggle, working as a steward on other people's property, before he could get together enough money to rent an estate for his own use; and *Panna* Agnieszka, all those long years, had lived with the Countess Potocka, in the capacity of a more or less honorary lady's maid. So that, when their happy hour had struck at last, and they stood together before the altar, there had been as much grey as dark in the dashing bridegroom's hair and moustache, and the curls that framed the blushing face of the bride had begun to silver.

But the silver in their hair had not marred their conjugal felicity; and their belated love had borne fruit in an only daughter, of almost the same age as the blind boy.

Having attained for their old age a home that, conditionally at least, they might call their own, the aging couple had settled down in it to a simple, quiet life that might make up to them, in its peace and solitude, for their strenuous years of drudgery for others. Their first venture had not worked out too well, and they had had to try again, on this rather small estate. But here, too, they had settled down at once to their own way of life. With the willow branch and the "thunder candle" in the icon corner, by the ivy-twined images, *Pani* Yaskulskaya kept always a supply of herbs and roots, to treat her husband's ailments and those of the village folk who came to her for help. These herbs filled the whole house with a peculiar fragrance, which would come back invariably, even to chance visitors, at every recollection of the little home, so neat and clean and peaceful, or of the aging couple who had settled there, or of the tranquil life they lived—a strange life, somehow, in our day.

*[A wax candle that is lit during bad storms, or to be held by the dying.]*

And with these two old people lived their only daughter—a little girl with sky-blue eyes, and long, fair hair that she wore braided down her back; a child of an uncommon staidness, in her whole little being, that immediately struck everyone who met her. It was as though the tranquillity of the parents' elderly love had come down to the daughter, finding expression in an unchildlike sobriety, a gentle quietness of movement, a look of thoughtfulness that never left the depths of her blue eyes. The little girl was never timid or shy with strangers. She did not avoid other children, but joined willingly in their games. Yet, always, there was a sort of kindly condescension in her manner, as though—for herself—she had no need of such amusement. And, true enough, she could be perfectly happy all alone—wandering through the fields, gathering flowers, or talking to her doll, all with so sedate an air that she often seemed less a child than a tiny woman.

## IV

Little Petro was out alone, on a low hillock by the river-bank. The sun was setting, and the evening was very still. There was no sound but the distant lowing of the village herd. The boy had been playing; but now he laid aside his pipe and

threw himself back in the grass, yielding dreamily to the sweet lassitude of the summer evening. He was almost asleep when, suddenly, the hush was broken by light footsteps down below. Annoyed at this interruption, he raised himself on his elbow to listen. The footsteps stopped at the bottom of his hillock. Unfamiliar steps.

"Little boy!" a child's voice called up to him. A girl's voice. "Who was playing here just now, do you know?"

Petro did not like such violations of his solitude, and it was none too cordially that he answered,

"That was me."

An exclamation of surprise burst from the little girl below.

"It was beautiful," she cried, in naive admiration.

Petro made no response. But his uninvited visitor did not leave.

"Why don't you go away?" he demanded at length, after waiting in vain for the sound of her retreating footsteps.

"Why do you want me to?" the girl returned, in that clear voice of hers, now naively wondering.

Her tranquil voice fell pleasantly on the blind boy's ears. But he declared, uncordially as before,

"I don't like people coming where I am."

The little girl laughed.

"Hear that!" she exclaimed. "Goodness me! Is all the earth yours, then, that you can forbid anyone to walk on it?"

"Mother tells everyone not to bother me here."

"Mother?" the little girl said slowly. "Well, but my mother lets me come out here to the river."

Petro had seldom encountered such persistent refusal to do as he wished. Indeed, he had been rather spoiled by the ease with which all yielded to his will. And now a wave of nervous anger passed over his face. He set up in the grass, crying excitedly, over and over,

"Go away! Go away! Go away!"

What might have happened next, it is hard to tell; but at this point Iochim's voice broke in, calling Petro to his tea, and the boy ran off.

"What a horrid little boy!"—were the last words he heard, called after him in a tone of heartfelt indignation.

## V

On his hillock again, next day, Petro recalled this clash with no remnant of annoyance. He would even have liked to have her here again—this little girl who spoke in so tranquil, so pleasant a voice. He had never heard a child's voice like that before. The children he knew were always shouting, or loudly laughing, or quarrelling, or crying. Not one of them ever talked so pleasantly as she did. He began to be sorry he had been rude to her. Now, he supposed, she would never come again.

Nor did she come, for three whole days. But on the fourth day Petro heard her

footsteps again, down on the river-bank. She was walking slowly, humming some Polish song. The pebbles along the bank, as she trod on them, made little crunching noises.

"Hullo," Petro called, as she was passing by the hillock. "Is that you again?"

The little girl did not answer. The crunching of the pebbles continued. She walked on without a pause, humming her song with a deliberate carelessness in which Petro sensed her unforgotten injury.

A little past the hillock, however, she finally stopped. There was no sound at all for a moment or so, while she stood playing with some flowers she had gathered. Petro, waiting for her answer, felt the tinge of deliberate disdain in her sudden pause and silence.

Only when her flowers were all arranged did she look up and ask, with a great air of dignity,

"Don't you see it's me?"

The simple question sent a bitter pang through the blind boy's heart. He did not answer. Only his hands, hidden in the grass, made a sudden convulsive movement.

But a beginning had been made.

"Who taught you to play the pipe so beautifully?" the little girl asked, still standing where she had stopped, and playing with her flowers.

"Iochim," Petro replied.

"It's beautiful! Only, what makes you so cross?"

"I ... I'm not cross with you," Petro said softly.

"Well, then, neither am I cross. Shall we play games?"

"I can't play games," he said, hanging his head.

"You can't play games? But why?"

"Because."

"No, but really, why?"

"Because," he repeated, barely audibly, hanging his head still lower.

He had never before had to speak so directly of his blindness, and the little girl's simplicity, the naive persistence with which she pressed her question, sent a new pang through his heart. The little girl climbed up the hillock and sat down beside him in the grass.

"You're awfully funny," she said condescendingly. "That's because you don't know me yet, I suppose. When we get acquainted, you won't be frightened any more. I'm never frightened, not of anyone."

As her clear, carefree little voice died away, Petro heard a soft rustling of stalks and leafage. She had dropped her flowers into her lap.

"You've been picking flowers," he said. "Where did you find them?"

"Over there," she returned, turning her head to indicate the direction.

"In the meadow?"

"No—over there."

"In the woods, then. What flowers are they?"

"Don't you know them? What a queer boy you are! Really, so queer!"

Petro took a flower, then another. Swiftly, lightly, his fingers caressed the leaves and blossoms.

"This is a buttercup," he said. "And here's a violet."

And then he had the wish to know his visitor in the same way. Leaning lightly on her shoulder, he lifted his hand to feel her hair, her eyes, the outlines of her face—pausing now and again, closely studying the unfamiliar features.



All this took place so suddenly, so swiftly, that at first the little girl was too amazed to protest. She sat staring at him silently, her wide eyes reflecting a feeling very close to horror. Only now did she notice that there was something very unusual about this boy. His pale, delicate face was set in an expression of strained attention that seemed out of keeping, somehow, with his unmoving gaze. His eyes looked away somewhere, at anything but what he was doing, and they reflected the gleam of the setting sun in the strangest way. For an instant, it all seemed to her a dreadful nightmare.

But then she wrenched her shoulder free and jumped to her feet, sobbing.

"Why do you frighten me so, you horrid boy?" she cried angrily, through the tears. "What harm have I done you?"

He sat there in the grass, altogether bewildered. His head fell, and a strange feeling, a mingling of humiliation and chagrin, filled his heart with pain. This was his first experience of the humiliation that is so often the cripple's lot: the realisation that his physical shortcoming may arouse not only compassion, but fear. He could not clearly analyse it, of course—this bitter feeling that oppressed him so; but its vagueness, his lack of lucid comprehension, in no way lessened the suffering that it brought.

A wave of searing pain rose to his throat. He threw himself down in the grass and broke into tears. His sobs grew more and more violent, shaking his whole little frame, the more so that, with inborn pride, he was trying his utmost to suppress them.

The little girl had run off down the hill; but now, hearing his sobs, she turned in surprise and looked back. And the sight of him, flat on his face in the grass, sobbing so bitterly, made her sorry for him. She came slowly up again, and bent over the weeping boy.

"Look here," she said softly, "what are you crying for? Afraid I'll tell? Well, then, I won't. Not anyone. Come, now, don't cry."

The kindly words, and the caressing tone, evoked a new and still more violent burst of sobbing. The little girl crouched beside him, and, after a moment, stroked his hair gently once or twice. Then, with the gentle insistence of a mother soothing her punished child, she lifted his head and began to dry his tear-wet eyes with her handkerchief.

"There, there, now," she murmured, as a woman might, "there's enough of that! I'm not angry any more, at all. I can see you're sorry that you frightened me."

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said, drawing a deep breath to keep down the nervous sobs.

"Well and good, then. I'm not angry any more. You'll never do such a thing again, I know you won't!"

She tugged at his shoulders, trying to make him sit up beside her.

He obeyed her tugging hands. Now he sat facing the sunset, as before; and when the little girl looked into his face, lit by the crimson glow, she felt again that there was something strange about it. The boy's lashes were still wet with tears; but his eyes, behind the lashes— they were so unmoving! His face still twisted in nervous spasms; yet, at the same time, it expressed such deep, unchildlike, such oppressive sorrow!

"But just the same, you're awfully queer," she said, wonderingly, but sympathetically.

"No, I'm not queer," the boy returned, his face twisting pitifully. "I'm not

queer. I ... I'm blind."

"Bli-ind?" she cried—and her voice quivered, as though this grievous word, that the boy had said so softly, had struck a cruel blow to her little woman's heart, a blow that no words of comfort could ever efface.

"Bli-ind?" she repeated. Her voice broke altogether, and, as though seeking refuge from the flood of pity that swept through all her little being, she suddenly threw her arms about the blind boy's neck and pressed her face to his.

The shock of this grievous discovery dispelled all trace of the tiny woman's usual staid dignity, transforming her into a hurt child, helpless in her pain. And now it was she who burst into bitter, inconsolable weeping.

## VI

A few minutes passed.

The little girl stopped crying, except for an occasional sob that she could not altogether stifle. Through a haze of tears, she watched the setting sun. It seemed to be turning, turning, in the incandescent air, as it sank slowly beyond the dark line of the horizon. Now its fiery edge flashed gold again, and a few last blazing sparks flew out; and suddenly the dark outline of the distant forest swam forward in a jagged line of blue.

A cool breath came up from the river. The peace of approaching evening found its reflection in the blind boy's face. He sat with bowed head, perplexed, it seemed, by this hot outpouring of sympathy.

"I feel so sorry," the little girl said, at last, in explanation of her weakness. She was still choking down the rising sobs.

When she had mastered her voice, she made an effort to turn the talk to some indifferent topic, of which they might both speak without emotion.

"The sun's gone down," she murmured.

"I don't know what the sun is like," he answered wistfully.

"I can only ... only *feel* it."

"Not know the sun?"

"Not what it's like."

"But ... but, then ... well, don't you know your mother, either?"

"I do know Mother. I can always tell her step, from a way off."

"That's so. I always know Mother, too, even if I keep my eyes tight shut."

The talk was calmer now.

"You know," Petro said, brightening a little, "I can feel the sun, after all, and I always know when it sets."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, you see ... well, it's... I can't exactly tell you, how."

"Oh," the little girl returned, evidently perfectly satisfied with his explanation.

Neither spoke for a moment or two. It was Petro who broke the silence.

"I can read," he announced. "And I'll soon learn to write with pen and ink."

"But how..." she began, and broke off suddenly, feeling that this might be too delicate a topic.

Petro understood what she had meant to ask.

"I read in a special book," he said. "With my fingers."

"With your fingers? I'd never be able to! Why, I read badly enough, even with my eyes. Father says women aren't made for learning."

"I can read French, too."

"French! With your fingers! How clever of you," she cried, in genuine admiration. "But look, I'm so afraid you'll be catching cold. There's a great mist coming up along the river."

"What about you, then?"

"I'm not afraid. The mist can't hurt me."

"Well, then, neither am I afraid. How can a man catch cold, if a woman doesn't? Uncle Maxim says a man must never be afraid—not of cold, or hunger, no, nor of thunder, or the heaviest storm-clouds."

"Uncle Maxim? Is that the one that walks with crutches? I've seen him. He's so horrible!"

"He is not horrible. He's just as kind as he can be."

"Ah, but he is," she insisted, with great conviction. "It's because you've never seen him, you can't tell."

"Who can tell, then, if I can't? He teaches me."

"And whips you?"

"Never. Nor scolds me, either. Never, never."

"That's good. Because, how can anybody hurt a blind boy? That would be a sin."

"Why, but he never hurts anyone at all," Petro returned; but he spoke a little absently. His sensitive ear had caught Iochim's approaching footsteps.

A moment later, the stableman's tall figure appeared on a low ridge that lay between the manor and the river, and his voice came ringing through the evening hush:

"Petro-o-o!"

"You're being called," the little girl said, getting up.

"I know. But I don't feel like going home."

"Ah, but you must. I'll come and visit you tomorrow. Your people will be expecting you now. And I must go home, too."

## VII

The little girl kept her promise faithfully, earlier even than Petro could have hoped. Working at his lessons with Maxim, next morning, he suddenly lifted his head, sat listening a moment, and then asked excitedly,

"May I run out a minute? That little girl has come."

"What little girl?" Maxim demanded amazedly.

He followed Petro towards the door.

True enough, the little girl of the day before was just turning in at the manor gate. Anna Mikhailovna happened to be passing through the yard at the moment, and the little visitor went straight up to her, with no sign of embarrassment.

"What is it, dear child?" Anna Mikhailovna asked, thinking the little girl had been sent to her on some errand.

But the tiny woman held out her hand, with great dignity, and asked,

"Is it you has a blind little boy?"

"Why, yes, my dear, I have," Anna Mikhailovna answered, very much taken by her visitor's clear blue gaze and fearless manner.

"There, then. You see, Mother's allowed me to visit him. May I see him, please?"

But at this moment Petro himself came running up, and Maxim appeared on the porch.

"It's that same little girl, Mother! The one I told you about," Petro cried, when he had greeted his visitor. "Only—I'm having a lesson just now."

"Oh, I think Uncle Maxim will excuse you, just this once," the mother said. "I'll ask him, shall I?"

But the little woman, evidently quite at home, had already turned to meet Maxim, who was coming slowly across the yard towards them. Holding out her hand to him, she declared, with gracious approval,

"It's good of you not to whip a blind little boy like that. He told me."

"Not really, my dear young lady?" Maxim returned, with comic gallantry. "I'm greatly obliged to my pupil, for winning me the favour of so delightful a creature."

And he burst into laughter, patting the tiny hand he held in his. The little girl stood looking up into his face; and her frank, clear gaze quickly won that woman-hating heart of his.

"Look at that, Anna," he said, turning to his sister, with an odd smile on his lips. "Our Petro's beginning to make friends of his own. And you must agree that ... well, blind as he is, he's managed to make quite a good choice, hasn't he?"

"What are you hinting at, Max?" the young mother demanded sternly, her face aflame.

"Nothing. I was joking," he said quickly, realising that his careless quip had touched an aching spot, had brought into the open a secret worry over coming problems hidden deep in the mother's heart.

Anna Mikhailovna flushed redder still. Stooping, she threw her arms around the little girl, in sudden passionate tenderness. The child received her fierce embrace with that same clear gaze, only the least bit surprised.

## VIII

This was the beginning of a close friendship between the two estates. The little girl, whose name was Evelina, spent some part of every day at the manor; and soon she, too, began to study with Uncle Maxim. Her father, *Pan* Yaskulsky, was not too pleased at first by this idea. For one thing, he thought a woman quite sufficiently educated if she could keep her laundry lists and household accounts in order. For another, he was a good Catholic, and felt that *Pan* Maxim should not have gone to war against the Austrians, when "our father the Pope" had so clearly expressed himself against it. And, finally, it was his firm conviction that there was a God in heaven, and that Voltaire and all Voltaireans were doomed to boiling pitch—a fate which many thought to be awaiting *Pan* Maxim as well. On closer acquaintance, however, he had to admit that this wild brawler and heretic was a

very pleasant man, and a very clever one; and he finally agreed to compromise.

Still, in the depths of his heart, he could not help a certain uneasiness. And so, bringing his daughter to the manor for her first lesson, he felt called upon to start her off in her studies with a solemn and somewhat pompous exhortation—intended, however, rather for Maxim than for the child.

"Now, then, Evelina," he began, laying his hand on his daughter's shoulder, but glancing sidewise at her teacher, "you must always remember our God in heaven, and his holy Pope in Rome. It's I, Valentin Yaskulsky, tell you that, and you must put your faith in me, because I'm your father. *Primo.*"

*Pan* Yaskulsky's glance at Maxim, at this point, was particularly significant. In resorting to Latin, it was his purpose to show that he, too, was no stranger to scholarship, and not easily to be deceived.

"*Secundo,*" he continued, "I'm a nobleman, and over the stack and crow in our family's glorious coat of arms stands a holy cross in a blue field. The Yaskulskys have always been valorous knights, but many of them, too, have exchanged the sword for the missal, and they have never been ignorant of what concerns religion, so that there you must put your faith in me. Well, and so far as other things go, *orbis terrarum*, or all things earthly, give your attention to *Pan* Maxim Yatsenko, and be a good pupil to him."

"Never you fear, *Pan* Yaskulsky," Maxim assured the old man, smiling. "I don't recruit little girls to fight for Garibaldi."

## IX

Both of the children benefited by studying together. Petro was ahead, of course; but this did not preclude a definite element of emulation. Again, Petro often helped Evelina with her lessons; and she, in turn, often found very effective ways of helping him to understand things that his blindness made difficult for him. And her very presence gave a new interest to his studies, a pleasant animation that tended to stimulate his mental effort.

In every way, this friendship was a gift of fortune. Petro no longer sought to be entirely alone. He had found such communion as his elders, for all their love, were incapable of giving him; had found a presence that brought him pleasure even in those moments of hushed spiritual tension that sometimes came upon him. The children were always together, now, in their excursions to Petro's high rock, or to the river-bank. When Petro took up his pipe, Evelina would sit listening in childish rapture. When he laid it aside, she would begin to talk, describing her vivid, child's impressions of all that lay around them. She could not express what she saw, of course, in words that would all be clear to her blind companion. But her simple sketches, the very tone in which she spoke, helped him to grasp the essential, characteristic flavour of everything that she described. If she spoke of the darkness of night, of its damp, chill blackness, blanketing the earth, he would seem to hear this darkness in the hushed awe of her voice. If she turned her grave little face to the sky and cried, "Oh, what a cloud, over there! Such a huge, grey cloud, floating this way!"—he would seem to feel the cloud's cold breath, to hear, in her voice, the rumbling advance of this fearful monster that was crawling

towards them across the far heights of the sky.

## Chapter Four

### I

There are souls which seem born for the quiet heroism of that love which goes hand in hand with care and grief; souls to which ministrations to others in misfortune seems an organic necessity, the very breath of life. Nature has endowed them, these souls, with the tranquillity, lacking which such everyday, prosaic heroism would be inconceivable; has providently softened their passions, their ambitions, aspirations, subordinating all purely selfish hopes and desires to this one dominant trait of character. Such people often seem to those around them cold, unemotional, sober beyond all need. Deaf to the impassioned appeal of earthly life, they follow the sad path of duty tranquilly as they might the road of the most glorious personal happiness. Cold as snow-topped mountain peaks, they seem; and majestic, too, as those lofty peaks. All that is worldly and base lies like dirt at their feet. Even slander and gossip slip from their snow-white robes, as splattered mud from the wings of a swan.

This is a type only rarely created by life or training. Like talent, like genius, it is Nature's endowment to a chosen few. Its traits are early manifested, and they were already evident in Petro's little friend. The mother soon realised what a happy thing this childish friendship might become for her blind boy. And Maxim, seeing this as well as she, felt that now, when the child had everything he had been lacking, the course of his spiritual development should be smooth and even—unhindered, undisturbed.

But that was an error, and a bitter one.

### II

For some years, while Petro was still quite small, Maxim thought himself entirely in control of the boy's spiritual growth. Not every aspect of this growth, perhaps, arose from the tutor's direct influence; but he was sure, in any case, that no new development, no new spiritual acquirement, could escape his notice and his guiding hand. But when Petro grew older, and entered upon the period transitional between childhood and adolescence, these lofty pedagogical dreams turned out to be quite unfounded. Hardly a week passed that did not bring something new, and often startling; and Maxim was altogether at a loss to find the source of these new ideas and concepts that arose in the blind boy's mind. There was some unknown force at work in the very depths of the child's being, thrusting up to the surface the most unexpected manifestations of independent spiritual development. And Maxim could only bow his head in reverent awe before these

mysterious processes that had begun to interfere in his methods of pedagogy. Nature seemed to know some stimulus, some way of revelation, to give the child new concepts that he could not possibly, in his blindness, have developed from direct experience. Contemplating all this, Maxim had a sense of the endless, unbroken continuity of life's vital processes—passing ever on, in all their thousands of details, through the successive train of individual lives.

It frightened him, at first, this realisation that he was not entirely master of the child's mentality; that there was something else, independent of his will and unaffected by his influence, that worked upon his pupil. It made him fear for the child's future, fear the possibility of desires and seekings that might bring the blind boy nothing more than unappeasable longings and suffering. And he began to grope for the sources of these new springs of knowledge—hoping to stop them up, for the boy's own good.

The mother, too, noticed these sudden strange flashes. There was a morning when Petro came running up to her, excited as she had seldom seen him.

"Mother, Mother," he cried. "I saw a dream!"

"What did you *see*, then, child?" the mother asked, with a sad doubt that she could not suppress.

"I saw ... you, in my dream, and Uncle Maxim. And ... and—everything, I saw. It was so fine, Mother! Oh, it was so fine!"

"Well, and what else did you see, Petro?"

"I can't remember."

"Do you remember me?"

"No," the child answered hesitantly. "No, I can't remember. Not anything."

There was a moment's silence.

"But I did see, just the same, I did see, truly," he cried.

His face clouded over, and a tear gleamed in his sightless eyes.

This happened several times. And with each repetition the boy grew sadder, more unquiet.

### III

Passing through the yard, one day, Maxim heard strange sounds floating from the drawing-room, where Petro should have been having a music lesson. A strange sort of exercise, this! It consisted of only two notes. First, the very highest, brightest note of the upper register, quivering as it was struck—repeatedly, rapidly, over and over again; then, suddenly—and also over and over—a low, rolling bass note. What could such extraordinary music mean? Maxim turned quickly towards the house, and a moment later, opening the drawing-room door, stopped short in amazement at the scene confronting him.

Petro, in his tenth year now, sat on a low stool at his mother's feet. Beside him, its neck outstretched and its long beak turning restlessly from side to side, stood a young stork Iochim had tamed and given to the boy. Petro always fed his pet from his own hand, and the bird followed him everywhere. Now he was holding it still with one hand, and with the other gently stroking its feathers—the neck, the back, the wings. His face was set in strained attention. And his mother, at the piano—



her face aflame with excitement, her eyes dark with grief—was striking one of the keys, rapidly, repeatedly, evoking that continuous, quivering highest note of all. As she played, she looked with painful intentness into the child's face at her knee. And then, when the boy's hand, stroking the stork, reached the point at the end of the wing where the intense white of the feathers ended abruptly in as intense a black, the mother's hand swept down across the keyboard and a low, bass note came rumbling through the room.

They were so absorbed in what they were doing that neither of them noticed Maxim until, recovering from his amazement, he interrupted them with a loud, "Anna! What does all this mean?"

Meeting her brother's searching glance, Anna Mikhailovna hung her head like a little girl whom her teacher has caught at some childish mischief.

"Well, you see," she explained awkwardly, "Petro says he feels some difference in the colouring of the feathers. Only he can't understand just what the difference is. He spoke of it himself, truly he did, and I think he really feels it."

"And if he does, what then?"

"Why, nothing, only ... you see ... I thought perhaps I could help him a little to understand the difference, by using this difference of sounds. Don't be cross with me, Max. I really think it's very similar."

Maxim was so amazed by this new thought that, at first, he could find nothing to say. He made her repeat her experiment, and watched the boy's strained face in silence, shaking his head. -

"Do try to understand me, Anna," he told his sister, when the boy had left the room. "It's not a good thing to raise questions in the child's mind that you can never, never answer to his full satisfaction."

"But he brought it up himself, truly he did," she cried. "That makes no difference. The boy has no choice but to settle down to his blindness. And we must try to make him forget any such thing as light. I do my best to prevent any outer stimulus that might lead him to fruitless questioning. And if we could rid him of all such stimuli, he'd never feel the lack in his sensations—just as we, with all five senses, never long for some unknown sixth."

"Ah, but we do," she answered softly.

"Anna!"

"We do," she persisted. "We often long for what's impossible."

Still, she yielded to her brother's counsel.

But this time Maxim was wrong. In his eagerness to block all outer stimuli, he had failed to take into account those impulses which Nature had implanted in the child's own being.

## IV

The eyes, someone has said, are the mirror of the soul.

It would be more true, perhaps, to liken them to windows, through which the soul receives its impressions of the outer world in all its vivid, sparkling colour. Who can say what portion of our spiritual make-up depends upon our sight impressions?

A man is only one link in an unending chain of lives that stretches, through him, from the bottomless past to the infinitely distant future. In one such link, a blind little boy, some cruel chance had shut these windows. All his life must pass in darkness. But did that mean that the chords by which the soul responds to sight impressions had snapped within him, never to be mended? No! Through this dark life, too, the soul's receptiveness to light must continue, to be passed on to succeeding generations. The blind boy's soul was a normal human soul, with all the normal human capacities. And since every capacity carries with it the desire for accomplishment, this dark soul held within it an unconquerable longing for light.

Somewhere in the unfathomed depths lay inherited powers, unessayed, still dormant in the misty state of "potentiality", but ready at the first ray of light to rise in swift response. But the windows remained shut. The child's fate was sealed. He would never see that ray! All his life must pass in darkness.

And the darkness was alive with phantoms.

Had the child lived in poverty, had he been surrounded with misery, his thoughts might, perhaps, have been absorbed by these outer sources of suffering. But his family had taken care to isolate him from all that might cause him distress. They had given him unbroken peace and quiet. And now, in this quiet that reigned in his soul, the inner want made itself the more strongly felt. Through the still darkness around him, he began to feel a vague, but unremitting sense of a need that sought fulfilment—a striving to give shape to powers that lay dormant, unapplied, deep in his being.

All this gave rise to strange, undefined expectations and impulses—something in the nature of the will to fly that all of us have experienced in childhood, with the wonderful dreams it is bound up with at that age.

And this, in its turn, gave rise to instinctive mental strivings that found expression in a look of painful inquiry on the blind boy's face. The "potentialities" of sight impression, inherited but not applied, raised strange phantoms in the childish brain—dark, shapeless, undefined, compelling, tormenting effort to attain he knew not what.

It was Nature, rising in blind protest against this individual "exception"—seeking to reassert the universal rule that here was violated.

## V

And so, try as he might to eliminate all outer stimuli, Maxim would never be able to destroy the pressure from within, the pressure of a need unsatisfied. At best, the care he exercised might succeed only in delaying the awakening of this need, in preventing the too early intensification of the blind child's suffering. For the rest, the boy's unhappy fate must take its course, with all the bitter consequences of his blindness.

And it advanced upon him, his fate, a heavy storm cloud. His inborn liveliness subsided more and more, as the years passed by—like a receding tide; and an inner melancholy, vague as yet, but unremitting, sounded more and more strongly in his soul, and began to affect his character. The laughter that had rung out, in his

early childhood, at every vivid new impression, now sounded less and less frequently. He was able to perceive but little of life's laughter, merriment, humour; but was wonderfully sensitive to the shadowy, wistful melancholy that sounded in Nature in his southern homeland, and in the songs of its people. His eyes would fill with tears at the song of how "the grave whispered with the wind, out in the open field", and he liked to go out into the fields himself, to listen to this whispering. More and more, he developed the desire to be alone; and when, his lessons over, he wandered away by himself, none of the household, if it could be helped, would break in on his seclusion. He would go off to some ancient burial mound, out in the steppe, or to his hillock by the river-bank, or to that high rock he knew so well, and lie there listening, with not a sound about him but the rustle of leaves and the whispering of the grass, and, perhaps, the faint sighing of the wind over the steppe. These things harmonised in some very special way with the depths of his soul's mood. To the extent that he was capable of apprehending Nature, it was out here that he understood her best—completely, to the very bottom. Here, Nature did not worry him with insoluble problems. Here, there was this wind pouring itself straight into his soul, and the grass, that seemed to whisper soft words of sympathy; and when his young soul, tuned to the gentle harmony around him, relaxed in Nature's caressing warmth, he would feel something rising in his breast, something that flooded his whole being. He would bury his face, at such moments, in the cool, damp grass, and let the soft tears flow; soft tears, not bitter. Or, sometimes, he would take up his pipe, and forget all the world in wistful melodies congenial to his mood and to the quiet harmony of the steppe.

Any human sound that might break suddenly in upon this mood affected him, always, as a jarring dissonance. And that was natural enough. It is only with the closest, the most kindred of hearts that there can be communion at such moments; and the boy had only one such friend of his own age—the fair-haired little girl from the possessor's estate.

Their friendship grew steadily stronger. It was a completely reciprocal relationship. Evelina brought her friend her tranquillity, her quiet joy in life. She helped him, in his blindness, to perceive new shadings in the life around them. And he—he brought her his sorrow. It was as though her first knowledge of his grief had dealt the little woman's tender heart a deep and cruel wound, and—remove the dagger from the wound that it had dealt, and she would bleed to death. After the poignant sympathy that had hurt her so on that day of their first talk together, on the hillock by the riverside, his company grew daily more essential to her. When they were apart, the wound would begin to bleed, and the pain would fill her heart again; and she would hasten to her friend, to ease her own suffering in unceasing care for him.

## VI

On a mild autumn evening both families had gathered on the grassy stretch before the house, talking of one thing and another, and looking up often into the deep blue of the sky, with its glittering sprinkling of stars. The blind boy sat by his mother, as always, with Evelina close by his side.

For a moment, the talk died away. The evening was very quiet. Only the leaves, now and again, would flutter suddenly, and whisper something, and fall still.

And in this moment of silence a brilliant star dropped from somewhere in the dark-blue heights and swept in a flashing curve across the sky, leaving behind it a phosphorescent trace that lingered, only gradually fading, long after the star had disappeared. The little company watched it silently. Anna Mikhailovna, whose hand lay on Petro's arm, felt him suddenly start, and shiver.

"What ... was that?" he asked, turning to her excitedly.

"A star falling, son."

"A star? Of course. I knew it must be a star."

"How could you know that, Petro?"

A sad note of doubt sounded in the mother's voice.

"Ah, but it's true, what he says," put in Evelina. "He knows lots of things ... well, somehow."

"This sensitivity to the outer world, increasing with every passing day, indicated a rapid approach to the critical age that lies between adolescence and youth. As yet, however, Petro's development was quiet enough. It might have seemed, even, that he had resigned himself to his fate; and the strangely even melancholy, never lifting, yet never greatly deepening, that had become habitual to him, now seemed somewhat less. But this was only a temporary lull: one of those breathing spaces that Nature gives us, as though of deliberate purpose—that the young life may muster up its strength, and gird itself to meet new storm and stress. During such lulls new problems accumulate, unnoticed, and gradually mature. One touch—and the soul's tranquillity is thrown into confusion, to its very depths, like the sea before the onslaught of a sudden storm.

## Chapter Five

### I

A few more years passed by.

Nothing had changed at the quiet manor. The beeches still rustled in the garden; only their foliage seemed rather thicker now, and darker. The white house wore the same pleasant, welcoming look as always; only its walls had settled a little, and seemed the least bit out of line. The thatched eaves of the stable frowned down as they always had, and Iochim, still confirmed in his bachelor life, tended the horses as before. The pipe, too, still sounded from the stable doors in the evening hours; only now Iochim preferred to listen, while the blind boy played—be it pipe or piano.

There was more grey than before in Maxim's hair.

No more children had been born to the Popelskys, and the blind firstling remained, as ever, the hub around which all the life of the manor centred. For him, the manor had shut itself up in its own narrow circle, content to live a quiet, secluded life, linked only with the no less quiet life of the possessor's little home. Thus, the boy—now a youth—had grown up much like a hot-house plant, sheltered against any harsh influence that might emanate from distant outer spheres.

He lived, as always, at the centre of a vast world of darkness: darkness above him, darkness around him—everywhere darkness, without end or limit; and, through the darkness, his sensitive nature strained to meet each new impression—like a taut string strains, ready to respond to sound in eager sound. And this taut expectancy noticeably affected his mood. Another moment—just another moment, it kept seeming, and the darkness would reach out its unseen hands and touch some chord within him, a chord still sunk in long and wearisome sleep and waiting, longing to be awakened.

But the familiar darkness of the manor, so kindly and so uneventful, brought to his waiting senses only the caressing murmur of the trees in the old garden, soothing, lulling his mind. Of the distant world, he knew only through songs, and books, and history. It was only by hearsay, here amidst the pensive murmuring of the garden and the quiet peace of the manor, that he learned anything of the storms and passions of that far-off life—picturing what he heard through a mist of enchantment, as he might a song, an epic, a tale of wonder.

All went so well, it might have seemed. The mother, watching, saw that her son's spirit, sheltered as by a high wall, lay plunged in an enchanted semi-slumber—artificial, it might be, but at any rate tranquil. And she did not want this tranquillity to be shattered. She was afraid of anything that might shatter it.

Evelina, too, had grown up, by imperceptible degrees. Her clear eyes, looking out over this enchanted hush, at times held something of perplexity, of inquiry about what life might hold in store; but never did they reveal the slightest hint of

impatience.

*Pan* Popelsky, in these years, had made his estate into a model property; but the question of his blind son's future was not, of course, any affair of this kindly soul's. All that got taken care of, somehow, with no effort on his part.

Only Maxim, constituted as he was, found this hush a difficult thing to bear, even as the temporary state he knew it to be—a compelled phase in his plans for his pupil. The youthful spirit, he reasoned, must be given time to settle itself, to accumulate strength, that it might be able to withstand the harsh contact of life.

But without the magic circle, all this time, life was boiling, surging, seething. And the time came when the blind boy's old preceptor felt that he might, at last, break open this circle, throw wide the hot-house door, and let in a stream of the fresh outer air.

## II

For a beginning, he brought to the manor an old friend who lived on an estate some seventy versts away. Maxim had visited this friend, old Stavruchenko, from time to time; and now, learning that he had some young people staying with him, wrote to invite them all to the manor. The invitation was accepted gladly—on the old man's part, because of the years of friendship that bound him to Maxim, on the part of the young people, because of the glamour and the traditions that still clung to the name of Maxim Yatsenko. Of these young people, two were Stavruchenko's sons: the younger a Kiev University student, specialising—as the fad was in those days—in philology; the elder a musician, studying at the Conservatory in St. Petersburg. The third was a young cadet, the son of a neighbouring landowner.

Stavruchenko was a hale old man, though his head was entirely grey. He wore his moustache long and drooping, Cossack-fashion, and carried his pipe and tobacco-pouch tied to the sash that supported his vast Cossack pantaloons; spoke no language but Ukrainian; and, when he stood between his two sons, in their long white Ukrainian coats and embroidered Ukrainian shirts, had very much the look of Gogol's Taras Bulba. There was nothing in his character, however, of Bulba's romanticism. Stavruchenko was a landowner, and a very competent and practical-minded one. He had managed very well, all his life, under the feudal relationships that went with serfdom; and had now adapted himself equally well to the new relationships arising after the emancipation. He knew the peasantry as country landowners know them: he knew every husbandman in the village he owned, every cow in those husbandmen's barns, and—almost—every ruble in their purses.

But—though he never fought them with his fists—there was much of Bulba in old Stavruchenko's relations with his sons. They were constantly clashing, and clashing furiously, regardless of time and place. Wherever they might be, and in whatever company, the slightest word was liable to set off these unending debates. Oftener than not it was the old man who began it, by mocking at his sons as "idealistic lordlings".

The young people would flare up, and the old man's spirit, too, would rise; and the result would be the most desperate hubbub, in the course of which each side would hear no few uncomplimentary opinions.

All this was a reflection of the well-known variance of "fathers and sons", though in a far milder form than the expression generally implies. The young people of that day, away at school from childhood, saw the countryside only in their brief holiday periods, and therefore lacked such practical knowledge of the peasantry as distinguished their fathers, who lived year in, year out on their estates. When the tide of "love for the people" arose in our society—the young Stavruchenkos were at that time in their last years at secondary school—they, too, had begun to "study the people". But they had begun this study from the pages of books. Somewhat later, they had advanced to a second stage—direct observation of "the people's spirit", as manifested in folk art. "Going among the people"—dressed for the part, of course, in romantic Ukrainian coats and embroidered shirts—was at that period a very widespread tendency among the youth of the propertied classes in the South-West Territory. It was not the economic aspects of the people's life, to any great degree, that interested these young people. Going about the villages, they occupied themselves with recording the words and music of folk songs, noting down legends and superstitions, comparing written history with its reflection in folk tales about the past—in a word, "seeing" the peasantry through the poetic prism of romantic nationalism. This last, indeed, was a weakness to which the elder generation, too, was prone enough. But, for all that, the old folk and the young never seemed able to agree.

"Just you listen!" old Stavruchenko might say to Maxim, with a sly prod of the elbow in his ribs, when the student son was declaiming—his face flushed, his eyes ablaze. "The young son of a cur—he talks just like a book! A man might think he'd a head on his shoulders, really! Only—come, tell us, my fine scholar, how that Nechipor of mine got around you!"

The old man would twitch his moustache and shout with laughter, telling the story of his son and Nechipor with true Ukrainian humour. The young men would flush, but they were never at a loss for a reply.

They might not know this or that individual Nechipor or Fedko, of this or that particular village, they might say; but what they were studying was the entire people, in general and on the whole. They approached life from the loftiest viewpoint—the only one that permitted conclusions to be drawn, and broad generalisation achieved. They embraced vast perspectives at one glance, whereas certain of their practical-minded elders—confirmed inveterately in the age-old routine—failed to see the forest for the trees that blocked their view.

The old man was not displeased to hear his sons argue so learnedly.

"You can tell they've been to school," he would say, looking proudly about him—and then, turning back to his sons, "Say what you please, but that Fedko of mine can lead you anywhere he likes, like a pair of young calves—so he can! Whereas I can take that same rogue of a Fedko and stuff him in my tobacco-pouch, and down my pocket too. And that only goes to show you're just a pair of pups compared to an old dog like me."

### III

One of these debates had just died down. The elder folk had gone indoors, and

through the open windows Stavruchenko's voice could be heard, describing a series of comic incidents that kept his listeners laughing merrily.

The young folk remained where they were, out in the garden. The student had spread his coat out on the grass and thrown himself down on it, with somewhat deliberate carelessness. His elder brother, the musician, sat beside Evelina, on the earth bank running around the house; and the cadet, buttoned up to the chin, sat next to him. Pyotr, too, sat on this seat, a little apart from the others, leaning against a window-sill. Pyotr's head was bowed. He was thinking about the debate he had just heard, which had interested him deeply.

"What did you think, *Panna* Evelina, of all that talk?" the elder of the brothers asked. "You never said a word, all through it."

"Why, it was all very fine—all you said to your father, I mean. Only..."

"Only what?"

Evelina did not at once answer. She laid her work down on her knees, smoothed it out carefully, and sat looking at it thoughtfully. It would have been difficult to say what she was thinking about: whether she should not have chosen a different canvas for the design she was embroidering, or—what answer to make to the question she had been asked.

All the young people were impatient to hear this answer. The student raised himself on his elbow and turned his face up to hers in lively curiosity. The musician sat watching her with calm, questioning eyes. Pyotr, too, tensed and lifted his head—then, after a moment, turned his face away.

"Only," Evelina continued, very low, still smoothing her embroidery on her knees, "it's not for every one to follow the same road in life. We have each our own destiny."

"Good Lord," the student exclaimed sharply, "what sober wisdom! Why, how old are you, *Panna* Evelina, if one may ask?"

"Seventeen," she answered simply—but immediately added, with naive, triumphant curiosity, "You thought I was much older, didn't you?"

The young men laughed.

"If I were asked your age," the musician said, "I'd be hard put to it to choose between thirteen and twenty-three. You seem a very child, at moments—truly! Yet you reason, at times, like a wise old lady."

"In serious matters one must reason seriously, Gavriilo Petrovich," the little woman declared mentorially; and she took up her embroidery.

A silence fell. Evelina's needle began to ply again. The visitors turned looks of curious interest on this tiny, yet so sober-minded young lady.

#### IV

Evelina had grown up, of course, since her first meeting with Pyotr; but young Stavruchenko's remark was very true. Her slender figure, at first glance, made her seem hardly more than a child. There was something, however, in her unhurried, even movements that gave her at times the dignity of a grown woman. Her face, too, made a similar impression. It is only among Slavs, I believe, that such faces are encountered. Fine, regular features, outlined in smooth, cool curves; blue eyes,



calm and steady; pale cheeks, to which the colour rarely rose—not the pallor, this, that is ready always to blaze in the flush of passion, but, rather, the cool white of snow. Her straight, fair hair, lightly shadowing her marble temples, was confined in a heavy braid that seemed to draw her head back when she walked.

Pyotr, too, had grown and greatly matured. Anyone glancing at him just now, where he sat—pale and deeply moved—a little apart from the other young people, must have been strongly impressed by his handsome face, so unlike other faces in its expression, so sharply changing in response to every movement of the soul. His black hair lay in a graceful wave over his prominent forehead, already lightly furrowed. His cheeks now flushed with rapid colour, now, as rapidly, blanched to a dull pallor. A nervous tremor passed, at times, over his lower lip, turned down the least bit at its corners; and his mobile eyebrows were seldom still. But his beautiful eyes stared out in an even, unmoving gaze that gave his face a somewhat unusual tinge of gloom.

"And so," the student began, after some moments of silence, "*Panna* Evelina feels that these things we've been talking of are beyond the powers of a woman's mind; that woman's lot lies in the narrow sphere of kitchen and nursery."

There was a certain self-satisfaction in the young man's tone (for these ideas were brand new at the time), and a challenging note of irony. Again, for a moment, silence fell. Evelina flushed nervously.

"You're a little hasty in your conclusions," she returned finally. "I understood your talk well enough—which shows that it's quite within the powers of a woman's mind. What I said about destiny referred only to my own, personal life."

She fell silent, and bent over her work with such an air of preoccupation that the young man's courage began to fail him.

"How strangely you talk," he said perplexedly. "A person might think you'd planned your whole life out ahead, to the very grave."

"But what is there strange about that?" Evelina returned quietly. "Why, I'm sure even Ilya Ivanovich"—that was the cadet—"has his life all planned out already; and he's younger than me, isn't he?"

"That's perfectly true," the cadet put in, pleased to be drawn into the talk. "You know, I read a biography of N—, not long ago. He lived by plan, too. Married at twenty, and got his command at thirty-five."

The student laughed mockingly. Again, a slight flush rose to Evelina's cheeks.

"There it is," she said, after a pause, with cold asperity. "We have each our own destiny."

No one tried to debate the point any further. A grave hush fell over the little group of young people—a hush through which it was easy to sense a feeling of puzzled alarm. They all realised that, unwittingly, their talk must have touched some very delicate personal feeling; that Evelina's simple words veiled the quivering of a taut and sensitive chord.

No sound broke the hush but the rustling of the trees. It was growing dark, and the old garden seemed, somehow, out of humour.

All this talk and argument, this surging tide of youthful hopes and interests, opinions and expectations, swept down upon the blind youth like a sudden storm. At first he listened eagerly, his face aglow with wondering admiration. But, before long, he could not help noticing that this vigorous tide made no effort to sweep him along in its advance; that it evinced no interest in him whatever. No questions were ever put him, no opinion asked of him. He was left apart, in a cheerless sort of isolation—the more cheerless, the greater the animation now reigning at the manor.

But he still listened attentively to the talk, so new and strange; and as he listened his eyebrows would draw sharply together, and his pale face assume an expression of straining interest. It was a gloomy interest, however, and the thoughts it aroused were heavy and bitter.

Mournfully, the mother watched her son. Evelina's eyes expressed her sympathy and alarm. Maxim alone seemed not to notice how his pupil was affected by the lively company. With the greatest cordiality, he urged the visitors to come again, and often; and undertook to look them up a wealth of interesting ethnographical material.

They left, promising to return. In parting, the young men pressed Pyotr's hand with friendly warmth. He returned their pressure impulsively, and when they drove off stood for a long time listening to the retreating rumble of wheels—then, quickly, turned away and disappeared into the garden.

With their departure, all grew still again at the manor. But it was a different stillness now, Pyotr felt: a strange, unusual stillness. In the very hush, he seemed to hear the admission that something had happened here, something of vital importance. Along the quiet paths, where no sound greeted him but the rustle of beeches and lilac, he seemed to hear echoes of the recent talk. And, too he sometimes heard, through the open windows, some sort of debate going on in the drawing-room. His mother's voice would float out, full of pain and pleading, and Evelina's, tense with indignation—both directed, evidently, against Maxim; while Maxim seemed to answer their attacks firmly, if heatedly. When Pyotr came in sight, these discussions would break off at once.

It was with deliberate purpose that Maxim had so ruthlessly hacked this first breach in the wall which had so long enclosed his blind pupil's world. Now the first swift, turbulent wave had swept in at the breach; and its impact had jarred the boy's spiritual calm.

He felt cramped, now, within his enchanted circle. He was oppressed by the tranquil quiet of his home, by the lazy rustlings and murmurings of the old manor garden, by the monotony of the slumber in which his youthful spirit had been plunged. The darkness brought him new voices—calling, enticing; it was alive with new concepts, only vaguely defined, that came crowding into his brain and filled it with a restless longing.

It called, it summoned, it awakened needs that had been slumbering within him. And even these first beckonings made their mark. His face grew paler; and a dull, vague ache gnawed at his heart.

The mother and Evelina quickly noticed these signs of his disquiet. We who have sight, seeing on others' faces the reflection of their thoughts and feelings, learn in time to mask our own emotions. But the blind are helpless in this respect. Pyotr's blanched face was as easily read as a diary forgotten, unlocked, in a drawing-room; and it betrayed a harrowing unrest.

They saw, too, that Maxim noticed all this as well as they—more, that it seemed to enter into some plan he was pursuing. They both thought this bitterly cruel. The mother would have shielded her son, if she could, with her own body. A hot-house, Maxim called it? Well, and what of that, so long as, in this hot-house, her child had been happy? Let his life continue always so—quiet, tranquil, unruffled.

Evelina was less outspoken, seeming to reserve much of her thoughts. But her attitude to Maxim had changed. She objected, now, to many of his proposals—at times, to the most trifling of details—with a sharpness he had never met in her before. Looking out searchingly at her from under his drawn brows, he would often encounter a wrathful glitter in her eyes. He would shake his head at such moments, muttering something unintelligible, and surround himself with even thicker clouds of tobacco-smoke than always—a sign of concentrated mental effort. But he maintained his ground unyieldingly; and, from time to time, delivered himself of scathing remarks, addressed to no one in particular, concerning the foolishness of feminine love and the limitations of feminine reasoning—a woman's brain, as all the world knows, being too short-sighted to see beyond the moment's suffering or the moment's joy. It was not tranquillity that he sought for Pyotr, but the utmost attainable fullness of life. Every teacher, it is said, strives to mould his pupil in his own likeness. And Maxim sought for his nephew that which he himself had experienced and so early lost: a life of struggle, of stirring conflict. In what form, he could not yet himself have said; but he made every effort to broaden the blind boy's impressions of the outer world—at the risk, even, of possible shocks and spiritual upheaval. It was something very different from this, he knew, that his sister and Evelina were seeking.

"Blind mother instinct!" he would exclaim at times, stumping up and down the room with an angry tapping of his crutches.

But these moments of anger were rare. Ordinarily he met his sister's arguments with mild persuasion and gentle sympathy, the more so that, when Evelina was not there to back her, she invariably yielded to his reasoning—which did not prevent her, be it added, from raising the question again before much time had passed. When Evelina was there, however, the resistance was far stronger, and at such times the old man sought refuge in silence. It was as though some contest were setting in between these two—a struggle in which each, as yet, was but studying his adversary, keeping his own cards carefully concealed.

## VI

When, two weeks later, the visitors came again, Evelina's greeting was very cool. But their youthful animation held a charm she could not easily withstand. Day after day, the young people wandered about the village, or went shooting in the woods, or recorded the songs of the reapers, out in the fields. In the evenings they would gather in the garden, on the long seat running around the house.

And on one such evening, before Evelina realised what was happening, the talk turned again to painful topics. How it had come about, who had begun it, neither she nor any of the others could have said—just as they could not have said

when it was that the sunset glow had died, and twilight gathered over the manor garden; or at what moment the nightingale had begun its song in the shadowed bushes.

The student threw into his words all the impassioned fervour of youth, advancing eagerly, without fear or calculation, to meet the uncharted future; and there was a very compelling charm, the all-but-unconquerable force of settled conviction, in this faith with which he spoke of the future, of the wonders that it must bring.

The blood rushed to Evelina's cheeks. Today, she realised, this challenge was addressed—perhaps not altogether deliberately—to her, and her alone.

She bent low over her embroidery. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks aflame. Her heart beat fast. But then the bright glow faded from her eyes, and the flush from her cheeks—though her heart beat faster still. Her lips were suddenly compressed, and a look of fright came into her blanched face.

Fright, because she had seemed to see a dark wall part before her eyes; and through the breach had gleamed bright, distant vistas of a different world—a broad world of seething life, activity.

Yes, it had long been calling her. She had not realised that before. Yet often and often had she sat alone for hours, on some secluded bench in the shady old garden, dreaming strange dreams—bright visions of far-off places; and in her visions there had been no room for blind Petro.

Now, this world was suddenly very near—not merely calling, but seeming to assert some sort of claim upon her.

She threw a swift glance at Pyotr; and her heart stabbed her. He sat very still, deep in thought, with a heaviness in his attitude that she was not soon to forget. He understood—yes, everything! And as this thought flashed through her mind, Evelina felt suddenly very cold. The blood rushed to her heart, leaving her face so white that she herself could feel its pallor. For just one instant she saw herself removed to that bright, distant world, while he sat here alone, his head bowed low. But no, not here. Out on the hillock by the river-bank—the blind little boy she had cried over, that evening long ago.

And she was frightened, frightened lest someone try to draw the dagger from her old wound.

Now she recalled Maxim's eyes, so often turned to her of late. So that was the meaning of those long, silent looks! Better than she herself, he had guessed her mood, had realised that her heart lay open still for struggle and for choice, that she was not yet confident.... But he was wrong! Yes, she knew what her first step must be; and, that step taken, she would see what she might yet wring out of life.

She drew a deep, gasping breath, as after heavy physical exertion, and looked around her. She did not know how long they had been sitting thus, in silence—what more the student had said, if anything, or when he had broken off. She glanced at the place where Pyotr had been sitting.

He was not there.

"You must excuse me, gentlemen," she said, quietly folding up her work. "I shall have to leave you, for a while, to your own resources."

And she walked slowly down the shadowed garden path.

It was not only to Evelina that these evening hours were so heavy with anxiety. Coming up to a bend in the path, she heard voices a little way ahead, where a bench stood under the trees. Maxim and Anna Mikhailovna sat there, talking, and both seemed deeply moved.

"That's so. It was the girl I was thinking of, no less than the boy," Maxim said gruffly. "Just think of it yourself, a moment. Why, she's only a child. She knows nothing at all of life. Would you take advantage of her innocence? You couldn't do that, surely!"

The mother's voice, as she answered, was very near to tears.

"Well, but Max, what ... what if she... What will become of my poor boy?"

"Come what may," the old soldier returned firmly, though his voice was sad. "We'll do our best, if such a time should come. But in any case, he must never be weighed down by the thought of a life spoiled on account of him. Yes, and you and I, Anna—have we no conscience? You must think of that, too."

His voice had softened. Lifting his sister's hand, he kissed it tenderly. Anna Mikhailovna bowed her head.

"My poor, poor boy! It would have been better, then, if he'd never met her," she moaned, so softly that Evelina rather guessed her words than heard them.

The girl paused, flushing painfully. If she came past them now, they could not but realise that she had overheard their secret thoughts.

But then, proudly, she raised her head. She had not meant to eavesdrop, after all. And in any case, she was not to be halted in her chosen course by any feeling of false shame. And he took too much upon himself, besides—Uncle Maxim. Her life was her own, and she would do with it whatever she found fit.

And, her head held high, she walked on slowly down the path, past the bench where they were sitting. Maxim hurriedly pulled his crutch out of her way; and Anna Mikhailovna looked up at her with miserable eyes, full of love, almost adoration, and at the same time of fear—seeming to feel, in her mother's heart, that this fair, proud girl, walking past them with a look of such wrathful challenge, was the carrier of joy, or of grief, for her son's whole future.

## VIII

Off at the end of the manor garden there was an old, abandoned water-mill. Its wheels had long ceased turning; its shafts were overgrown with moss; and the water filtered through its leaky sluices in several tiny streamlets, never still. This was a favourite haunt of the blind youth's. He often sat for hours on the dam, listening to the rippling murmur of the water—and then, at home, drew from the piano those same rippling sounds. But now he had no heart for the murmuring water. Now he strode up and down, up and down the path, his heart overflowing with bitterness, his face twisted with the pain that filled him.

Hearing Evelina's light footsteps, he stopped short. She came up to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me, Pyotr," she said earnestly. "Tell me—what's the matter? What is it that troubles you so?"

He turned quickly and moved down the path again. Evelina kept close at his side. She understood his silence, his sharp turning away; and, for a moment, she hung her head.

Someone was singing, back at the house:

*O'er the rocky peaks,  
Hear the eagles' loud screams,  
See them soaring, gliding, swooping,  
Seeking out their prey....*

A lusty young voice, softened by the distance, singing of love, and happiness, and the open spaces—it came floating through the evening hush, stilling the lazy whisperings of the garden.

They were happy, those young people, with their talk of such a full and vivid life. She, too, only a few minutes past, had been with them, intoxicated with the dream of that bright life, where there remained no room for *him*. She had not even noticed when he left—and who could say how long these moments of grief might have seemed to him, in his loneliness?

Of all this Evelina thought, walking down the path at Pyotr's side. Never before had it been so difficult for her to speak to him, to turn his mood. But now too, she could see, her very presence was gradually softening his gloom.

It was not long before his hurried step slowed down, and his face began to clear. With Evelina at his side, the bitter pain in his heart grew less, giving way to another, a softer feeling—a familiar feeling, that he could not have named, but to whose healing influence he yielded willingly.

"What is it?" Evelina asked again.

"Nothing in particular," he answered, with a bitter note in his voice. "It's simply that I feel so utterly unwanted and unneeded in this world."

The song at the house had died away. There was a silence, and then a new song reached them, barely audibly—one of

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the old Ukrainian *dumkas*, softly sung, in the manner of the ancient *bandurists*. At times the voice of the singer would fade entirely away, leaving a vague, unformed dream to reign in the listeners' souls; and then again the melody would reach them faintly, through the rustling of the trees.

Pyotr stopped, involuntarily, to listen.

"You know," he said wistfully, "it sometimes seems to me it's true, what old people like to say—that the world keeps getting worse and worse to live in. Even for the blind, the old times were better. I'd have played the *bandura*, if I'd lived then, instead of the piano. And I'd have gone wandering about the country, through the towns and villages. The people would have thronged to hear me, and I'd have sung to them of their fathers' great deeds, of heroism and glory. I'd have had my place in life, blind as I am. Whereas now.... Why, even that child of a cadet, with the shrill little voice—even he has his path chalked out. Did you hear him? When he's to marry, and when he's to get his command. The others laughed at him. But for me—for me, even that's far out of reach." •

Evelina's blue eyes opened wide in alarm, and a tear gleamed in the evening shadows.

"You've been listening to that young Stavruchenko," she returned, as lightly as she could, trying to hide her anxiety.

"Yes, I have," Pyotr said slowly. "He has a very pleasant voice. Is he good-looking?"

"He's nice," Evelina began thoughtfully—but broke off, in swift anger at herself, to declare sharply, "No, he isn't, not at all, and I don't like him one bit! He's too sure of himself, and his voice isn't pleasant, either. It's too loud."

Pyotr said nothing, taken aback by this sudden fit of anger.

"Such stupid foolishness!" Evelina hurried on, stamping her foot. "It's Maxim's doing, all of it, I know it is. Oh, how I hate him now, that old Maxim!"

"What are you saying, Evelina?" Pyotr cried. "What do you mean—his doing?"

"It is, it is, and I just hate him!" she repeated stubbornly. "He's planned and calculated till he's strangled any bit of human kindness he ever had in him. Don't you talk to me of them! Who ever gave them the right to interfere in other people's lives?"

Suddenly breaking off, she clenched her slender hands until the knuckles cracked, and began to cry, as children do.

Pyotr took her hands in his, with wondering concern. He could not understand this sudden outburst. Evelina had always been so quiet, so entirely the master of her emotions! He stood listening to her sobs, and to the strange echo that her sobbing aroused in his own heart. Old memories surged up—a memory of himself, out on his hillock, sad as he had been today, and of the little girl, weeping for him as now she wept again.

But all at once she pulled her hands free—and again he stood wondering, for she was laughing.

"Silly goose that I am! What was I crying about?"

She dried her eyes and went on, her voice soft with repentance.

"I mustn't be so unfair. They're really fine people, both of them. And the things he was talking of are very fine. Only, all that—it's not for everyone."

"It's for everyone who can undertake it," Pyotr said.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she returned briskly—though, mingling with her smile, her voice still carried traces of her recent tears. "Why, even if you take Maxim—he fought as long as he could; but now that he can't, he takes life as it comes. Well, and we too..."

"Don't say, *we*. For you, it's quite another matter." "No, it isn't." "Why isn't it?"

"Because... Well, then—because you're going to marry me, aren't you? And so our lives will be alike."

"Marry you? Me? You ... you mean, you'd marry me?"

"Why, of course I do," she cried, her tongue tripping over the words in her excited haste. "You silly boy! Hadn't you really ever thought of it? A simple thing like that? Why, who were you thinking of marrying, if not me?"

"Yes, of course," he agreed, with unaccustomed selfishness; but, suddenly realising what he was saying, continued quickly, taking her hand in his, "No, Evelina. You listen to me. You heard their talk, just now. In the cities, girls can study. They can learn. And you, too—great things might open up for you. Whereas I..."

"Well, and what of you?"

"I ... I'm blind," he concluded, quite illogically.

Again the memories of childhood rose in his heart: the river, lapping softly on its banks; his first acquaintance with Evelina, and her bitter tears when he told her of his blindness. And instinctively he broke off, realising that his words must wound her now, too, as they had wounded her then. There was no sound for a moment but the gentle rippling of the water in the sluices. Evelina was very still—so still, she might not have been there at all. In that moment, her face was twisted with silent pain. But she quickly mastered herself, and when she spoke again her voice was light and carefree.

"And what if you are?" she demanded. "After all, if a girl falls in love with a blind boy, why, what can she do but marry that blind boy? That's how it always works out, you know. So that—what can we do about it?"

"If a girl falls in love," he repeated slowly; and his mobile eyebrows drew together in concentrated thought, as the familiar words sank into his consciousness in so new an aspect. "If she falls in love?"—this time on a rising note of excited query.

"Why, of course! You and I—we're both in love. You silly boy! Why, just think a minute: could you live on here alone, if I went away?"

His face paled, and his unseeing eyes opened wide.

It was very quiet. Only the water continued its rippling murmur. Even this would fade at times, almost dying away; but always it would rally, and carry on its tinkling tale. A soft whispering filled the dark foliage of the bird cherries. The singing at the house had stopped—but now a nightingale trilled tentatively, on the bank of the mill pond.

"I'd die," he said dully.

Her lips trembled, as on that day of their first acquaintance.

"And so would I," she said, with an effort, in a voice that was suddenly faint and childlike. "And so would I—alone, so far away, without you."

He pressed her slender fingers. And, how strange—her gentle answering pressure was so unlike what it had always been before! Now, this slight movement of her fingers found its way deep, deep into his heart. And Evelina herself had become, not only his accustomed childhood friend, but also—at one and the same time—a new, a different person. He, Pyotr, now seemed to himself strong and virile; Evelina—weak, and in tears. In an impulse of the deepest tenderness, he drew her close and began to stroke her silky hair.

And it seemed to him that all the grief in his heart was stilled, that he had no more longings and desires, that there was nothing in life but this one moment.

The nightingale by the pond, satisfied at last with its tentative ventures, burst into full song, filling the quiet garden with passionate music. Evelina started, and shyly put aside Pyotr's caressing hand.

He released her at once, and stood listening as she smoothed back her hair. His breath came full and free. His heart beat loud, but evenly—driving through his body, with the hot rush of blood, a new sense of concentrated energy. When, a moment later, she said simply, "Now we must get back to our guests," he listened wonderingly, hearing not so much the words as the new notes in this dear voice he knew so well.



## IX

They had all gathered in the little drawing-room. Only Pyotr and Evelina were missing. Maxim sat talking with old Stavruchenko, but the young people, lounging by the open windows, were very quiet. A strange, hushed mood reigned in the room—the mood that comes at moments of an emotional crisis that is sensed by all, if not by all entirely understood. The absence of Pyotr and Evelina seemed, somehow, very marked. Maxim kept breaking off his talk to glance swiftly, expectantly at the open doors. Anna Mikhailovna had a sad, almost a conscience-stricken look. She was making an obvious effort to behave as a cordial and attentive hostess. Only *Pan* Popelsky, who was growing noticeably stouter as the years rolled by, was placid as always, half-dozing in his chair in expectation of his supper.

Footsteps sounded on the veranda, and all eyes turned that way. Evelina appeared in the black opening of the veranda door. Behind her, Pyotr was coming slowly up the steps.

Evelina felt the eyes turned so intently on her. But she showed no embarrassment. Her step was even as always as she came into the room. Only once, as she encountered Maxim's glance, did her lips curl in a faint smile, and her eyes flash a look of ironic challenge.

Anna Mikhailovna had eyes only for her son.

Pyotr, slowly following Evelina, seemed hardly to realise where he was. Coming into the bright light at the doorway, he paused suddenly, his pale face and slender figure outlined against the night. But then he stepped over the threshold and—still with that strange, absent look on his face—walked quickly across the room to the piano.

Music was an accustomed element in the quiet life of the manor; but it had always been a very domestic element, a thing unshared with the outside world. During these days when the house resounded to the talk and songs of their young visitors, though the elder of the two young Stavruchenkos, a student of music, had played at times, Pyotr had never once approached the piano. And this reticence had been one of the things that kept him so much in the background in the lively company—effacing him so thoroughly, amidst the general animation, that his mother's heart had bled to see it. But now, for the first time, Pyotr moved confidently to his accustomed place. He did not seem, actually, to realise what he was doing; nor did he seem to notice the people in the room. True, such a hush had fallen over the company with his and Evelina's appearance that he might almost have thought the room was empty.

He opened the piano and laid his fingers gently on the keys, then played a few swift, light chords—tentative, inquiring. He seemed to be asking some question—asking the piano, as he pressed its keys; or, perhaps, asking his own heart and mood.

The chords died away, and he sat motionless, absorbed in thought—his hands spread, passive, on the keys; and the hush in the drawing-room grew deeper still.

The night looked in at the black rectangles of the open windows. Here and there a leafy tree, caught out of the darkness by the light from the house, seemed to be looking curiously into the room. Impressed by Pyotr's vague prelude, and caught by the spell of a strange inspiration that seemed to radiate from his pale

face, the visitors sat in silent expectation.

And still Pyotr's hands lay passive on the keys. He sat as though listening, his unseeing eyes upturned. A tumultuous tide of emotions had risen within him. Life—unknown, unexperienced—had caught him up, as the rising waves catch up a boat that has long been lying peacefully on the dry seaside sand. His face expressed amazement and inquiry—yes, and something else, an unwonted, excited animation, that came and went in swift changes of light and shade. His blind eyes seemed deep and dark.

For a moment he seemed unable to single out, in the tumult of his emotions, that one above all others that he sought so eagerly. But then—though his look of amazement, of expectation, did not change—he started, raised his hands over the keyboard, and, caught up by a new wave of feeling, let himself be carried away in flowing, singing music.

## X

Playing by score is a difficult thing for the blind. The score is raised: separate signs for each note, strung out in rows like the letters in a book. Between notes meant to be played together, exclamation points are set, to indicate their connection. Reading with his fingers, the blind player is compelled to memorise every passage—to memorise it for each hand separately—before he can attempt to play it. This is a laborious and lengthy process. But Pyotr had always loved the elements of which music is made; and when, after memorising a few bars for each hand, he sat down to play them, and the raised hieroglyphs of the book were transformed suddenly into harmonious sound—his pleasure and interest, at such moments, were so lively that the dry work by which they were attained lost much of its tedium, and actually began to fascinate him.

Still, there were too many intermediate processes between the raised characters in the book and their expression in sound. Each character, to become music, had to travel through the fingers to the brain, there to be established in memory, and then to travel back again from the brain to the finger-tips, as they pressed the keys. And Pyotr's musical imagination, highly developed from childhood, would intervene in the process of memorisation; so that the music thus learned, whoever its author, was always perceptibly tinged, in the playing, by the blind player's own personality.

Pyotr's musical feeling was moulded in the shape in which melody had first reached his consciousness, the shape in which, later, it had filled his mother's playing. It was his native folk music that sounded always in his soul; it was this music through which his spirit communed with Nature.

And from the first notes of the Italian piece he now began to play, with throbbing heart and overflowing soul, there was something so unusual about his interpretation that the visitors glanced at one another wonderingly. But as he played on an irresistible charm stole over them all, and only the elder of the two young Stavruchenkos, himself a musician, made any attempt to trace the familiar score, or to analyse its execution.

The music filled the room, resounded through the quiet garden. The young

people listened with sparkling eyes, full of curiosity and excited interest. Old Stavruchenko sat quietly at first, his head bowed in thought; but soon he began to show a rising excitement.

"That's what you call playing—eh?" he whispered suddenly, jogging Maxim with his elbow. "What do you say to that?"

As the music gained in power, he was seized by memories—of his youth, most likely, for he threw back his shoulders, his cheeks flushed, and his eyes grew bright. He raised a clenched fist, as though to bring it down on the table with a crash; but restrained himself, and lowered it without a sound.

"Shelve the old man, will they? Let them try!" he whispered to Maxim, with a swift glance at his sons. "You and me, brother, in our day....Yes, and now too....Well, isn't that so?"

And he tugged at his long moustache.

Maxim, in general, was quite indifferent to music. Today, however, he sensed something entirely new in his pupil's playing; and he sat listening intently—shaking his head, from time to time, behind his sheltering cloud of tobacco-smoke, and turning his eyes now on Pyotr, now on Evelina. Again, life was interfering in his system, in a way he had not planned at all. Anna Mikhailovna, too, glanced often at Evelina, trying to determine what it was that sounded in Pyotr's music: grief, or joy.

Evelina sat in a corner where her face was sheltered from the lamplight. Only her eyes, wide open, darker than by day, gleamed in the shadows. She had her own understanding of the music; for she heard in it the ripple of the water in the old mill sluices, and the murmur of the bird cherries in the shadowed garden.

## XI

The melody had long since changed. Dropping the Italian piece he had been playing, Pyotr had given rein to his own fantasies—to all that had crowded his thoughts in those moments of silence when he sat, absorbed in memories, his hands lying passive on the piano keys. The voices of Nature filled his playing—the breath of the wind and the rustle of the forest, the splash of the river, and the vague murmurings that quiver and die in the distance; and, behind it all, that deep, heart-swelling emotion, so elusive of definition, that Nature's discourse arouses in the soul. Yearning, shall we call it? But why, then, should it be so pleasant? Happiness, perhaps? Then why should it be so deeply, so infinitely sad?

At times the music grew stronger, louder; and, at these moments, a strange severity would come over the blind youth's features—as though he himself were amazed by the new power of his music, and looked forward impatiently to what more might follow. His listeners would wait in breathless expectation. A few more chords, it would seem, and all must merge into a beautiful and mighty harmony. But, hardly it had risen, the melody would sink again, in a strange, plaintive murmur—as a wave breaks in foam and spray; and for long moments afterwards the music would be threaded with bitter notes of query, of perplexity.

Then, perhaps, for a moment, the flying hands would be still, and a hush would fall once more over the room, broken only by the whisper of the trees out in the

garden. The magic that had seized upon the little company, carrying them far, far away from the quiet manor, would be dispelled. The walls of the drawing-room would close in upon them, and the dark night peep in at the open windows—until again the musician raised his hands over the keys and began to play.

And again the music would grow and strengthen, again it would seek and inquire, rising to ever loftier heights. Through an ever-changing clamour of chords, folk melodies would come pressing through—wistful tales of love, or memories of past days of suffering and glory, or the joyous revelry and hopes of youth—the blind player's attempt to find expression in familiar musical forms.

But the songs, too, would sink away, and again the plaintive notes of query, of a problem still unsolved, would quiver in the hush of the little drawing-room.

## XII

A few last notes, imbued with undefined complaint. And as they died away Anna Mikhailovna, watching her son, saw in his face an expression that she well remembered. A sunny spring day rose in her memory; and again she saw tiny Petro lying in the grass by the river-bank, overwhelmed by the too vivid impressions of Nature's awakening.

But none of the others noticed this look of strain. The room rang with talk. Old Stavruchenko was shouting something at Maxim, and the young people, excited and moved, were pressing Pyotr's hands, predicting success and fame for him as a musician.

"No question about it," the elder of the brothers declared. "It's amazing, how you've grasped the very essence of our folk music, how completely you've mastered it. Only, what was that you played at the beginning?"

Pyotr named the piece, an Italian composition.

"So I thought," young Stavruchenko exclaimed. "I have some knowledge of it, but—your manner of playing is so strikingly individual! There are many who play better; but no one, surely, has ever played it as you did. It was— well, like a translation from the language of Italian music into that of Ukrainian. You need study, training, and then...."

Pyotr sat listening attentively. Never before had he been the focus of such eager talk; and it was giving rise to a sensation altogether new to him: a proud consciousness of his own power. Could it really be that this music of his—and it had cost him more pain, today, and left him more unsatisfied, than it ever had before—that this music of his could affect others so tremendously? Well, then—he too, it seemed, could do something in life!

And then, when the talk was at its loudest, he felt a sudden hot pressure on his fingers, which still lay on the keys. It was Evelina.

"Do you hear? Do you understand?" she whispered joyfully. "There's your work, then, waiting for you. If only you could see, if only you could know how you carried us all away!"

Pyotr started, and threw back his shoulders proudly.

Only the mother noticed Evelina's hurried whisper, and its effect on Pyotr. And, as she watched, she blushed—as though it were she who had just received

the first caress of youthful love.

Pyotr did not move. He was struggling to master the new happiness that flooded his heart. And at the same time, it may be, he sensed the first shadow of the storm-cloud that was already rising, heavy, shapeless, somewhere in the utmost depths of his being.

## Chapter Six

### I

Pyotr woke early, next morning. Quiet filled his room. The house, too, was still. The stir that comes with day had not yet begun. From the garden, through the open window, the fresh breath of morning came pouring into him. Blind though he was, Pyotr had an excellent feeling for the state of Nature around him. He knew, now, that it was very early. He knew, too, that his window was open—knew it by the rustling of the trees, so close and clear, with nothing to bar it from the room. Today, this feeling was more vivid than ever. He knew, though it did not reach him, that the sun was peeping into the room; knew that, should he stretch a hand out through the window, the dew would come sprinkling from the bushes just outside. And there was another feeling too, today—a feeling unfamiliar, never before experienced, but filling his whole being to overflowing.

He lay still awhile, listening to the twitter of some tiny bird out in the garden, and wondering at this strange new feeling in his heart.

What was it? What had happened?

And suddenly, as he questioned himself, came the memory of her words last night, in the dusk, by the old mill.

"Hadn't you really ever thought of it?" she had said, and—"You silly boy!"

No, he had never thought of it. Her presence had always been a joy to him; but, until that evening, it had been a joy not consciously recognised—as we are not conscious of the air we breathe. Those simple words had stirred his spirit like a stone cast into still waters: one touch, and the smooth, shining surface, reflecting the sunlight and the sky's distant blue, is gone—the water stirred to its very bottom.

Waking now, with his spirit thus renewed, he saw his old playmate in an altogether new light. All that had taken place the evening before came back, in its slightest detail; and, as her voice sounded in his memory, he was amazed at its new tembre. "If a girl falls in love..." and—"You silly boy!"

He sprang out of bed, dressed hurriedly, and ran off down the dew-wet garden paths to the old mill. The water rippled in the sluices, and the bird cherries whispered around him, just as the night before; only then it had been dark, and now it was morning, bright and sunny. Never before had he "felt" the light so strongly—as though the damp fragrance, the freshness of the morning, carried with them to his tingling nerve centres some inkling of the joyous cheer of daylight.

### II

Life at the manor became brighter, somehow, and happier. Anna Mikhailovna seemed young again; and Maxim could be heard to joke and laugh, though a moody rumbling still issued at times—like the echo of some distant storm—from his shelter of tobacco-smoke. Some people, he grumbled, seemed to think of life as something in the order of those stupid novels that end with wedding bells; but there were plenty of things in this world of ours that it wouldn't harm such people to give a little thought to. And *Pan* Popelsky, rotund and handsome in healthy middle-age, his cheeks still ruddy, his hair gradually and evenly silvering—*Pan* Popelsky, evidently thinking that Maxim's grumbling was addressed to him, would invariably express his agreement and hurry off to attend to his affairs, which were always, it must be said, in perfect order. But the young people would only smile, absorbed in the plans that they were laying. Pyotr was to study music seriously, now.

When the crops were in, and autumn, decked in golden threads of gossamer, hung in languorous contentment over the fields, the whole family, with Evelina, set out on a visit to Stavrukovo, as the Stavruchenkos' estate was called. It was a journey of only some seventy versts; but this short distance brought a great change in the surrounding countryside. The last of the Carpathian foot-hills, still visible in Volhynia and along the Bug, were lost to view, and the landscape settled into rolling Ukrainian steppeland. The villages here were green with orchards and gardens. Scattered gullies cut across the steppe; and here and there along the horizon stood tall grave mounds, long since ploughed around to the very base and now surrounded by yellow fields of stubble.

It was seldom that the family went so far from home. Away from the familiar fields and village, where he knew every inch of ground, Pyotr lost his confident ease of movement; he felt his blindness more strongly, and grew nervous and irritable. Yet he had readily accepted the Stavruchenkos' invitation. Since that memorable evening when he had first realised both his love and the power of his awakening talent, he seemed to shrink less from the outer world—from the dark, unknown vistas that he sensed beyond the bounds of his accustomed life. It had begun to attract him, this world, growing more upon him.

The days at Stavrukovo passed very pleasantly. Pyotr was far less constrained, now, in the youthful company. He would listen with eager interest to young Stavruchenko's masterful playing, and his stories of the Conservatory and of concerts hoard at the capital; and he would flush with pleasure at the musician's enthusiastic praises when the conversation turned to Pyotr's own talent, so vividly expressed, if as yet unpolished. He no longer tried to efface himself, but joined in the general talk as freely as the others, though perhaps not so loquaciously. Evelina, too, had thrown aside the cold restraint—the vigilance, almost—that had hung over her so recently, and delighted them all by her carefree gaiety, her sudden fits of irrepressible merriment.

There was an old monastery, some ten versts from Stavrukovo, that was widely known hereabout for the part it had played, in its time, in local history. Again and again, Tatar hordes, like swarming locusts, had besieged its walls, sending their arrows in myriads against its defenders; or Polish troops had stormed it desperately; or, when it was held by the Poles, the Cossacks had rushed into battle to regain their fortress.

Now the ancient towers lay in ruin. The crumbling walls, patched here and

there with stretches of peaceful paling, protected the monastery's vegetable gardens from no more dangerous foe than the enterprising cattle of the local peasantry; and the broad moats were overgrown with millet.

One clear, mild autumn day the Stavruchenkos and their guests set out to visit this monastery. Maxim, with his sister and Evelina, went in the carriage—a broad, old-fashioned vehicle, swaying on its high springs like a wind-tossed boat. The young men rode.

Pyotr rode confidently along beside the others, guided always by the hoofbeats of his companions' mounts and by the sound of the carriage wheels on the road ahead. A stranger, seeing his easy, fearless manner, could hardly have guessed that this young horseman did not see the road—that he had simply learned by long practice to trust his horse's instinct. Anna Mikhailovna, at first, kept looking anxiously back at her son, uneasy because both horse and road were unfamiliar to him. Maxim, too, watched him furtively, with a mentor's pride in his pupil and a purely male superiority to women's silly fears.

"You know," the student exclaimed suddenly, riding up to the carriage, "I've just had an idea. There's a grave here that you really ought to see. We came on the story not long ago, going through some old papers at the monastery, and it's tremendously interesting. We can go right now, if you like. It's not much out of our way—just at the end of the village."

"What makes you think of graves?" Evelina demanded, laughing. "Are we such sad company as all that?"

"I'll answer that question later," he returned, and called to the coachman to turn off towards Kolodnya and stop by the stile to Ostap's garden.

Then, turning his horse, he cantered back to join the other riders.

The carriage turned down a narrow little road, where its wheels sank deep into a thick layer of dust. The young men shot past, and dismounted by a wattle fence at the side of the road. When they had tied their horses here, the young Stavruchenkos walked back to help the ladies down from the carriage, when it should come up; and Pyotr stood waiting, leaning against the pommel of his saddle, his head inclined—listening intently, trying to orientate himself in this unfamiliar place.

To him, this bright autumn day was darkest night, enlivened only by the daytime sounds around him. He could hear the approaching carriage, and the talk and laughter of the two young men. The horses at *his* side, reaching over the fence to the tall growth of weeds that bordered the vegetable garden inside, pulled at their bridles and made them tinkle. A song floated, wistful, lazy, on the light breeze. It came from somewhere quite near—among the garden beds, perhaps. There was a murmur of leaves, in some near-by orchard. A stork clattered its bill; there was a loud beating of wings, and a cock crowed, as though suddenly recalling some urgent matter; a well-sweep creaked. The sounds of workaday village life. And, indeed, the village was very near. They had stopped by a garden at its very edge.

Of more distant sounds, the clearest was the measured calling of a monastery bell, very thin and high. By the way the bell sounded, or perhaps by the feel of the breeze, or, it might be, by some other sign that he himself could not have named, Pyotr felt that there must be a sudden break or fall in the land somewhere beyond the monastery—the bluff bank of a stream, perhaps; and beyond it a long stretch of flatland, humming with the sounds of peaceful life. Faintly, fragmentarily, these sounds too reached his ears, giving him an aural sensation of distance, veiled and



quivering—as to us, who can see, distant outlines seem to quiver in the dim light of evening.

The breeze played with his hair, under the brim of his hat, and brushed past his ear with a soft murmuring much like the singing of an Aeolian harp. Vague memories stirred in his mind. Happenings of his distant childhood, caught up out of forgetfulness, came to life again in the form of wind, and touch, and sound. This breeze that played around him, mingling with the distant bell and with the wistful song here in the garden, seemed to be telling him some old, sad tale of the past history of these places, or, perhaps, of his own past, or of his future—so dark, so undefined.

But now the carriage had come up, and the whole company trooped over the stile into the garden. In a corner of the garden, among a rank growth of weeds and grasses, lay a broad stone slab, almost level with the earth around it. Green leaves of thistle, around flame-pink flower heads, broad-leafed burdock, and tall, thin-stalked cockle swayed above the shorter grasses, rustling gently in the breeze, and Pyotr could hear them whispering over the neglected grave.

"It was only recently we discovered this," young Stavruchenko said. "Yet, do you know who lies under this stone? He was famous, in his day—old Ignat Kary."

"So this is where you lie, old fighter," Maxim said slowly. "How did he come to be here at Kolodnya?"

"It was back in 17—. The monastery was held by Polish troops, and the Cossacks had laid siege to it, together with some Tatar band. And—well, you know, the Tatars were always a dangerous sort of ally. The garrison must have found some way of buying over their *mirza*. And one night, when the Poles organised a sally, the Tatars joined them against the Cossacks. There was a fearful battle in the dark. The Tatars were beaten, I believe, and the monastery taken; but the Cossacks lost their leader in the fighting."

The young man paused a moment.

"There was another name in the story, too," he continued slowly, "though we haven't been able to find a second grave. The records at the monastery speak of a blind young *bandurist* buried at Kary's side. He had been with Kary through many campaigns."

"Blind?" Anna Mikhailovna cried tremulously. "And campaigning with Kary?"

She had a vision of her own blind boy, in that fearful battle in the darkness.

"Yes, he was blind. And, evidently, famed for his singing throughout the Zaporozhye country. At any rate, that's how the record speaks of him, in that peculiar mixture of Polish and Ukrainian and Church Slavonic in which the story is set down. I can quote it for you, if you like. I remember this part of it almost word for word: 'And with him Yurko, gloried Cossack singer, who had never left his side, and was by him much loved. And Yurko too, when Kary lay dead, the heathen horde perfidiously cut down. For in their heathen faith know they no veneration for the crippled, nor for the glorious talent of song making and of the plucking of the strings, by which even the wolves of the steppe might be softened, yet not these heathen, who spared it not in their attack by night. And they are laid side by side, the singer and the warrior, and may their noble end be gloried in eternity, Amen.'"

"The stone is wide," one of the company remarked. "Perhaps they lie together under it."

"That may be so. But the inscriptions are all worn away. The mace and

horsetail still show, here at the top, but all the rest is gone. Nothing but lichen."

"Ah, but wait one minute," cried Pyotr, who had been listening to this tale with breathless interest.

He knelt beside the stone and pressed his slender fingers down on the green growth of lichen that covered it. Through the lichen, he could feel the firm texture of the stone, and the faint outlines of letters cut in its surface.

He sat thus a moment, his face uplifted, his eyebrows drawn. Then he read aloud.

"'Ignaty, known as Kary ... by the will of our Lord ... shot down from a Tatar bow....'"

"Yes, that much we made out," the student said.

Pyotr's fingers, tensely arched, crept further and further down the stone slab.

"'When Kary lay dead...'"

"'The heathen horde...'" the student put in eagerly. "That's how Yurko's death is described in the record. So that it's true—he lies here too, under this same stone."

"Yes—'the heathen horde'," Pyotr confirmed. "And that's all I can make out. No, wait a bit! Here's some more: 'Cut down by Tatar sabres....' And something else—but no, it's indecipherable. That's all."

All further memory of the young *bandurist* had been wiped out by erosion, in the century and a half that the stone had been lying over the grave.

For a moment, a deep silence hung over the garden. Only the foliage rustled in the breeze. Then the hush was broken by a long-drawn, reverential sigh. That was Ostap, the owner of the garden, and thereby master of the one-time ataman's last earthly abode. Coming up to welcome the gentlefolk, he had stopped in speechless amazement at the sight of the young man with upturned, sightless eyes, bending over the grave to read by touch words that years, and rain, and storm had combined to hide away from human sight.

"It's the grace of God," he said, his eyes fixed on Pyotr in a look of the deepest awe. "It's the grace of God, that gives the blind to know what we, with eyes, can never see."

"Do you understand now, *Panna* Evelina, why I suddenly remembered Yurko?" the student asked, when the carriage had set off again along the dusty road on its slow progress towards the monastery. "We kept wondering, my brother and I, how a blind singer could have ridden with Kary and his flying bands. Of course, Kary may not have been the chief ataman at that time. He may have been simply a troop leader. But we know that he was always in command of mounted Cossacks, not of foot troops. And the *bandurists*—they were usually old men, wandering from village to village and singing for alms. It was only when I saw your Pyotr riding, today, that I suddenly pictured that blind lad in the saddle, with his *bandura*, slung on his back instead of a gun."

The young man paused a moment, then continued, almost enviously,

"And he fought in battles, too, it may well be. And in any case, he shared in all the marches and the dangers. Yes, what times there were, once, in this Ukraine of ours!"

"What dreadful times!" Anna Mikhailovna put in, sighing. "What wonderful times!" the young man returned. "Nothing like that ever happens now," Pyotr put in gruffly. He had just ridden up to join young Stavruchenko beside the carriage. For a moment he listened, his eyebrows raised, to catch the gait of the other horses. His face, rather paler than usual, betrayed a state of deep emotion.

"All that has disappeared, nowadays," he repeated.

"What was due to disappear, has disappeared," Maxim put in, with a hint of coldness in his tone. "Those people lived the life of their own time. It's for you to find the life that suits your time."

"It's all very well for you," the student said. "You've had something out of life."

"Yes, and life's had something out of me, too," the old Garibaldian returned, with a grim smile, glancing at his crutches.

There was a silence.

"I had my dreams of the old Cossack days too, when I was young," Maxim went on. "The wild poetry of it, and the freedom. I actually went off to Turkey, to join Sadik." *[ Sadik-pasha—one Chaikovsky, a Ukrainian dreamer, who thought to make the Cossacks a political force in Turkey.]*

"Well, and what came of that?" the young people demanded eagerly.

"I was cured of my dreams fast enough, when I saw those 'free Cossacks' of yours in the service of Turkish despotism. Pure masquerade, historical quackery! I realised then that history has swept all those old trappings into the waste heap; that it's the aim that matters, not the form, however handsome it may seem on the surface. And that was when I went to Italy. There, people were fighting for an aim I was willing to give my life for, even if I didn't know their language."

Maxim was serious now, and spoke with an earnestness that gave his words added weight. He had seldom taken any part in the loud debates between old Stavruchenko and his sons, except to chuckle quietly at their fervour, or to smile good-naturedly when the young people appealed to him as to an ally. But today he had been stirred by the old story that had risen so vividly before them as they bent over the moss-grown stone; and, too, he had the feeling that in some strange way this episode of the distant past had a real significance in the present—for Pyotr, and, through Pyotr, for them all.

This time the young people made no attempt to argue—subdued, perhaps, by the emotion they had experienced in Ostap's garden a few minutes past, beside the gravestone that spoke so eloquently of the death of those past times; or, perhaps, impressed by the old veteran's earnest tone.

"What remains for us, then?" the student asked, breaking the silence that had fallen after Maxim's words.

"Struggle; the same eternal struggle," Maxim answered.

"In what field? In what forms?"

"That's for you to seek."

Now that he had dropped his usual half-mocking tone, Maxim seemed inclined to discuss things seriously. But no time remained, just now, for serious talk. The carriage was approaching the monastery gates. The student reached out a hand to check Pyotr's horse. Like an open book, the blind youth's face showed the deep emotion that still moved him.

### III

Visitors to the monastery generally wandered awhile through the ancient

church and then climbed to the belfry, which offered a broad view over the adjacent countryside. On clear days, by staring hard, one could make out the distant blobs of white that marked the gubernia centre, and, merging with the horizon, the gleaming curves of the Dnieper.

The sun had already begun to sink when, leaving Maxim to rest on a little porch by one of the monastic cells, the rest of the company made their way to the foot of the bell-tower. In the arched entrance-way they found a young novice waiting to take them up—a slender figure, in a cassock and a high, peaked hat. He stood with his back to the door, his hand on the padlock that secured it, facing a little group of children who hung about, alert as so many frightened sparrows, just out of his reach. Clearly, there had been some clash between the novice and these lively youngsters. Most probably, to judge by his belligerent attitude and the hand he still kept on the lock, he had caught them hanging about the door, in the hope of slipping in when the gentlefolk went up, and had been trying to drive them away. An angry flush darkened his cheeks, contrasting sharply with the pallor of his skin.

There was something strange about the young novice's eyes. They did not seem to move at all. It was Anna Mikhailovna who first noticed this immobility of his gaze, and the peculiar expression of his face. Tremulously, she seized Evelina's hand.

The girl started.

"He's blind!" she whispered faintly.

"Hush," the mother answered. "And—do you notice?"

"Yes."

It was easy enough to notice—the novice's strange facial resemblance to Pyotr. The same nervous pallor, the same clear, but unmoving pupils, the same restless mobility of the eyebrows—starting at every sound, darting up and down as an insect's antennae will when it is frightened. The novice's features were coarser than Pyotr's, and his figure more angular; but that seemed only to emphasise the likeness. And when he broke into a heavy cough, and his hands flew to his sunken chest, Anna Mikhailovna stared at him in wide-eyed panic, as at some ghostly apparition.

When his fit of coughing had passed, the novice unlocked the door, but stood before it, blocking the way.

"No youngsters around?" he demanded hoarsely—and, throwing himself suddenly forward, shouted at the children, "Be off, then, curse you!"

A moment later, as the young people were filing past him into the tower, his voice sounded in their ears with a sort of honeyed pleading:

"Will there be a little something for the bell-ringer? Watch your step—it's dark, inside."

All the company gathered at the foot of the stairs. Anna Mikhailovna had been hesitating, only a few minutes before, at the thought of the steep, difficult climb; but now she followed the others in dumb submission.

The blind bell-ringer shut and locked the door. It grew very dark inside the tower, and some time passed before Anna Mikhailovna noticed the dim beam of light overhead, coming in through a diagonal slit in the thick stone wall. Cutting across the tower, the light cast a faint glow on the rough, dust-covered stones of the wall opposite.

The young people were already scrambling up the winding stairs, but Anna

Mikhailovna, who had hung back to let them pass, still lingered irresolutely at the bottom.

Shrill, childish voices sounded suddenly outside the tower.

"Let us in," they pleaded. "Please, Uncle Yegor! Be a good fellow!"

But the bell-ringer threw himself furiously against the door, beating with his fists on its iron sheathing.

"Be off with you, curse you!" he shouted hoarsely, choking with rage. "May the thunder strike you!"

"Blind devil!" several voices answered loudly; and there was a swift patter of bare feet, running off.

The bell-ringer stood listening a moment, then drew a quick, sharp breath.

"Perdition take you!" he muttered. "Will there never be an end? May the fever choke you all!"

And then, in an altogether different tone, vibrant with the despair that comes of suffering beyond endurance—

"Oh, Lord! Oh Lord, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"

Moving towards the stairs, he collided with Anna Mikhailovna, still hesitating at the very bottom.

"Who's this? What are you waiting for?" he demanded sharply—then added, more mildly, "That's all right. Don't be afraid. Here—take my arm."

And again, as they climbed the stairs, in the same offensively honeyed tone as in the doorway, he made his plea:

"Will there be a little something for the bell-ringer?"

Anna Mikhailovna fumbled in her purse, in the darkness, and handed him a note. He seized it swiftly. They had come up to the level of the narrow slit in the wall, and in the dim light she saw him press the money to his cheek and feel it carefully with his fingers. His pale face—so like her son's!—twisted suddenly, in the strange, faint light, in an expression of naive and greedy pleasure.

"Oh!" he cried. "Thanks, oh, thanks! Twenty-five rubles! And I thought you were fooling me, just making mock of the blind fellow. Some people do."

The poor woman's bee was wet with streaming tears. She brushed them hastily away and pushed on to overtake the others, whose voices and footsteps, far ahead, came echoing dully down the stairs to her—like the sound of falling water, heard through a stone wall.

The young people paused at one of the turnings, quite high up, where a narrow window admitted a little air and a tiny ray of light, very diffuse, but clearer than what came up from below. The wall here was smooth, and covered with inscriptions—for the most part, the signatures of people who had visited the belfry at one time or another.

Many of these names were familiar to the young Stavruchenkos, and each such discovery was hailed with jokes and laughter.

"Ah, but here's something of another sort," the student exclaimed, and read off slowly, from a tangled scrawl, "'Many start; few reach the goal.'" He laughed, and added, "I suppose that refers to this ascent."

"Twist it that way if you like," the bell-ringer said rudely, turning away; and his mobile eyebrows betrayed his tension. "There's a verse here, too—a little lower down. It wouldn't hurt you to read it."

"A verse? Where? There's no verse here."

"You're so sure, aren't you? But I tell you, there is. There's lots of things

hidden from you that have sight."

He moved down a step or two and passed his hand over the wall, just beyond the reach of the faint beam of daylight.

"Here it is," he said. "And a fine verse, too. Only you won't be able to read it without a lantern."

Pyotr moved to his side and passed a hand over the wall. In a moment he had found these grim lines, cut into the wall by someone now dead, perhaps, a hundred years and more:

*Forget not the hour of death,  
Forget not the judgement day.  
Forget not that life must end,  
Forget not Hell's flame for aye.*

"A merry Maxim!" the student commented—but, somehow the would-be joke fell flat.

"Don't like it, do you?" said the bell-ringer maliciously. "Well, you're still young, of course, only—who can tell? The hour of death steals on us like a thief in the night." In a somewhat different tone, he went on, "It's a fine verse. 'Forget not the hour of death, Forget not the judgement day.'" And, maliciously again, "Yes, and what comes to us then—there's the point of it all."

They went on up the stairs, and soon came out on the lower belfry platform. This was very high; but an opening in the wall disclosed another stairway, steeper and narrower than the first, which brought them to the upper platform, higher still. Here a delightful view spread out before them. The sun was sinking to the west, casting long shadows over the lowland; and the eastern sky was dark with heavy clouds. Off in the distance, the world lay dim and indistinct in the evening haze, except that, here and there, the slanting beams picked out some whitewashed peasant home from the blue shadows, or painted a window-pane in ruby red, or sparkled on the cross of some far belfry.

A hush fell over the little company. A breeze blew about them, fresh and pure—free, at this height, from any breath of earth. It played with the bell ropes, and with the bells themselves—making them quiver, now and again, with a faint, long-drawn metallic murmur that suggested to the ear vague, distant music, or perhaps a sighing deep in the bells' copper hearts. Peace and tranquillity breathed from all the quiet countryside.

But there was another reason, too, for the hush that had fallen on the belfry platform. Moved by some common instinct—by the sensation of height, and helplessness, most likely—the two blind youths had moved to the support of the corner pillars, and stood leaning against them, their faces turned to meet the gentle breeze.

And the strange likeness between them now caught every eye. The bell-ringer was a little elder. An ample cassock fell in heavy folds over his wasted frame; and his features were coarser, more roughly cut, than Pyotr's. There were other differences, also, to the searching eye. The bell-ringer was blond. His nose was a little hooked, and his lips were thinner than Pyotr's. His chin was framed in a short, curly beard, and a moustache was beginning to show on his upper lip. But—in the gestures, in the nervous fold of the lips, in the unceasing movement of the eyebrows, lay that amazing, that almost family likeness that makes so many

hunchbacks, too, resemble one another.

Pyotr's expression was somewhat the more peaceful. What in him was a look of habitual melancholy was intensified in the bell-ringer to bitterness—at times, to searing malice. At the moment, however, the bell-ringer too had a milder look—as though the softness of the breeze had smoothed the furrows from his forehead, and filled his soul with the tranquil peace that rose from the scene below, hidden as it was from his unseeing gaze. The twitching of his eyebrows was growing less and less.

Then, suddenly, his eyebrows flew up again, and Pyotr's too—as though both had heard some sound down in the valley, inaudible to all the others.

"Church bells," Pyotr said.

"That's St. Yegori's, fifteen versts from here," the bell-ringer returned. "They always ring for evening service half an hour before us. Do you hear it, then? I hear it, too. Most people don't."

Dreamily, he went on:

"It's fine, up here. On a holiday, specially. D'you ever hear me ringing?"

The question was put with naive vanity.

"Come and hear me, some day. Father Pamfili—you know Father Pamfili, don't you?—he got these two new bells here, specially for me."

He left the support of his pillar to stroke two small bells that time had not yet darkened like the others.

"Fine bells. The way they sing for you, the way they sing! Towards Eastertide, specially."

He reached out for the bell ropes and, with swift finger movements, set the two bells quivering melodiously. The tongues touched so lightly, though distinctly, that the ringing—clearly heard by all the company—could hardly have been audible at even the slightest distance from the belfry platform.

"And you should hear the big one—boo-oom, boo-oom, boom!"

His face was alight with childish pleasure; but even in his pleasure there was something sickly, pitiful.

"Father Pamfili—yes, he got the bells for me," he went on, with a sudden sigh, "but he won't get me a warm coat, not he. Stingy, he is. I'll catch my death, yet, up this belfry. It's so cold! And the autumn's worst of all."

He paused a moment, listening, then said:

"The lame fellow's calling, down below. It's time you were going."

Evelina, who had been watching him all this time as though bewitched, was the first to move.

"Yes, we must go," she said.

And they all turned to the stairs. The bell-ringer, however, did not move. And Pyotr, who had turned with the rest, stopped suddenly.

"Don't wait for me," he said imperiously. "I'll be down in a moment."

Soon the footsteps on the stairs died away. Only Evelina remained, a few steps down. Pressing close to the wall, she had let the others pass, and now stood waiting in breathless suspense.

The blind youths thought themselves alone. For an instant both stood motionless, in an awkward silence, listening.

"Who's that?" the bell-ringer demanded.

"It's me," Pyotr answered.

"You're blind too, aren't you?"

"Yes. And you—have you been blind long?"

"I was born that way. Roman, now—he helps me with the bells—he went blind when he was seven. Look here—can you tell night from day?"

"Yes."

"And so can I. I can feel the light coming on. Roman, he can't. But just the same, it's easier for him."

"Why?" Pyotr asked eagerly.

"Why? Don't you know why? He's seen the daylight. He's seen his mother. Understand? He goes to sleep at night, and

he can see her in his sleep. Only she's old now, and he still sees her young. Do you ever see your mother in your sleep?"

"No," Pyotr responded dully.

"Of course you don't. That only happens when a person goes blind, afterwards. But if you're born blind..."

Pyotr's face was shadowed sombrely, as though a storm-cloud had settled over him. The bell-ringer's eyebrows swept suddenly up over his unmoving eyes, in that expression of blind torment that Evelina knew so well.

"Try as you may, a person will sin sometimes, and complain. Oh Lord, our creator! Holy Virgin, mother of God! Let me see the light and the joy, just once, if it's only in my sleep!"

His face twisted, and he went on, with his former bitterness:

"But no, they won't do even that. Dreams come, sometimes, only—so faint, you can't remember them when you're awake."

He stopped suddenly, listening. His face turned pale, and a strange, convulsive movement distorted every feature.

"The imps are in," he said angrily.

And, true enough, childish shouts and footsteps were echoing up the narrow stairs, like the roar of an advancing flood. Then, for an instant, all was hushed again. Probably, the children had reached the lower platform, where their shouts flew out into the open. But at once the upper stairway was filled with clamour, and a merry crowd of children came racing up, past Evelina, to the bell platform. At the top step they paused a moment, then—one by one—slipped quickly through the doorway, where the blind bell-ringer had taken his stand, his face distorted with malice, striking out wildly at them with his fists.

A new figure appeared in the darkness of the stairway. This was evidently Roman. He had a broad, pock-marked face, expressive of the utmost good nature. His sunken eyes were veiled behind shut lids, but his lips were curved in a very kindly smile. He passed Evelina, still pressed against the wall, and moved on towards the platform. In the doorway, Yegor's flying fist collided with his neck.

"Yegor!" he exclaimed, in a deep, pleasant voice. "Brother! Raging again?"

They stood chest to chest now, feeling one another.

"Why'd you let the imps in?" Yegor demanded, in Ukrainian, his voice still loud with anger.

"Let them play," Roman returned good-humouredly. "God's little birds. Why do you scare them so? Hi, little imps! Where have you got to?"

The children, huddled at the corners of the platform, kept very still; but their eyes gleamed with mischief—and, a little, with fright.

Evelina, stealing noiselessly down the stairs, had already passed the lower platform when she heard Yegor's confident step coming down, and Pyotr's. The



next moment a burst of joyous shouts and laughter sounded on the upper platform, as the children rushed to throw their arms around Roman.

As the carriage drove slowly out at the monastery gates, the bells began to sound overhead. Roman was ringing for the evening service.

The sun had set, and the carriage rolled through darkened fields. The even, melancholy peals of the monastery bells floated after it through the blue evening shadows.

Very little was said on the way home. All that evening Pyotr kept away from the others, sitting alone in a far corner of the garden and making no response even to Evelina's anxious calls. Not until everyone had gone to bed did he go in, and feel his way to his room.

#### IV

There were times during the remaining days of their visit at Stavrukovo when Pyotr's earlier animation returned, and in his own way he seemed quite cheerful. He was greatly interested by the collection of musical instruments the elder of the two young Stavruchenkos had accumulated. Many of these were new to him, and he had to try them all—each with its own, individual voice, suited to the expression of its own peculiar shades of feeling. But something, clearly, was oppressing him; and these moments of cheerfulness seemed but brief flashes against a background of increasing gloom.

None of the company ever referred to the bell-tower. The whole excursion seemed forgotten, as though by tacit agreement. But it had affected Pyotr very deeply—that was quite evident. When he was alone—or even in company, in moments of silence, when there was no talk to occupy his mind—he would sink into thoughts of his own, that brought a bitter look into his face. True, it was a look he had often worn before; but now it seemed harsher, somehow, and—very reminiscent of the blind bell-ringer's.

At the piano, in his moments of least reserve, the quivering of the bells on the high tower came often into his music, and the long-drawn sighing deep in their copper hearts. And as he played, pictures that none of the company had heart to speak of would rise in their memories only too clearly. The sombre gloom of the winding stairs, and the slender figure of the bell-ringer; the consumptive flush on his cheeks, his malice, his bitter complaints. And then, the two blind youths, up on the bell platform—so alike in posture, in expression, in the darting of their eyebrows at every sound or movement. What all these years had seemed to Pyotr's friends an expression of his own, separate individuality now revealed itself to them as the common seal of darkness, lying in equal measure on all victims of its mysterious power.

"Look here, Anna," Maxim said to his sister a few days later, when they were back at home again, "this change that's come over our boy—it started after the trip we took to the monastery. Did anything out of the ordinary happen there, do you know?"

"Ah, it's all on account of that blind lad we met," Anna Mikhailovna answered, sighing.

She had already sent warm sheepskin coats to the monastery, and money, with a letter to Father Pamfili in which she begged him, so far as it was in his power, to ease the lot of the two blind bell-ringers. True, for all her gentle, kindly heart, she had forgotten Roman at first, and Evelina had had to remind her that there were two to be provided for. "Yes, yes, of course," she had answered Evelina; but her thoughts had obviously been centred on the one—Yegor. It was to him her heart went out in aching pity, not unmixed with a strange, superstitious feeling that in sending him this offering she might propitiate some unknown, but menacing force that was already advancing, casting its grim shadow over her son's life.

"What blind lad?" Maxim demanded, very much surprised.

"Why, the one in the belfry."

Maxim's crutch came down with an exasperated thump.

"Confound these legs of mine! You forget, Anna, that I don't go clambering up belfry stairs any longer. If one could only get a little sense out of a woman! Evelina—see if you can't tell me, then, just what it was that happened in the belfry."

"The bell-ringer who took us up was blind," Evelina began. Her voice was very low. She, too, had grown paler in these last few days. "Well, and...."

She stumbled, and stopped. Anna Mikhailovna buried her face in her hands, trying to hide the tears that wet her flaming cheeks.

"Well, and—he looked very like our Pyotr," Evelina continued.

"And no one said a word of this to me! But was there nothing else? Because after all, Anna"—and Maxim's voice, as he turned to his sister, softened in gentle reproach—"there's really no such great tragedy in that."

"Ah, it's just more than I can bear," Anna Mikhailovna returned, barely audibly.

"What's more than you can bear? That some blind lad should resemble your son?"

At this point Evelina caught Maxim's eye, and, seeing her expression, he fell silent. Anna Mikhailovna soon left the room; but Evelina remained, busy, as always, with her embroidery. For a moment, the room was very still.

"Is there more to the story, then?" Maxim asked finally.

"Yes. Pyotr didn't leave the belfry with the rest. He told Aunt Anna"—that had always been Evelina's name for Anna Mikhailovna—"to go down with the others, but he didn't follow her. He stayed behind on the platform, with the blind bell-ringer. Well, and—I stayed, too."

"To eavesdrop?"

The question came almost mechanically—token of Maxim's long years of pedagogy.

"I—I couldn't go away," Evelina answered slowly. "They talked to one another like...."

"Like comrades in misfortune?"

"Yes. As the blind to the blind. And then Yegor asked Pyotr whether he ever saw his mother in his sleep. And Pyotr said no, he didn't. And Yegor—he doesn't, either. But there's another blind bell-ringer there, Roman, and he does see his mother. She's an old woman now, but he still sees her young."

"So. And what more?"

After a moment's hesitation, Evelina raised her eyes to meet Maxim's. Their blue depths were dark with suffering and struggle.

"That other one, Roman—he's kind-hearted, and he seems at peace with life. His face is sad, but there's no malice in it. He wasn't blind from birth. But Yegor..." she paused, then hurried on evasively, "He suffers dreadfully."

"Say what you mean, child," Maxim interrupted impatiently. "He's embittered, then, this Yegor—is that it?"

"Yes. He cursed some children who came up the stairs, and struck out at them with his fists. Whereas Roman—the children seemed to love him."

"Bitter, and resembling Pyotr," Maxim said thoughtfully. "I see, I see."

Again Evelina hesitated, but finally went on—faintly, as though at the cost of painful inner struggle:

"In feature, they weren't really alike at all. It was more a likeness of expression. Until they met, it seems to me, Pyotr had more the look of Roman. But now it's more and more the look of that Yegor. And then, you see, what I'm afraid of is ... I mean, I begin to think...."

"What is it you're afraid of, my dear child? My clever child? Come here to me."

Maxim spoke with a tenderness so unusual in him that the tears sprang to Evelina's eyes. He lifted a hand to stroke her silky hair.

"What is it you think, then, child? Tell me your thoughts. For you *can* think—I see that now."

"I think ... I think he feels, now, that anyone born blind is bound to be ill-natured. And he's persuaded himself, I'm afraid, that he must be so too, that there's no escaping it."

"So. I see." Maxim's caressing hand dropped heavily to his knee. "Get me my pipe, will you, my dear? There it is, on the window-sill."

Soon a blue cloud of tobacco-smoke began to form around him, and through the smoke his voice came, grumbling to himself.

So. So. No, that was no good at all.... He had been wrong; his sister had been right. People could really yearn and suffer for lack of things they had never in their lives experienced. And now that instinct had been reinforced by conscious realisation, both would keep working in the same direction. What an unfortunate encounter! Though after all, as the saying goes, the truth will always out—if not one way, then another.

He could hardly be seen, now, for the swirling smoke. New thoughts and new decisions were ripening in his square-hewn head.

## V

Winter came. A heavy snow fell, blanketing roads and fields and villages. At the manor, all was white. The trees in the garden were laden with fluff, as though they had put out new foliage to replace the withered green. In the drawing-room, a bright blaze crackled in the fire-place; and everyone coming in from out of doors brought with him a whiff of freshness, an odour of new-fallen snow.

In other years Pyotr, too, had felt the poetry of this first winter day. There was that very special stir of energy that always came with his awakening, on such a morning. And there were all the familiar signs of winter—the stamping of feet in

the kitchen, when people came in from the cold; and the creak-of the doors; and the tiny currents of nipping air that scampered all about the house; and the crunching footsteps out in the yard, and the new, wintry sensation that came with every outdoor sound. And then, when he drove out with Iochim into the open fields—what a delight it was to hear the sleigh runners gliding over fresh snow, and the sudden cracklings that sounded in the woods beyond the river, and echoed back from fields and road.

But now the first white day brought with it only a deeper melancholy.

Pyotr pulled on high boots, that morning, and wandered off to the old mill. His feet sank deep at every step in the untrodden snow.

The garden was very still. The frozen soil, so softly carpeted, made no sound underfoot. But the air today was sensitive to sound as at no other time of the year, carrying over great distances, clear and true, the cawing of a crow, or the blow of an axe, or even the light snapping of a twig. Now and again it brought to Pyotr's ears a strange, ringing sound, as though of glass, rising quickly to a thin, high note, then dying away at what seemed a tremendous distance. This was off at the village pond. The peasant boys were throwing stones to test the thin layer of ice that had formed on the water overnight.

The manor pond had also frozen over. But the river where the old mill stood still flowed between its snow-piled banks and murmured in the sluices, though its current was slower now, and its waters darker.

Pyotr went up to the dam and stood there, listening. The sound of the water had changed. It was heavier, and all its melody was gone. It seemed to reflect the cold that lay, like the hand of death, over all the countryside.

And Pyotr's heart, too, was filled with a chilly gloom. The dark feeling that had stirred somewhere in the utmost depths of his being, on that blissful summer evening—a vague sense of apprehension, dissatisfaction, questioning—that feeling had now grown until it usurped all the room in his soul that had once belonged to joy and happiness.

Evelina was away. She had been gone since the late autumn. Her parents had planned a visit to their "benefactress", old Countess Potocka, and the Countess had written them to be sure and bring their daughter. Evelina had not wished to go, but had yielded in the end to her father's insistence, which Maxim, too, had supported with considerable energy.

Standing now by the old mill, Pyotr tried to gain again the fullness, the harmony of the emotions he had once experienced here. Did he miss her?—he asked himself. Yes, he did. Yet, though he felt her absence, her presence too—he realised—no longer brought him happiness. It brought, instead, a new and poignant suffering, which he felt somewhat less keenly when she was away.

Only so short a while ago, every detail of that evening had been vivid in his memory—her words, the silky feel of her hair, the beating of her heart against his breast. And out of these details he had created for himself a concept of her that filled him with happiness. But now a something shapeless, amorphous—as were all the phantoms that haunted his sightless imagination—had breathed its noxious breath upon this concept, and shattered it. And he could no longer integrate his recollections into that completeness and harmony which, at the beginning, had filled him to overflowing. There had been a particle, a tiny sand-grain, of something alien lurking from the very outset somewhere deep behind his feeling; and now this particle had so expanded that it seemed to obliterate all else—as a

grim storm-cloud obliterates the horizon.

The sound of her voice no longer rang in his ears. The vivid memory of that blissful evening was gone, leaving behind it a gaping emptiness. And something within him, something confined in the deepest depths of his soul, was struggling desperately to fill this emptiness.

He wanted to see her.

A dull aching—that there had always been, of course; but it had long remained no more than a vague, half-realised discomfort, much like a toothache that is not yet acute.

Since his encounter with the blind bell-ringer, consciousness, realisation, had made of this dull ache a piercing pain.

He loved her. And he wanted to see her.

Such was his mood, as day passed after day at the hushed, snow-blanketed manor.

There were times when the moments of happiness rose vividly again in memory, and Pyotr's face would clear, and his melancholy seem to lift. But this never lasted long; and in the end even these moments of comparative brightness were marred by a haunting uneasiness—as though he feared that they, too, would disappear, never to come again. His mood, in consequence, was very uneven, flashes of passionate tenderness and nervous animation alternating with long days of heavy, unrelieved dejection. The piano wept in the dark drawing-room, of an evening, in deep, almost morbid melancholy; and Anna Mikhailovna, listening, shrank with the pain each sobbing note brought to her heart.

In time, one of the worst of her fears materialised. The dreams that had agitated Pyotr's childhood began to visit him again.

Coming into his room when he was still asleep, one morning, Anna Mikhailovna noticed that he seemed strangely uneasy. His eyes were half-open, gleaming dully from under the drooping lids; his face was pale, and his expression troubled.

She paused in the doorway, looking anxiously into his face, trying to guess what might cause his uneasiness. But she saw only that his agitation was swiftly growing, his features tensing more and more in an expression of straining effort.

Then, suddenly, something seemed to move—or had she imagined it?—over the bed. It was the light, a narrow beam of brilliant winter sunlight, slanting in from the window to strike the wall just over Pyotr's head. Again, as she watched, the sunbeam seemed to quiver—and the bright spot on the wall slipped lower down. And again it slipped, and again. Slowly, barely perceptibly, the light was approaching Pyotr's half-opened eyes. And as it approached, his tension grew more and more marked.

Anna Mikhailovna stood motionless in the doorway, unable to tear her eyes from that blazing spot of light. As in a nightmare, she seemed to see its movements—step by quivering step—closer and closer to her son's defenceless eyes. Pyotr grew paler and paler, his drawn face set in that expression of painful effort. Now the yellow light touched his hair. Now its warm glow reached his forehead. The mother strained forward, in an instinctive effort to protect her child. But—as in a nightmare—her feet were rooted to the floor, and she could not move. Pyotr's eyes opened wide, now; and when the light touched his sightless pupils, his head rose from the pillow as though to meet it. A spasm passed over his lips—a smile, perhaps; or perhaps a moan. And again his face set in its look of

straining effort.

But now, at last, Anna Mikhailovna managed to break free of the paralysis that had gripped her limbs. She hurried across the room and laid her hand on Pyotr's forehead. He started, and woke.

"Is that you, Mother?" he asked.

"Yes."

He sat up. For a moment, he seemed only partially conscious. But then the fog seemed to lift, and he said,

"I've had a dream again. I have them often, now. Only—I can never remember them, afterwards."

## VI

Pyotr's mood was changing, his deep, but quiet melancholy giving way to fits of nervous irritability. At the same time, his remarkable delicacy of sense perception was noticeably increasing. His keen hearing became keener still; and his whole being responded to the stimulus of light—responded even in the evening hours. He always knew whether the night was dark or moonlit; and often, after all the family had gone to bed, he would walk about the manor grounds for hours, sunk in wordless melancholy, yielding himself to the mysterious influence of the moon's dreamy, fantastic light. Always, at such times, his pale face would turn to follow the fiery globe in its passage across the sky; and its cold beams would be reflected in his eyes.

But when the moon began to set, growing steadily larger as it approached the earth; when in the end, heavily veiled in crimson mist, it slowly sank beyond the snowy horizon, a softer, more peaceful look would come into his face, and he would turn back to the house and go indoors.

What occupied his thoughts those long nights, it would be hard to say. To all who have tasted of the joys and the torment of knowledge and of understanding, there comes at a certain age—to some in greater, to some in lesser degree—a period of spiritual crisis. Pausing at the threshold of life's activities, people look about them, attempting each to understand his place in Nature, his own significance, his relations with the outer world. This is a difficult time, and he is fortunate whose vitality is of such sweeping power as to carry him through it without violent upheaval. For Pyotr, too, there was this added difficulty, that to the universal query—"What do we live for?" he must add his own: "What, being blind, do I live for?" And again, thrusting in upon the very process of such sombre reflection, there was another factor: the all but physical pressure of a need that could not be satisfied. And all this had its effect upon his character.

The Yaskulskys got back shortly before Christmas. Evelina ran at once to the manor, and burst into the drawing-room, bubbling over with excited joy, to throw her arms around Anna Mikhailovna, and Pyotr, and Maxim. Snow sparkled in her hair, and a gust of frosty freshness came with her into the room. Pyotr's face lit up, at first, with the sudden happiness of her coming; but it soon darkened again, in almost deliberate melancholy.

"I suppose you think I love you," he said gruffly, that same day, when he and

Evelina were alone together.

"I'm sure of it," she returned.

"Well, but I'm not sure of it at all," he declared morosely. "No, not at all. I used to think I loved you more than anything on earth. Only now I'm not sure I do at all. You'd do best to drop me, before it's too late, and follow the voices that call you away, out into life."

"Why must you torment me so?"

The gentle reproach broke out against her will.

"Torment you?" Again that look of deliberate, selfish melancholy came to his face. "Yes, so I do. Torment you. And I'll go on tormenting you, all the rest of my life. I can't possibly not torment you. I didn't know, before. But now I know. And it's no fault of mine. The hand that took away my sight, even before I was born—that same hand put this ill nature into me. We're all of us like that—all of us, born blind. You'd do best to drop me—yes, all of you, turn away from me, because I can only return you suffering for your love. I want to see. Can't you understand? I want to see, and I can't rid myself of that want. If I could only see Mother, and Father, and you, and Maxim—if I could see you once, I'd be satisfied. I'd remember. I'd have that memory to carry with me through the darkness, all the years to come."

Again and again, with remarkable persistency, he returned to this idea. When he was alone, he would pick up now one object, now another, and examine it with infinite care—then, laying it aside, sit pondering over the qualities that he had found in it. He pondered, too, over those distinctions which he was able faintly to perceive, through the medium of touch, between bright surfaces of different colours. But it was only as differences, as comparatives, void of all concrete sense significance, that all these things could reach his receptive centres. Even a sunlit day, now, differed to him from dark night only in this—that the brilliant daylight, penetrating by mysterious, untraceable channels to his brain, intensified his painful seekings.

## VII

Coming into the drawing-room, one day, Maxim found Pyotr and Evelina there. Evelina seemed upset, and Pyotr's face was gloomy. He seemed to feel an organic need, nowadays, to search out new and ever new sources of suffering with which to torment both himself and others.

"He keeps asking," Evelina told Maxim, "what people mean when they talk of the bells 'ringing red'.\* And I can't seem to explain it properly." [*Red ringing—a term used in Russian in speaking of the pealing of church bells on a holiday.*]

"What's the trouble, then?" Maxim asked Pyotr curtly.

Pyotr shrugged.

"Nothing in particular. Only—if sounds have colour, and I can't see it, why, that means I can't perceive even sound in all its fullness."

"You're talking childish nonsense," Maxim returned, sharply now. "You know perfectly well that's not true. Your perception of sound is fuller than ours by far."

"Well, but what do people mean, then, when they say that? There must be

some meaning to it."

Maxim thought a moment.

"It's just a comparison," he answered finally. "Sound is motion, if you get down to it, and so is light. And that being so, of course, they're bound to have certain traits in common."

"What traits, then?" Pyotr persisted. "This 'red' ringing—what's it like?"

Again Maxim stopped to think before answering.

He might go into the science of vibration. But that, he realised, could not satisfy the question in Pyotr's mind. And, too, whoever it was that had first described sounds by adjectives of light and colour had probably had no knowledge of the physical nature of either; yet, clearly, he had felt a resemblance. What resemblance?

A new idea began to take shape in Maxim's mind.

"I don't know whether I can make it altogether clear to you," he said. "But anyway—this 'red' ringing, to start with. You've heard it time and again, in the city, on church holidays, and you know it just as well as I do. It's simply that the expression isn't used in our parts."

"Wait! Wait a minute!"

Hastily, Pyotr threw open the piano and began to play. Against a background of a few low tones, his skilful fingers set the higher notes, more vivid and mobile, leaping and skipping in endless permutations; and the room echoed to just that joyous, high-pitched clamour of bells that fills the air on a church holiday.

"There!" Maxim said. "That's very like. And none of us could master it better than you have, though we do have eyes to see. Well, and anything red that I may look at, if it has a large enough surface, affects me in much the same way as this 'red' ringing. There's the same feeling of restlessness, of a sort of resilient agitation. The very redness seems to be always changing. The depth, the intensity of the colour slip into the background; and on the surface, now here, now there, you seem to catch fleeting glimpses of lighter tones, swiftly rising and as swiftly disappearing. And all this affects the eyes very powerfully—my eyes, at any rate."

"How true, how true!" Evelina broke in excitedly. "I get exactly the same feeling. I can never look long at our red table-cloth."

"Nor can some people endure the holiday bells. Yes, I believe I'm right in drawing such a parallel. And while we're at it, the comparison can be carried further. There's another sort of chiming, that people often call 'crimson'. And there's a colour, too, a shade of red, that's called by that same name—'crimson'. Both the sound and the colour are very close to red, only—deeper, milder, more even. Sleigh bells, carriage bells—while they're still new, their tinkling is liable to be sharp, uneven, unpleasant to the ear; but when they've been long in use they 'ring into their own', as lovers of their music put it, and attain this 'crimson' chime. With church chimes, too, you can get the same effect by skilful combination of several of the smaller bells."

Pyotr began to play again—the merry jingle of bells as the post speeds by.

"No," Maxim said. "I should call that too red."

"Oh! I know now."

And the music became more even. Sinking from the high pitch at which it had begun, so vivid and lively, it grew gradually softer, lower, deeper. Now it was the chiming of a set of bells hung under the bow of a Russian *troika*, speeding away down a dusty road into the distant evening haze—quiet, even, marred by no



sudden janglings; fainter and fainter, until the last notes died away in the calm stillness of the countryside.

"That's it!" Maxim said. "You've grasped the difference perfectly. Yes—your mother tried, once, to explain colour to you by means of sound. You were only a youngster then."

"I remember that. Why did you make us give it up? Perhaps I might have learned to understand."

"No," Maxim returned slowly. "Nothing could have come of that. Though it does seem to me that, if you get down deep enough inside us, the effects produced by sound impressions and by colour impressions are really very much alike. We may say of a person, for instance, that he sees the world through rose-coloured spectacles. By that we mean that he is buoyantly, optimistically inclined. Much the same mood can be induced by the right choice of sound impressions. Both sound and colour, I should say, serve as symbols for the same inner impulses."

Maxim paused to light his pipe, watching Pyotr closely as he puffed. Pyotr sat very still, clearly waiting eagerly. For a moment, Maxim hesitated. Ought he to go on? But the thought passed, and he began again, slowly, abstractedly, as though carried on independently of his will by the strange current his thoughts had taken.

"And, you know—the queerest thoughts come to my mind. Is it mere chance, say, that our blood is red? Because, you see, whenever an idea takes shape in your brain; or when you have those dreams of yours, that set you shivering after you wake, and force the tears to your eyes; or when a man seems all ablaze with passion—at all such times, the blood comes pulsing faster from the heart, racing up in glowing streams to the brain. Well, and—it's red, our blood."

"It's red, our blood," Pyotr repeated musingly. "Red, and hot."

"Yes. Red, and hot. And so, you see—the colour red, and the sounds we may also call 'red', bring us brightness, animation. They bring, too, the conception of passion, which people also call 'hot', and 'fiery', and 'seething'. And another interesting thing: artists often speak of reddish tones as tones of warmth."

Maxim puffed awhile at his pipe, surrounding himself with blue clouds of smoke.

"If you swing your arm up over your head and down again," he continued, "you'll describe a more or less limited semicircle. Well, then, try to imagine your arm much longer—indefinitely long. Then, if you could swing it so, you'd be describing a semicircle infinitely far away. That's where we see the vault of the skies above us. Infinitely far away. A vast hemisphere, even and endless and blue. When it has that aspect, our spirit is calm, unclouded. But when the sky is overcast with clouds—shifting, uneasy, of undefined and changing outline—then our spiritual calm, too, is broken by a feeling of indefinable unrest. You feel that, don't you, when a storm-cloud is approaching?"

"Yes. Something seems to disturb my very soul."

"Exactly. And so we wait for the deep blue to show again, from behind the clouds. The storm passes, but the blue sky remains. We know that well, and so we can endure the storm. There, then: the sky is blue. And the sea, when it's calm. Your mother's eyes are blue, and so are Evelina's."

"Like the sky!" Pyotr said, with sudden tenderness. "Like the sky. Blue eyes are considered a sign of spiritual clarity. And now, take green. The soil, of itself, is black. And the tree-trunks, in early spring, are black too, or sometimes grey. But then the spring sun sends down its light and heat, and warms these dark surfaces.

And the green comes creeping out to cover the blackness. Green grass, green leaves. They must have light and warmth, these green growths; but not too much light, or too much warmth. That's what makes green things so pleasant to the eye. Greenness—it's warmth intermingled with a dewy coolness. It arouses a feeling of tranquil satisfaction, of health—but not by any means of passion; not of the state that people call joyous rapture. Have I made it at all clear to you?"

"N-no, not very. But go on, anyway. Please."

"Well, there's no helping it, I suppose. Let's go on, then. As the summer heat increases, the green growths seem overburdened, as it were, with the very fullness of their vital powers. The leaves begin to droop. And if the heat isn't tempered by the cool damp of rain, the green colour may fade entirely. But then, as autumn draws on, the fruit takes shape, gleaming daily redder among the weary foliage. The fruit is reddest on the side where it receives most light. It seems to concentrate within itself all the vital force, all the summer passion of growing things. So that here too, as you see, red is the colour of passion. And it's used as the symbol of passion. Red is the colour of rapture, of sin, of fury, of wrath and vengeance. The great masses of the people, when they rise in revolt, seek to express the feeling that moves them in the red of their banner, carried like wind-tossed flame over their march. But—again, I haven't made it clear."

"That doesn't matter. Go on."

"Late autumn. The fruit has matured. It falls from the tree, lies helpless on the ground. It dies, yes, but the seed within it lives; and within this seed, potentially, the new plant already lives, with its luxuriant new leafage, and its new fruit to come. The seed has fallen to the ground. And over it, the sun hangs low and cold. And cold winds blow, driving cold clouds before them. Not only passion—all of life is gently, imperceptibly stilled. More and more, the black earth shows bare through its green coverings. The very blue of the sky turns cold. And then, one day, the snow-flakes in their millions come floating down over this subdued and quiet, this widowed earth. And soon the earth lies smooth, and white, and even. White—that's the colour of the frosty snow; the colour of the loftiest of the clouds, floating up there in the chill, unattainable heights; the colour of the highest mountain peaks, majestic, but barren. White is the emblem of passionless purity, of cold, high sanctity, the emblem of a future life of the spirit, incorporeal. As to black..."

"That I know," Pyotr broke in. "No sound, no movement. Night."

"Yes, and for that reason black is the emblem of grief and death."

Pyotr shuddered.

"Death!" he repeated dully. "You said it yourself. Death. And for me, all the world is black. Always, everywhere."

"That's not true," Maxim returned heatedly. "You know sound, and warmth, and movement. You live among loving friends. There are many who would give up their gift of sight for the blessings you so unreasonably despise. But you're too full of your own selfish grief..."

"And if I am?" Pyotr's voice was tense with passion. "Of course I'm full of it. How else? I can't get away from it. It's always with me."

"If you could get it into your head that there are troubles in the world a hundred times worse than yours; if you could realise that this life you lead, the security, the love you've always enjoyed—that in comparison with such troubles your life is very heaven, why..."

"No, no!" Pyotr broke in wrathfully, on the same high, passionate note as before. "That isn't true! I'd change around with the most miserable beggar, because he's happier than me. All this solicitude for the blind—there's no sense in it at all. It's a great mistake. The blind—they should be put out on the roads and left there, to beg their living. Yes, I'd be happier if I were a beggar. When I woke in the morning, I'd have my dinner to think of. I'd keep counting the coppers that were given me, and I'd have the worry, always—would there be enough? And then, if there was enough, I'd have that to be happy about. And then there would be the night's lodging to worry over. And if I didn't get enough coppers, I'd suffer with hunger and cold. And with all that I'd never have an empty moment, and ... well, and no hardship could ever make me suffer as I suffer now."

"Couldn't it, then?"

Maxim's voice was cold. Evelina, pale and subdued, saw his eyes turn to her in a look of sympathy and deep concern.

"No, never. I'm convinced of that," Pyotr returned stubbornly, with a new harshness in his tone. "I often envy Yegor now, up in his belfry. Waking up, in the early morning, I think of him—especially if it's a windy, snowy day. I think of him, climbing the belfry stairs..."

"In the cold," Maxim put in.

"Yes, in the cold. He shivers, and coughs. And over and over he curses Father Pamfili, because he won't get him a warm coat for the winter. And then he takes hold of the bell ropes, though his hands are so freezing cold, and rings the bells for morning service. And he forgets he's blind. Because anyone would feel the cold, up there, blind or not. But me—I can't forget I'm blind, and..."

"And you've no one to curse for anything."

"Yes, I've no one to curse. There's nothing to fill my life, nothing but this blindness. There's no one I can blame for it, of course, but—any beggar's happier than me."

"Perhaps he is," Maxim said coldly. "I won't argue about that. In any case, if life had been harder on you, perhaps you'd be easier to live with."

And, with another pitying glance at Evelina, he took up his crutches and stumped heavily out of the room.

Pyotr's spiritual unrest intensified after this talk, and he was absorbed more and more in his agonising mental labour.

There were moments of success, when his groping spirit stumbled upon the sensations Maxim had described to him, and they merged with his own space impressions. The earth stretched, dark and melancholy, away and away into the distance. He tried to survey it all, but it had no end. And over it hung another infinitude. Memory brought back the roll of thunder, and with it a feeling of breadth, of vastness. The thunder would pass, but something would remain, up there—something that filled the soul with a sensation of majesty and serenity. At times this feeling would achieve almost concrete definition—at the sound of Evelina's voice, or his mother's; for were not their eyes "like the sky"? But then abruptly—destroyed by too great definition—the concept that had been rising, seeking shape, from the far depths of his imagination would disappear.

They tormented him, all these dim imaginings; and they brought no shade of satisfaction. He pursued them with such straining effort—yet they remained always so obscure, bringing him nothing but disappointment. They could not assuage the dull ache that accompanied the painful seekings of his afflicted spirit,

its vain strivings to regain the fullness of perception life had denied it.

## VIII

Spring had come.

In a little town some sixty versts from the manor, in the opposite direction from Stavrukovo, there was a wonderworking Catholic icon, the miraculous powers of which had been assessed with some precision by people versed in matters of this kind. Anyone who came on foot to honour this icon on its fete day was entitled to twenty days' "remission"—in other words, to complete absolution in the other world from any sin or crime committed here on earth in the course of twenty days. And so every year, on a certain day of early spring, the little town would come to life. The old church, decked out for its fete in the first green branches, the first flowers of spring, would send the joyous clamour of its bell echoing over all the town. There would be a constant rumble of carriage wheels, and the streets and squares, even the fields far round about, would be thronged with pilgrims come on foot. Nor were all of these pilgrims Catholics. The fame of the icon had travelled very far, and it attracted anguished and distressed of the Orthodox faith as well—city folk, in their majority.

The flood of people on the church road, when the great day came, was vast and colourful this year as always. To an observer looking down on the scene from one of the near-by hilltops, the pressing crowds might well have seemed one living whole: some gigantic serpent stretched out along the road, inert and still—only its lustreless, varicoloured scales stirring and shifting with its heavy breathing. And to either side of the teeming roadway stood the beggars, two endless lines of beggars, stretching out their hands for alms.

Leaning heavily on his crutches, Maxim moved slowly down one of the streets leading away to the outskirts of the town. Pyotr walked beside him, with Iochim.

They had left behind them the clamour of the crowd, the cries of the Jewish peddlers, the rumble of wheels—all the hubbub and uproar that rolled from end to end of the church road. At this distance, it merged into one vast, dull wave of sound—now rising, now falling, never ceasing. Here too, however, though the throng was less, there was a constant tramp of feet, and murmur of voices, and rustling of wheels on the dusty road. Once, a whole train of ox-carts came squeaking past and turned into a near-by side-street.

The day was cold, and Pyotr, following passively wherever Maxim turned, kept drawing his coat closer about him. Absently, he listened to the hubbub in the streets; but his mind was busy, even here, with those painful seekings that now occupied him constantly.

And then, through this selfish preoccupation, a new sound caught his ear—caught it so forcefully that he threw up his head, and stopped abruptly.

They had reached the edge of the town, where the last rows of houses gave way to long lines of fencing and plots of wasteland, and, finally, the street widened into a broad highway, stretching away between open fields. At this widening of street into road, pious hands had in some past day set up a stone pillar bearing an icon and a lantern. The lantern, true, was never lit; but it swung,

creaking, on its hook in every wind. And at the foot of this pillar huddled a group of blind beggars, crowded out of all the better stands by less handicapped competitors. They held each a wooden alms-bowl in his hands; and from time to time one or another of them would raise his voice in a plaintive chant:

"A-alms for the bli-ind! Alms, in Christ's name!"

It was cold, and the beggars had been there since morning. There was nothing to shelter them from the fresh wind that blew in from the fields. They could not even move about, like others, with the crowd, to warm their limbs. And their voices, raised by turn in their dreary chant, were burdened with unreasoning, inarticulate complaint—with the misery of bodily suffering and of utter helplessness. After the first few notes their cramped chests would fail them, and the chant would fade into a dismal mumbling, that died away in a long, shivering sigh. But even these last, faintest notes, all but drowned in the clamour of the streets, brought to any human ear that caught them a shocked, almost incredulous realisation of the immensity of suffering behind them.

Pyotr stopped abruptly, his face twisted with pain—as though the beggars' wretched wailing were some grim auricular spectre, rising in his path.

"What are you frightened at?" Maxim asked him. "What you hear are those same fortunate souls you were so envious of, not long ago. Blind beggars, asking alms. They're feeling the cold a bit, of course. But, according to you, that should only make them happier."

"Come away from here!" Pyotr cried, seizing Maxim's arm.

"Ah, you want to come away, then! And is that your only response to other people's suffering? No, stop awhile. I've been wanting to have a serious talk with you, and this is a very good place for what I have to say. Well, then—you keep grumbling because times have changed, and blind youths aren't cut down any more in battle by night, like that young *bandurist*—Yurko. You chafe because you've no one to curse like Yegor in his belfry. And in your heart you do curse, too—curse your own people, because they've deprived you of the bliss life brings these beggars. And—on my honour!—you may be right. Yes, on the honour of an old soldier, any man has the right to choose his own way in life. And you're a man already. So that—listen, now, to what I have to say. If you make up your mind to remedy our mistake; if you decide to flout your fate, to throw up all the privileges life has given you from the cradle, and try the lot of these unfortunates—I, Maxim Yatsenko, promise you my respect, and help, and support. Do you hear me, Pyotr? I wasn't much older than you are now, when I threw myself into fire and battle. My mother wept for me, just as yours will for you. But, the devil take it all, I feel I had the right to do as I did, just as you have that right now. Once in a lifetime, fate gives any man the chance to choose. And so, you need only say the word...."

Maxim broke off and, turning towards the beggars, shouted,

"Fyodor Kandiba! Are you there?"

"Here I am," one of the cracked voices replied. "Is that you, Maxim Mikhailovich?"

"Yes. Come where I told you, a week from today."

"I'll be there," the beggar answered, and once more took up the endless chant.

Maxim's eyes were flashing.

"There you'll meet a man," he said, "who really has the right to grumble against fate, and against his fellow-men. Perhaps you'll learn from him to shoulder your burden, instead of—"

"Come, come away from here," Iochim broke in. He tugged at Pyotr's arm, with an angry look at Maxim.

"Oh, no!" Maxim cried wrathfully. "There's no one yet passed blind beggars by without throwing them a copper, if he can't give more. Do you mean to run off without doing even that? Blaspheme—that's all you know how to do! It's easy to envy other people's hunger, when your own belly's full!"

Pyotr threw back his head as though a whip had struck him. Pulling out his purse, he moved quickly towards the huddled group of beggars. When his groping stick touched the feet of the nearest of them, he bent over him, feeling for the wooden alms-bowl, and carefully laid his money on the pile of coppers in it. Several passers-by stopped to stare at this handsome youth, so clearly of the gentry, fumblingly giving alms to a blind beggar who as fumblingly received them.

But Maxim turned sharply away, and stumped off up the street. His face was flushed, his eyes blazing. He had been seized, evidently, by one of those violent fits of anger that had been so well known to all his acquaintances in his youth. And he was no longer a pedagogue, weighing and choosing every word. He was a man impassioned, giving full rein to his hot wrath. Only later, after a sidelong glance at Pyotr, did his anger seem to subside. Pyotr was white as chalk. His brows were drawn sharply together, and his face betrayed his deep agitation.

The cold wind set the dust whirling about them as they walked on though the streets of the little town. Behind them, they could hear the blind beggars squabbling over the money Pyotr had given.

## IX

Perhaps it was simply the result of a chill; perhaps, the culmination of a lengthy period of spiritual crisis. Perhaps it was a combination of the two. Whatever the cause, the following day found Pyotr ill in his room, in a burning fever. He lay tossing on his bed, his face distorted. At times, he seemed to listen for something; at times, tried to spring up, as though to hurry off somewhere. The old doctor called in from the town felt his pulse, and talked of the cold spring winds, Maxim, frowning sombrely, avoided his sister's eyes.

The fever was persistent. When the crisis came, Pyotr lay for several days almost without sign of life. But youth is resilient; and he overcame his illness.

One morning Anna Mikhailovna noticed a ray of bright spring sunlight slanting across the sick-bed.

"Pull the curtain to," she whispered to Evelina. "This sunlight—I don't trust it!"

But when Evelina got up to go to the window, Pyotr spoke suddenly—the first words he had uttered in all these weary days:

"No, don't. Please. Leave it as it is."

Joyfully, they bent over him.

"Do you hear, then? Do you know me?" the mother asked.

"Yes," he replied, and paused. He seemed trying to remember something. Then, faintly, he exclaimed, "Ah, that's it!"—and tried to sit up. "That Fyodor—"

has he come?"

Evelina and Anna Mikhailovna exchanged anxious glances. Anna Mikhailovna laid her fingers across Pyotr's lips.

"Hush, hush," she whispered. "It's bad for you to talk."

He seized her hand, and kissed it tenderly. Tears rose to his eyes. He let them flow, and they seemed to relieve him.

For some days he was very thoughtful and quiet; but a nervous tremor passed over his face whenever Maxim's footsteps sounded in the hall. Noticing this, the women asked Maxim to keep away from the sick-room. But one day Pyotr himself asked to see him, and alone.

Coming up to the bed, Maxim took Pyotr's hand in his and pressed it gently.

"Well, then, dear boy," he began, "it seems I owe you an apology."

Pyotr's hand returned his uncle's pressure.

"I understand now," he said, very quietly. "You've taught me a lesson, and I'm grateful for it."

"Lesson be damned!" Maxim returned, with an impatient gesture. "It's an awful thing, being a teacher too long. Turns a man's brains into sawdust. No, I wasn't thinking of lessons, that day. I was simply angry, terribly angry, with myself as well as you."

"Then you really wanted me to?..."

"What matter what I wanted? And who can tell what a man wants, when he loses his temper? I wanted you to get some idea of other people's troubles, and think a little less about your own."

Neither spoke for a moment.

"That chant of theirs," Pyotr said finally. "I never once forgot it, all that time I was out of my head. And that Fyodor you spoke to—who was he?"

"Fyodor Kandiba. An old acquaintance of mine."

"Was he ... born blind, too?"

"Worse. His eyes were burnt out in the wars."

"And now he goes about chanting that song?"

"Yes, and supports a whole brood of orphaned nephews by it. And has always a cheery word, or a joke, for everyone he meets."

"Really?" Pyotr asked, and went on musingly, "Well, but, say what you will, there's something mysterious about it all. And I'd like..."

"What would you like, dear boy?"

A few minutes later footsteps sounded in the hall, and Anna Mikhailovna opened the door. Looking anxiously into their faces, she could see only that both seemed moved by their conversation, which broke off abruptly with her appearance.

The fever once conquered, Pyotr's young body recovered swiftly. In another two weeks he was up and about.

He was greatly changed. Even his features seemed altered, no longer strained by those spasms of bitter inner suffering that had formerly been so frequent. The shock he had experienced was now followed by a state of quiet musing, tinged with a gentle melancholy.

Maxim feared that this might be only a temporary change, a slackening of nervous tension resulting from physical weakness.

Then, one day, as evening was gathering, Pyotr sat down to the piano, for the first time since his illness, and began to improvise, as he so liked to do. His music

breathed a quiet, gentle sadness, very much in tune with his own mood. And then, all at once, through this quiet melancholy burst the first notes of the blind beggars' chant. The melody disintegrated, and Pyotr stood up abruptly, his face distorted, his eyes bright with tears. He was not yet strong enough, it seemed, to cope with so forceful an impression of life's dissonance as had come to him in the shape of this cracked, heart-rending plaint.

Again, that evening, Maxim and Pyotr talked long together, alone. And afterwards—the days drew into weeks, and the quiet weeks went by, and there was no change in Pyotr's peaceful mood. The too bitter, too selfish consciousness of his own misfortune which had made his spirit sluggish all those last months, and fettered his native energy, seemed now to have lost its foothold, to have yielded place to other feelings. He set himself aims again, laid plans for the future. Life was reviving within him, and his wounded spirit was putting forth fresh shoots, much as a tree that has been ailing bursts into new life at the first bracing breath of spring.

That very summer, it was decided, Pyotr was to go to Kiev for serious study. A famed pianist was to be his teacher. And only his uncle was to accompany him. On this both Pyotr and Maxim insisted.

## X

A britzka turned off the road into the steppe, one warm evening in July, to stop for the night at the edge of a near-by wood. As dawn was breaking, two blind beggars came up the road. One of them was turning the handle of a primitive instrument: a hollow cylinder in which, as the handle was turned, a wooden shaft rubbed against taut strings, producing a monotonous and melancholy droning. In a voice somewhat nasal and cracked with age, but still pleasant to the ear, the other beggar was chanting a morning prayer.

A little further down the road, a train of carts was rumbling along, loaded with sun-dried fish. The carters heard someone hail the two blind beggars up ahead, and saw them turn off the road and approach some gentlefolk who were lounging on a rug beside a britzka drawn up at the edge of the wood. Some time later, as the carters were watering their horses at a wayside well, the beggars caught up with them again. But there were three of them now. The leader, tapping the road before him with his long staff at every step, was an old man with long, flowing grey hair and a drooping, snow-white moustache. His forehead was covered with old sores, evidently the mark of severe burns, and his eye sockets were empty. A thick cord, slung over his shoulder, stretched back to the second beggar's belt. This second was a tall, sturdy fellow, badly pock-marked, with a sullen, ill-natured look. Like the old man, he strode along with an accustomed swing, his sightless face uplifted as though seeking guidance in the sky. The third of the beggars was a youth, dressed in stiff new clothing of the sort that peasants wear. His face was pale, and there was a hint of fright in his expression. His step was hesitant. How and again he would stop, and seem to listen for some sound behind him—bringing up his companions with a jerk by the long cord that bound them all together.

They made steady progress. By ten o'clock the wood had fallen far behind—no



more than a faint blue streak on the horizon. Around them stretched the open steppe. Later, a hum of sun-warmed telegraph wires announced a highway ahead, intersecting the dusty road. Coming out on the highway, they turned off along it to the right. Almost at once they heard a pounding of horses' hoofs behind them, and the dry sound of iron wheels on the metallated roadway. They stopped, and drew up at the side of the road. Again the wooden shaft began to turn, grinding out its melancholy drone, and the cracked old voice took up the chant:

"A-arms for the bli-ind..."

And as the chant continued, the youngest of the beggars joined the droning accompaniment with a soft thrumming of strings.

A coin clinked at old Kandiba's feet, and the sound of the wheels on the roadway stopped. The giver, evidently, wanted to be sure that his offering was not lost. Kandiba quickly found the coin. As he fingered it, his face lit with satisfaction.

"God save you," he said, turning again to face the vehicle in the road.

It was a britzka, occupied by a grey-haired gentleman of broad, square-hewn figure. A pair of crutches lay propped against the seat.

He looked intently at the youngest of the beggars—this old gentleman in the britzka. The youth was pale, but calm—though a moment before, at the first notes of Kandiba's chant, his fingers had plucked sharply, nervously at the strings, as though attempting to drown out the dismal plaint.

The britzka rolled off again. But, as long as the beggars were in sight, the old gentleman kept looking back at them.

Soon the sound of its wheels died away in the distance. Returning to the roadway, the beggars continued on their way.

"You bring us luck, Yuri," Kandiba said. "And you play right well, too."

A little later, the pock-marked beggar asked,

"For God, is it, you're going to Pochayev? On a vow?"

"Yes," the youth answered, very low.

"Think you'll get your sight back, eh?" This was said with a bitter smile.

"Some people do," Kandiba put in mildly.

"Never met any such, all the years I've been on the road," the pock-marked beggar returned morosely.

They fell silent, tramping steadily on. The sun rose higher and higher, silhouetting against the straight white line of the highway the dark figures of the beggars and, far ahead, the britzka that had passed them by. Further on, the highway forked. The britzka took the road that led to Kiev; but the beggars turned off the highway again, to wander on by country roads towards Pochayev.

Soon afterwards a letter reached the manor. Maxim wrote, from Kiev, that he and Pyotr were both well and that things were working out just as they had wished.

And the three beggars tramped on. All three, now, strode along with the same accustomed swing. Kandiba, in the lead, tapping the road before him with his staff at every step. He knew all the roads and lanes, and always reached the bigger villages in time for fair days or holidays. People would gather to hear the beggars' play, and the coins would come clinking into old Kandiba's outstretched cap.

The youthful beggar's hesitancy, his look almost of fright, soon disappeared. Each step he took along the roads brought to his ears new sounds—the sounds of the vast, unknown world for which he had exchanged the sleepy, lulling murmur

of the quiet manor. His unseeing eyes opened ever wider. His chest expanded. His keen hearing grew keener still. Gradually, he came to know his companions—kindly Kandiba and sullen Kuzma. He tramped, with them, in the wake of long trains of squeaky peasant carts; spent many a night by blazing fires in the open steppe; heard the clamour of markets and fairs; stumbled upon human grief and misfortune—and not only among the blind!—that made his heart contract in bitter pain; and, strange as it might seem, found room now in his soul for all these new impressions. The beggars' chant no longer set him trembling. And, as day followed day in this great, roaring sea of life, his painful inner striving for the unattainable subsided and grew still. His sensitive ear caught every new song and melody, and when he began to play a look of quiet pleasure would soften even Kuzma's gloomy features. As they approached Pochayev, their little band grew steadily in number.

\* \* \*

Late that autumn, when the roads were already heaped high with snow, the manor folks' young son came suddenly home, in the company of two blind beggars. The whole household was taken by surprise. He had been to Pochayev, people said, to pray to the icon of the Virgin there for healing. It was a vow that he had taken.

Be that as it might, his eyes remained clear, yet unseeing, as they had always been. But his soul—that, unquestionably, had found healing in his wanderings. It was as though some fearful nightmare had vanished for ever from the manor.

When Maxim, who had been writing all this time from Kiev, finally got home, Anna Mikhailovna greeted him with the cry,

"I'll never forgive you for this, never!"

But the look in her eyes gave the lie to her stern words.

In the long autumn evenings Pyotr told them the story of his wanderings. And when he sat down to the piano, in the twilight hours, the house would be filled with new melodies, such as he had never been heard to play before.

The trip to Kiev was postponed to the next year. And the thoughts of all the family were absorbed by Pyotr's plans and hopes for the future.

## Chapter Seven

### I

That same autumn Evelina declared to her parents her unalterable decision to be married to the blind youth "from the manor". Her mother began to cry; but her father knelt before the icons and, after prayer, declared that such, to his mind, was God's very will in the matter.

They were married, and Pyotr's life was filled with a new, quiet happiness. And yet—behind this happiness, somewhere, lurked a haunting, undefined anxiety, of which he was never entirely free. Even at his most radiant moments there was a tinge of doubting sadness in his smile—as though he could not feel that his happiness was really justified, or really lasting. The news that he was, perhaps, to be a father brought a look of sudden apprehension to his face.

Still, the life that he now led left him no leisure for his former fruitless searchings. His days were occupied by serious study, and by growing anxiety for his wife and for the child that was to come. There were moments, too, when all else was crowded back by rising memories of the blind beggars' mournful chant. At such times he would go off to the village, where a new home had been built for Fyodor Kandiba and his pock-marked nephew. Kandiba would take up his *kobza*; or perhaps they would simply talk, of one thing and another; and, gradually, Pyotr's thoughts would grow calmer, and his plans regain their power to inspire.

He had become less sensitive to light, and the striving to apprehend it, which had cost him such inner effort, had subsided. The deep-lying forces that had been driving him now slumbered, and he no longer stirred them by the conscious effort to fuse heterogeneous sensations into some one understandable whole. The place that these fruitless endeavours had once occupied within him was now filled by vivid memories, and lively hopes. And yet—who knows?—perhaps this very peace that had come into his soul had the effect of promoting the subconscious workings of his inner being, of helping the formless, disparate impressions that reached his nerve centres in their quest for synthesis, for fusion. For does not our mind often, when we are asleep, easily mould ideas and concepts such as it could never achieve by conscious effort?

### II

The room was very still—the same room in which Pyotr had been born. Only an infant's wailing cry disturbed the hush. The child was now a few days old, and Evelina was recovering rapidly. But Pyotr, all these days, had seemed weighed heavily down by a foreboding of approaching sorrow.

The doctor arrived. He took up the baby, and laid it down close to the window. Jerking aside the curtain, he let a bright ray of sunlight into the room. Then he bent over the child, his instruments in his hands. Pyotr sat with bowed head, depressed and seemingly apathetic, as he had been all these last days. The doctor's proceedings seemed to mean nothing to him at all—as though he knew beforehand what the result would be.

"He's surely blind," he said, again and again. "He should never have been born."

The young doctor made no reply, but went on quietly with his tests. And then, at length, he put down his ophthalmoscope, and his voice sounded calmly, confidently through the room:

"The pupils contract. The child sees, no doubt about it."

Pyotr started, and stood up quickly. Clearly, he had heard the doctor's pronouncement. But—such was the expression on his face—he hardly seemed to have understood it. He stood motionless, one trembling hand on the window-sill for support. His upturned face was very pale, his features set.

Until that moment he had been in the power of an extraordinary agitation—a state in which, though he was hardly conscious of his own being, his every nerve and fibre was alive and quivering with expectation.

He was conscious of the darkness that surrounded him. He distinguished it, sensed its presence around him, its unbounded compass. It pressed in upon him, and his imagination strained to encompass it, to contend with it. He placed himself in its path, as though to shield his child against this vast, undulating sea of impenetrable blackness.

This was the mood that held him while the doctor was making his silent preparations. He had been uneasy all these months, of course, but—until now—some faint remnant of hope had always persisted. Now his taut nerves, strained to the breaking point, were seized by a grim, agonising fear; while hope shrank, and hid itself away deep in the inmost recesses of his heart.

And suddenly those words, "The child sees"—and everything was changed: fear vanquished, hope sprung into certainty. It was as though swift light had broken on the tense expectancy that filled his being. It was a tremendous upheaval, a cataclysm, invading his shadowed soul as the lightning flashes through dark night—dazzling, vivid. They seemed to burn themselves a blazing path into his brain—those few short words the doctor had pronounced. A spark flashed, somewhere deep within, and lit the inmost recesses of his spirit. He began to tremble. His whole being quivered, as a taut string quivers when you strike it.

And then, after this lightning flash—then, suddenly, strange visions rose to his eyes, that had lost their power to see even before his birth. Was this light, or was it sound? He did not know. It was sound come to life, sound that had shape, sound flowing in rays, like light. Sound that glowed like the high vault of the heavens; that rolled majestically, like the fiery ball of the sun; that rippled and undulated like the murmurings of the green steppeland; that swayed like the boughs of the dreamy beeches in the garden. That was the first instant; and it was the confused impressions of that instant, only, that remained afterwards in his memory. All that followed was forgotten. But he declared, insisted, afterwards that in those instants that followed he had seen.

What it was he saw, and how, and whether he really saw at all, there can be no telling. Many said it was impossible. But he insisted firmly that it was so—that he

had seen the earth and the sky; had seen his mother, his wife, Maxim.

For several seconds he stood there, very still, his upturned face alight. He had so strange a look that all the others turned to stare at him, and a deep hush fell over the room. To all of them, watching him, it seemed that this was not he, standing by the window—not the Pyotr they knew so well. It was someone else, a stranger, unfamiliar. The Pyotr they knew had vanished. A veil of mystery, descending suddenly, had hidden him away.

And, in its shelter, for a few brief instants, he was alone—alone with this mystery that had come to him.

Afterwards, he retained only the feeling of a need allayed, and—the strange conviction that, in these instants, he had seen.

Might this possibly have been true?

Might it be that all those vague, dim perceptions or sensations of light that, in his one-time moments of quivering tension, of reaching-out to the bright light of day, had filtered their way by unknown paths to the dark recesses of his brain—that these clouded sensations now, in his moment of ecstasy, rose up, somehow, before his brain in utter clarity?

And the blind eyes saw the blue heavens, and the bright sun, and the limpid river, and the hillock by it, where he had wept so often in his childhood. And then the old mill, and the starlit nights when he had suffered such torment, and the silent, melancholy moon. Yes, and the dusty country roads, and the straight line of the highway; the trains of carts, catching the sunbeams in their iron wheels, and the colourful crowds among which he had sung the chant of the blind beggars.

Or was it, perhaps, wild visions that rose in his brain—of mountains such as the world has never seen, and fantastic plains, and wondrous trees that swayed on the banks of phantom rivers, in the bright rays of a phantom sun—the sun that had been seen for him by countless generations of his forebears?

Or was there, perhaps, no more than unformed sensations, in those depths of the dark brain of which Maxim had spoken—those depths where light and sound produce like effects of merriment or sadness, joy or anguish?

And what he later recalled—was it simply the music that had sounded, for an instant, in his soul—a vibrant harmony, intertwining in one all the impressions life had ever brought him, all his feeling of Nature, all his ardent love?

Who can say?

He remembered only the coming of this mystery, and its going—that final instant, when sounds and shapes merged and blended, clashing, quivering, trembling, fading, as a taut string trembles into silence: at first high and loud, then soft, softer, barely audible; like something slipping down an infinite incline, down and away into utter darkness.

And then it was gone, and all was still.

Darkness, and silence. There were still dim visions, trying to take shape in the blackness. But they had neither shape, nor sound, nor colour. Only—somewhere far, far down, the clear modulations of a scale cut through the darkness. And then they, too, slipped down into the infinity of space.

Then it was that the life in the room suddenly reached his ears, in its accustomed forms of sound. He seemed to wake from sleep. But still he stood there, radiant and joyful, pressing his mother's hand, and Maxim's.

"What came over you?" his mother asked him anxiously.

"Nothing. Only ... it seems to me ... I saw you, all of you. I ... I'm not dreaming,

am I?"

"And now?" she asked breathlessly. "What now? Do you remember? Will you remember?"

Pyotr sighed heavily.

"No," he said, with some effort. "No. But that doesn't matter. Because ... because I've given all that to him, now. To the boy. And ... and to all...."

He staggered, and lost consciousness. His face grew very pale. But it was still alight with the happiness that comes when a great need has been allayed.

## EPILOGUE

Three years passed.

A large audience gathered, at the Kiev "Contracts", [*The "Contracts", let us remind the reader, was the local term for the Kiev Fair.*] to hear a remarkable new musician. Blind, he was; yet rumour carried the most fantastic tales of his musical talent, and of his history. He came of a wealthy family, it was said, but a band of blind beggars had stolen him from his home when he was still a child, and he had wandered with them about the countryside until, one day, a famed professor had chanced upon him and discovered his wonderful talent. Or—as others told the tale—he had left home of his own will, and joined this beggar band for some romantic reason. Be that as it might, the hall was full to capacity, and the takings (appropriated to charitable purposes unknown to the audience) complete.

Deep silence fell as a young man came forward on the platform. His face was pale, his eyes dark and beautiful. It would have been hard to believe that he was blind, had not those dark eyes been so fixed, and had he not been guided by a fair-haired young lady—his wife, as many said.

"No wonder he makes such an impression," some sceptic whispered, in the hall. "His very looks are so dramatic!"

That was so. The musician's pale face, with its look of meditative attention, his unmoving eyes, his entire aspect aroused the expectation of something unusual, something altogether out of the ordinary.

They are all lovers of their native melodies—our southern folk; and even this miscellaneous "Contracts" audience was carried away from the first by the musician's tremendous sincerity. He played no set piece—simply what came into his heart and mind. And through this improvisation breathed his vivid feeling for Nature, his sensitive ties with the direct sources of folk melody. Plastic, melodious, rich in colour, the music came pouring forth into the hall—now swelling into a majestic anthem, now sinking into gentle, pensive melancholy. At times, it would be a thunderstorm, rolling across the heavens, echoing out into space; at times—the soft steppe, swaying the grass on some old burial mound, bringing dim dreams of times long past.

When the last note died away, a storm of frenzied applause broke over the huge hall. And the blind musician sat with bowed head, listening wonderingly to the clamour. But then, once more, he raised his hands and brought them down upon the keys. In an instant, the din was hushed.

It was at this point that Maxim came in. Searchingly, he looked into the faces

of the audience. And in all these myriad faces he found the same emotion, the same eager, burning gaze, fixed on the blind musician.

Maxim sat listening—and waiting. He knew so well, more than any other in the hall, the human drama that lay behind this music. At any moment, he feared, this improvisation that poured so freely, with such compelling power, from the musician's very soul, might break off suddenly, as it had so often in the past, on a note of strained and painful questioning, revealing some new wound in the player's heart. But the music continued, rising, strengthening, ever fuller and more powerful, complete master of the welded, tensely listening crowd.

And, as Maxim sat listening, he began to distinguish more and more clearly a something very familiar in the music.

Yes, that was it. The clamour of the street. A great wave rolling, rolling—bright, thunderous, alive—to break, sparkling into a thousand separate sounds; now swelling, rising, now sinking again into a distant, but incessant murmur—calm, unimpassioned, cold, indifferent.

And suddenly Maxim's heart contracted. Again, as in the past, a moan had broken into the music.

A moan broke in, and filled the hall, and died away. And again came the clamour of life, sounding ever clearer, brighter, stronger—mobile, sparkling, joyous, full of light.

No, this was not the old moan of private, selfish grief, of blind suffering and torment. Tears rose to Maxim's eyes. And he saw tears in the eyes of those around him.

"He's learned to see. Yes, that's the truth. He's learned to see," Maxim whispered to himself.

Through lively, vivid melodies, joyous, carefree, unrestrained as the wind in the steppes; through the sweeping, manifold din of life; through folk songs, wistful or solemn, there came again and again, with increasing urgency and power, a new, soul-rending note.

"So, so, dear boy," Maxim silently approved. "Overtake them in the hour of merriment and rejoicing."

Another moment—and the blind beggars' chant hung alone—all-powerful, all-absorbing—over the vast hall, over the spellbound throng.

"Alms for the blind.... Alms, in Christ's name."

But this was no mere plea for alms, no pitiful wail, drowned in the din of the streets. It carried all that it had held for Pyotr in those past days when he had fled from the piano, with distorted features, at its sound—unable to endure its bitter pain. Now, he had conquered this pain in his soul; and he conquered the hearts of all these people by the power of its truth, profound, appalling. It was black night against the background of bright day, a reminder of sorrow amid the very fullness of joy.

It was as though a thunderbolt had broken over the throng. Every heart trembled, as though the musician's swift fingers were pulling at its strings. The music ceased—but the people sat unmoving. A death-like silence filled the hall.

"Yes, he's learned to see," Maxim told himself, bowing his head. "In place of the old suffering—blind, selfish, not to be allayed—he carries now in his soul a true knowledge of life. He has come to know other people's sorrows, and other people's joys. He's learned to see, and he'll be able, now, to remind the fortunate of the less fortunate."

And the old soldier's head bowed lower still. He, too, then, had done his work in this world. He had not lived in vain. That was the message that the music bore him—this powerful, soul-commanding music, filling the hall, ruling the throng.

.....  
Such was the debut of the blind musician.

*1886-1898*