

III

Razumov, thus left to himself, took the direction of the gate. But on this day of many conversations, he discovered that very probably he could not leave the grounds without having to hold another one.

Stepping in view from beyond the lodge appeared the expected visitors of Peter Ivanovitch: a small party composed of two men and a woman. They noticed him too, immediately, and stopped short as if to consult. But in a moment the woman, moving aside, motioned with her arm to the two men, who, leaving the drive at once, struck across the large neglected lawn, or rather grass-plot, and made directly for the house. The woman remained on the path waiting for Razumov's approach. She had recognized him. He, too, had recognized her at the first glance. He had been made known to her at Zurich, where he had broken his journey while on his way from Dresden. They had been much together for the three days of his stay.

She was wearing the very same costume in which he had seen her first. A blouse of crimson silk made her noticeable at a distance. With that she wore a short brown skirt and a leather belt. Her complexion was the colour of coffee and milk, but very clear; her eyes black and glittering, her figure erect. A lot of thick hair, nearly white, was done up loosely under a dusty Tyrolese hat of dark cloth, which seemed to have lost some of its trimmings.

The expression of her face was grave, intent; so grave that Razumov, after approaching her close, felt obliged to smile. She greeted him with a manly hand-grasp.

"What! Are you going away?" she exclaimed. "How is that, Razumov?"

"I am going away because I haven't been asked to stay," Razumov answered, returning the pressure of her hand with much less force than she had put into it.

She jerked her head sideways like one who understands. Meantime Razumov's eyes had strayed after the two men. They were crossing the grass-plot obliquely, without haste. The shorter of the two was buttoned up in a narrow overcoat of some thin grey material, which came nearly to his heels. His companion, much taller and broader, wore a short, close-fitting jacket and tight trousers tucked into shabby top-boots.

The woman, who had sent them out of Razumov's way apparently, spoke in a

businesslike voice.

"I had to come rushing from Zurich on purpose to meet the train and take these two along here to see Peter Ivanovitch. I've just managed it."

"Ah! indeed," Razumov said perfunctorily, and very vexed at her staying behind to talk to him "From Zurich--yes, of course. And these two, they come from...."

She interrupted, without emphasis--

"From quite another direction. From a distance, too. A considerable distance."

Razumov shrugged his shoulders. The two men from a distance, after having reached the wall of the terrace, disappeared suddenly at its foot as if the earth had opened to swallow them up.

"Oh, well, they have just come from America." The woman in the crimson blouse shrugged her shoulders too a little before making that statement. "The time is drawing near," she interjected, as if speaking to herself. "I did not tell them who you were. Yakovlitch would have wanted to embrace you."

"Is that he with the wisp of hair hanging from his chin, in the long coat?"

"You've guessed aright. That's Yakovlitch."

"And they could not find their way here from the station without you coming on purpose from Zurich to show it to them? Verily, without women we can do nothing. So it stands written, and apparently so it is."

He was conscious of an immense lassitude under his effort to be sarcastic. And he could see that she had detected it with those steady, brilliant black eyes.

"What is the matter with you?"

"I don't know. Nothing. I've had a devil of a day."

She waited, with her black eyes fixed on his face. Then--

"What of that? You men are so impressionable and self-conscious. One day is like another, hard, hard--and there's an end of it, till the great day comes. I came over for a very good reason. They wrote to warn Peter Ivanovitch of their arrival. But where from? Only from Cherbourg on a bit of ship's notepaper. Anybody could have done that. Yakovlitch has lived for years and years in America. I am the only

one at hand who had known him well in the old days. I knew him very well indeed. So Peter Ivanovitch telegraphed, asking me to come. It's natural enough, is it not?"

"You came to vouch for his identity?" inquired Razumov.

"Yes. Something of the kind. Fifteen years of a life like his make changes in a man. Lonely, like a crow in a strange country. When I think of Yakovlitch before he went to America--"

The softness of the low tone caused Razumov to glance at her sideways. She sighed; her black eyes were looking away; she had plunged the fingers of her right hand deep into the mass of nearly white hair, and stirred them there absently. When she withdrew her hand the little hat perched on the top of her head remained slightly tilted, with a queer inquisitive effect, contrasting strongly with the reminiscent murmur that escaped her.

"We were not in our first youth even then. But a man is a child always."

Razumov thought suddenly, "They have been living together." Then aloud--

"Why didn't you follow him to America?" he asked point-blank.

She looked up at him with a perturbed air.

"Don't you remember what was going on fifteen years ago? It was a time of activity. The Revolution has its history by this time. You are in it and yet you don't seem to know it. Yakovlitch went away then on a mission; I went back to Russia. It had to be so. Afterwards there was nothing for him to come back to."

"Ah! indeed," muttered Razumov, with affected surprise. "Nothing!"

"What are you trying to insinuate" she exclaimed quickly. "Well, and what then if he did get discouraged a little...."

"He looks like a Yankee, with that goatee hanging from his chin. A regular Uncle Sam," growled Razumov. "Well, and you? You who went to Russia? You did not get discouraged."

"Never mind. Yakovlitch is a man who cannot be doubted. He, at any rate, is the right sort."

Her black, penetrating gaze remained fixed upon Razumov while she spoke, and

for a moment afterwards.

"Pardon me," Razumov inquired coldly, "but does it mean that you, for instance, think that I am not the right sort?"

She made no protest, gave no sign of having heard the question; she continued looking at him in a manner which he judged not to be absolutely unfriendly. In Zurich when he passed through she had taken him under her charge, in a way, and was with him from morning till night during his stay of two days. She took him round to see several people. At first she talked to him a great deal and rather unreservedly, but always avoiding all reference to herself; towards the middle of the second day she fell silent, attending him zealously as before, and even seeing him off at the railway station, where she pressed his hand firmly through the lowered carriage window, and, stepping back without a word, waited till the train moved. He had noticed that she was treated with quiet regard. He knew nothing of her parentage, nothing of her private history or political record; he judged her from his own private point of view, as being a distinct danger in his path.

"Judged" is not perhaps the right word. It was more of a feeling, the summing up of slight impressions aided by the discovery that he could not despise her as he despised all the others. He had not expected to see her again so soon.

No, decidedly; her expression was not unfriendly. Yet he perceived an acceleration in the beat of his heart. The conversation could not be abandoned at that point. He went on in accents of scrupulous inquiry--

"Is it perhaps because I don't seem to accept blindly every development of the general doctrine--such for instance as the feminism of our great Peter Ivanovitch? If that is what makes me suspect, then I can only say I would scorn to be a slave even to an idea."

She had been looking at him all the time, not as a listener looks at one, but as if the words he chose to say were only of secondary interest. When he finished she slipped her hand, by a sudden and decided movement, under his arm and impelled him gently towards the gate of the grounds. He felt her firmness and obeyed the impulsion at once, just as the other two men had, a moment before, obeyed unquestioningly the wave of her hand.

They made a few steps like this.

"No, Razumov, your ideas are probably all right," she said. "You may be valuable--very valuable. What's the matter with you is that you don't like us."

She released him. He met her with a frosty smile.

"Am I expected then to have love as well as convictions?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You know very well what I mean. People have been thinking you not quite whole-hearted. I have heard that opinion from one side and another. But I have understood you at the end of the first day...."

Razumov interrupted her, speaking steadily.

"I assure you that your perspicacity is at fault here."

"What phrases he uses!" she exclaimed parenthetically. "Ah! Kirylo Sidorovitch, you like other men are fastidious, full of self-love and afraid of trifles. Moreover, you had no training. What you want is to be taken in hand by some woman. I am sorry I am not staying here a few days. I am going back to Zurich to-morrow, and shall take Yakovlitch with me most likely."

This information relieved Razumov.

"I am sorry too," he said. "But, all the same, I don't think you understand me."

He breathed more freely; she did not protest, but asked, "And how did you get on with Peter Ivanovitch? You have seen a good deal of each other. How is it between you two?"

Not knowing what answer to make, the young man inclined his head slowly.

Her lips had been parted in expectation. She pressed them together, and seemed to reflect.

"That's all right."

This had a sound of finality, but she did not leave him. It was impossible to guess what she had in her mind. Razumov muttered--

"It is not of me that you should have asked that question. In a moment you shall see Peter Ivanovitch himself, and the subject will come up naturally. He will be curious to know what has delayed you so long in this garden."

"No doubt Peter Ivanovitch will have something to say to me. Several things. He may even speak of you--question me. Peter Ivanovitch is inclined to trust me

generally."

"Question you? That's very likely."

She smiled, half serious.

"Well--and what shall I say to him?"

"I don't know. You may tell him of your discovery."

"What's that?"

"Why--my lack of love for...."

"Oh! That's between ourselves," she interrupted, it was hard to say whether in jest or earnest.

"I see that you want to tell Peter Ivanovitch something in my favour," said Razumov, with grim playfulness. "Well, then, you can tell him that I am very much in earnest about my mission. I mean to succeed."

"You have been given a mission!" she exclaimed quickly.

"It amounts to that. I have been told to bring about a certain event."

She looked at him searchingly.

"A mission," she repeated, very grave and interested all at once. "What sort of mission?"

"Something in the nature of propaganda work."

"Ah! Far away from here?"

"No. Not very far," said Razumov, restraining a sudden desire to laugh, although he did not feel joyous in the least.

"So!" she said thoughtfully. "Well, I am not asking questions. It's sufficient that Peter Ivanovitch should know what each of us is doing. Everything is bound to come right in the end."

"You think so?"

"I don't think, young man. I just simply believe it."

"And is it to Peter Ivanovitch that you owe that faith?"

She did not answer the question, and they stood idle, silent, as if reluctant to part with each other.

"That's just like a man," she murmured at last. "As if it were possible to tell how a belief comes to one." Her thin Mephistophelian eyebrows moved a little. "Truly there are millions of people in Russia who would envy the life of dogs in this country. It is a horror and a shame to confess this even between ourselves. One must believe for very pity. This can't go on. No! It can't go on. For twenty years I have been coming and going, looking neither to the left nor to the right.... What are you smiling to yourself for? You are only at the beginning. You have begun well, but you just wait till you have trodden every particle of yourself under your feet in your comings and goings. For that is what it comes to. You've got to trample down every particle of your own feelings; for stop you cannot, you must not. I have been young, too--but perhaps you think that I am complaining-eh?"

"I don't think anything of the sort," protested Razumov indifferently.

"I dare say you don't, you dear superior creature. You don't care."

She plunged her fingers into the bunch of hair on the left side, and that brusque movement had the effect of setting the Tyrolese hat straight on her head. She frowned under it without animosity, in the manner of an investigator. Razumov averted his face carelessly.

"You men are all alike. You mistake luck for merit. You do it in good faith too! I would not be too hard on you. It's masculine nature. You men are ridiculously pitiful in your aptitude to cherish childish illusions down to the very grave. There are a lot of us who have been at work for fifteen years--I mean constantly--trying one way after another, underground and above ground, looking neither to the right nor to the left! I can talk about it. I have been one of these that never rested.... There! What's the use of talking.... Look at my grey hairs! And here two babies come along--I mean you and Haldin--you come along and manage to strike a blow at the very first try."

At the name of Haldin falling from the rapid and energetic lips of the woman revolutionist, Razumov had the usual brusque consciousness of the irrevocable. But in all the months which had passed over his head he had become hardened to the experience. The consciousness was no longer accompanied by the blank dismay and the blind anger of the early days. He had argued himself into new

beliefs; and he had made for himself a mental atmosphere of gloomy and sardonic reverie, a sort of murky medium through which the event appeared like a featureless shadow having vaguely the shape of a man; a shape extremely familiar, yet utterly inexpressive, except for its air of discreet waiting in the dusk. It was not alarming.

"What was he like?" the woman revolutionist asked unexpectedly.

"What was he like?" echoed Razumov, making a painful effort not to turn upon her savagely. But he relieved himself by laughing a little while he stole a glance at her out of the corners of his eyes. This reception of her inquiry disturbed her.

"How like a woman," he went on. "What is the good of concerning yourself with his appearance? Whatever it was, he is removed beyond all feminine influences now."

A frown, making three folds at the root of her nose, accentuated the Mephistophelian slant of her eyebrows.

"You suffer, Razumov," she suggested, in her low, confident voice.

"What nonsense!" Razumov faced the woman fairly. "But now I think of it, I am not sure that he is beyond the influence of one woman at least; the one over there--Madame de S--, you know. Formerly the dead were allowed to rest, but now it seems they are at the beck and call of a crazy old harridan. We revolutionists make wonderful discoveries. It is true that they are not exactly our own. We have nothing of our own. But couldn't the friend of Peter Ivanovitch satisfy your feminine curiosity? Couldn't she conjure him up for you?"--he jested like a man in pain.

Her concentrated frowning expression relaxed, and she said, a little wearily, "Let us hope she will make an effort and conjure up some tea for us. But that is by no means certain. I am tired, Razumov."

"You tired! What a confession! Well, there has been tea up there. I had some. If you hurry on after Yakovlitch, instead of wasting your time with such an unsatisfactory sceptical person as myself, you may find the ghost of it--the cold ghost of it--still lingering in the temple. But as to you being tired I can hardly believe it. We are not supposed to be. We mustn't, We can't. The other day I read in some paper or other an alarmist article on the tireless activity of the revolutionary parties. It impresses the world. It's our prestige."

"He flings out continually these flouts and sneers;" the woman in the crimson

blouse spoke as if appealing quietly to a third person, but her black eyes never left Razumov's face. "And what for, pray? Simply because some of his conventional notions are shocked, some of his petty masculine standards. You might think he was one of these nervous sensitives that come to a bad end. And yet," she went on, after a short, reflective pause and changing the mode of her address, "and yet I have just learned something which makes me think that you are a man of character, Kirylo Sidorovitch. Yes! indeed--you are."

The mysterious positiveness of this assertion startled Razumov. Their eyes met. He looked away and, through the bars of the rusty gate, stared at the clean, wide road shaded by the leafy trees. An electric tramcar, quite empty, ran along the avenue with a metallic rustle. It seemed to him he would have given anything to be sitting inside all alone. He was inexpressibly weary, weary in every fibre of his body, but he had a reason for not being the first to break off the conversation. At any instant, in the visionary and criminal babble of revolutionists, some momentous words might fall on his ear; from her lips, from anybody's lips. As long as he managed to preserve a clear mind and to keep down his irritability there was nothing to fear. The only condition of success and safety was indomitable will-power, he reminded himself.

He longed to be on the other side of the bars, as though he were actually a prisoner within the grounds of this centre of revolutionary plots, of this house of folly, of blindness, of villainy and crime. Silently he indulged his wounded spirit in a feeling of immense moral and mental remoteness. He did not even smile when he heard her repeat the words--

"Yes! A strong character."

He continued to gaze through the bars like a moody prisoner, not thinking of escape, but merely pondering upon the faded memories of freedom.

"If you don't look out," he mumbled, still looking away, "you shall certainly miss seeing as much as the mere ghost of that tea."

She was not to be shaken off in such a way. As a matter of fact he had not expected to succeed.

"Never mind, it will be no great loss. I mean the missing of her tea and only the ghost of it at that. As to the lady, you must understand that she has her positive uses. See that, Razumov."

He turned his head at this imperative appeal and saw the woman revolutionist making the motions of counting money into the palm of her hand.

"That's what it is. You see?"

Razumov uttered a slow "I see," and returned to his prisoner-like gazing upon the neat and shady road.

"Material means must be obtained in some way, and this is easier than breaking into banks. More certain too. There! I am joking.... What is he muttering to himself now?" she cried under her breath.

"My admiration of Peter Ivanovitch's devoted self-sacrifice, that's all. It's enough to make one sick."

"Oh, you squeamish, masculine creature. Sick! Makes him sick! And what do you know of the truth of it? There's no looking into the secrets of the heart. Peter Ivanovitch knew her years ago, in his worldly days, when he was a young officer in the Guards. It is not for us to judge an inspired person. That's where you men have an advantage. You are inspired sometimes both in thought and action. I have always admitted that when you are inspired, when you manage to throw off your masculine cowardice and prudishness you are not to be equalled by us. Only, how seldom.... Whereas the silliest woman can always be made of use. And why? Because we have passion, unappeasable passion.... I should like to know what he is smiling at?"

"I am not smiling," protested Razumov gloomily.

"Well! How is one to call it? You made some sort of face. Yes, I know! You men can love here and hate there and desire something or other--and you make a great to-do about it, and you call it passion! Yes! While it lasts. But we women are in love with love, and with hate, with these very things I tell you, and with desire itself. That's why we can't be bribed off so easily as you men. In life, you see, there is not much choice. You have either to rot or to burn. And there is not one of us, painted or unpainted, that would not rather burn than rot."

She spoke with energy, but in a matter-of-fact tone. Razumov's attention had wandered away on a track of its own--outside the bars of the gate--but not out of earshot. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat.

"Rot or burn! Powerfully stated. Painted or unpainted. Very vigorous. Painted or...Do tell me--she would be infernally jealous of him, wouldn't she?"

"Who? What? The Baroness? Eleanor Maximovna? Jealous of Peter Ivanovitch? Heavens! Are these the questions the man's mind is running on? Such a thing is

not to be thought of."

"Why? Can't a wealthy old woman be jealous? Or, are they all pure spirits together?"

"But what put it into your head to ask such a question?" she wondered.

"Nothing. I just asked. Masculine frivolity, if you like."

"I don't like," she retorted at once. "It is not the time to be frivolous. What are you flinging your very heart against? Or, perhaps, you are only playing a part."

Razumov had felt that woman's observation of him like a physical contact, like a hand resting lightly on his shoulder. At that moment he received the mysterious impression of her having made up her mind for a closer grip. He stiffened himself inwardly to bear it without betraying himself.

"Playing a Part," he repeated, presenting to her an unmoved profile. "It must be done very badly since you see through the assumption."

She watched him, her forehead drawn into perpendicular folds, the thin black eyebrows diverging upwards like the antennae of an insect. He added hardly audibly--

"You are mistaken. I am doing it no more than the rest of us."

"Who is doing it?" she snapped out.

"Who? Everybody," he said impatiently. "You are a materialist, aren't you?"

"Eh! My dear soul, I have outlived all that nonsense."

"But you must remember the definition of Cabanis: 'Man is a digestive tube.' I imagine now...."

"I spit on him."

"What? On Cabanis? All right. But you can't ignore the importance of a good digestion. The joy of life--you know the joy of life?--depends on a sound stomach, whereas a bad digestion inclines one to scepticism, breeds black fancies and thoughts of death. These are facts ascertained by physiologists. Well, I assure you that ever since I came over from Russia I have been stuffed with indigestible foreign concoctions of the most nauseating kind--pah!"

"You are joking," she murmured incredulously. He assented in a detached way.

"Yes. It is all a joke. It's hardly worth while talking to a man like me. Yet for that very reason men have been known to take their own life."

"On the contrary, I think it is worth while talking to you."

He kept her in the corner of his eye. She seemed to be thinking out some scathing retort, but ended by only shrugging her shoulders slightly.

"Shallow talk! I suppose one must pardon this weakness in you," she said, putting a special accent on the last word. There was something anxious in her indulgent conclusion.

Razumov noted the slightest shades in this conversation, which he had not expected, for which he was not prepared. That was it. "I was not prepared," he said to himself. "It has taken me unawares." It seemed to him that if he only could allow himself to pant openly like a dog for a time this oppression would pass away. "I shall never be found prepared," he thought, with despair. He laughed a little, saying as lightly as he could--

"Thanks. I don't ask for mercy." Then affecting a playful uneasiness, "But aren't you afraid Peter Ivanovitch might suspect us of plotting something unauthorized together by the gate here?"

"No, I am not afraid. You are quite safe from suspicions while you are with me, my dear young man." The humorous gleam in her black eyes went out. "Peter Ivanovitch trusts me," she went on, quite austere. "He takes my advice. I am his right hand, as it were, in certain most important things.... That amuses you what? Do you think I am boasting?"

"God forbid. I was just only saying to myself that Peter Ivanovitch seems to have solved the woman question pretty completely."

Even as he spoke he reproached himself for his words, for his tone. All day long he had been saying the wrong things. It was folly, worse than folly. It was weakness; it was this disease of perversity overcoming his will. Was this the way to meet speeches which certainly contained the promise of future confidences from that woman who apparently had a great store of secret knowledge and so much influence? Why give her this puzzling impression? But she did not seem inimical. There was no anger in her voice. It was strangely speculative.

"One does not know what to think, Razumov. You must have bitten something bitter in your cradle." Razumov gave her a sidelong glance.

"H'm! Something bitter? That's an explanation," he muttered. "Only it was much later. And don't you think, Sophia Antonovna, that you and I come from the same cradle?"

The woman, whose name he had forced himself at last to pronounce (he had experienced a strong repugnance in letting it pass his lips), the woman revolutionist murmured, after a pause--

"You mean--Russia?"

He disdained even to nod. She seemed softened, her black eyes very still, as though she were pursuing the simile in her thoughts to all its tender associations. But suddenly she knitted her brows in a Mephistophelian frown.

"Yes. Perhaps no wonder, then. Yes. One lies there lapped up in evils, watched over by beings that are worse than ogres, ghouls, and vampires. They must be driven away, destroyed utterly. In regard of that task nothing else matters if men and women are determined and faithful. That's how I came to feel in the end. The great thing is not to quarrel amongst ourselves about all sorts of conventional trifles. Remember that, Razumov."

Razumov was not listening. He had even lost the sense of being watched in a sort of heavy tranquillity. His uneasiness, his exasperation, his scorn were blunted at last by all these trying hours. It seemed to him that now they were blunted for ever. "I am a match for them all," he thought, with a conviction too firm to be exulting. The woman revolutionist had ceased speaking; he was not looking at her; there was no one passing along the road. He almost forgot that he was not alone. He heard her voice again, curt, businesslike, and yet betraying the hesitation which had been the real reason of her prolonged silence.

"I say, Razumov!"

Razumov, whose face was turned away from her, made a grimace like a man who hears a false note.

"Tell me: is it true that on the very morning of the deed you actually attended the lectures at the University?"

An appreciable fraction of a second elapsed before the real import of the question reached him, like a bullet which strikes some time after the flash of the fired shot.

Luckily his disengaged hand was ready to grip a bar of the gate. He held it with a terrible force, but his presence of mind was gone. He could make only a sort of gurgling, grumpy sound.

"Come, Kirylo Sidorovitch!" she urged him. "I know you are not a boastful man. That one must say for you. You are a silent man. Too silent, perhaps. You are feeding on some bitterness of your own. You are not an enthusiast. You are, perhaps, all the stronger for that. But you might tell me. One would like to understand you a little more. I was so immensely struck.... Have you really done it?"

He got his voice back. The shot had missed him. It had been fired at random, altogether, more like a signal for coming to close quarters. It was to be a plain struggle for self-preservation. And she was a dangerous adversary too. But he was ready for battle; he was so ready that when he turned towards her not a muscle of his face moved.

"Certainly," he said, without animation, secretly strung up but perfectly sure of himself. "Lectures--certainly, But what makes you ask?"

It was she who was animated.

"I had it in a letter, written by a young man in Petersburg; one of us, of course. You were seen--you were observed with your notebook, impassible, taking notes...."

He enveloped her with his fixed stare.

"What of that?"

"I call such coolness superb--that's all. It is a proof of uncommon strength of character. The young man writes that nobody could have guessed from your face and manner the part you had played only some two hours before--the great, momentous, glorious part...."

"Oh no. Nobody could have guessed," assented Razumov gravely, "because, don't you see, nobody at that time...."

"Yes, yes. But all the same you are a man of exceptional fortitude, it seems. You looked exactly as usual. It was remembered afterwards with wonder...."

"It cost me no effort," Razumov declared, with the same staring gravity.

"Then it's almost more wonderful still!" she exclaimed, and fell silent while Razumov asked himself whether he had not said there something utterly unnecessary--or even worse.

She raised her head eagerly.

"Your intention was to stay in Russia? You had planned...."

"No," interrupted Razumov without haste. "I had made no plans of any sort."

"You just simply walked away?" she struck in.

He bowed his head in slow assent. "Simply--yes." He had gradually released his hold on the bar of the gate, as though he had acquired the conviction that no random shot could knock him over now. And suddenly he was inspired to add, "The snow was coming down very thick, you know."

She had a slight appreciative movement of the head, like an expert in such enterprises, very interested, capable of taking every point professionally. Razumov remembered something he had heard.

"I turned into a narrow side street, you understand," he went on negligently, and paused as if it were not worth talking about. Then he remembered another detail and dropped it before her, like a disdainful dole to her curiosity.

"I felt inclined to lie down and go to sleep there."

She clicked her tongue at that symptom, very struck indeed. Then--

"But the notebook! The amazing notebook, man. You don't mean to say you had put it in your pocket beforehand!" she cried.

Razumov gave a start. It might have been a sign of impatience.

"I went home. Straight home to my rooms," he said distinctly.

"The coolness of the man! You dared?"

"Why not? I assure you I was perfectly calm. Ha! Calmer than I am now perhaps."

"I like you much better as you are now than when you indulge that bitter vein of yours, Razumov. And nobody in the house saw you return--eh? That might have appeared queer."

"No one," Razumov said firmly. "Dvornik, landlady, girl, all out of the way. I went up like a shadow. It was a murky morning. The stairs were dark. I glided up like a phantom. Fate? Luck? What do you think?"

"I just see it!" The eyes of the woman revolutionist snapped darkly. "Well--and then you considered...."

Razumov had it all ready in his head.

"No. I looked at my watch, since you want to know. There was just time. I took that notebook, and ran down the stairs on tiptoe. Have you ever listened to the pit-pat of a man running round and round the shaft of a deep staircase? They have a gaslight at the bottom burning night and day. I suppose it's gleaming down there now.... The sound dies out--the flame winks...."

He noticed the vacillation of surprise passing over the steady curiosity of the black eyes fastened on his face as if the woman revolutionist received the sound of his voice into her pupils instead of her ears. He checked himself, passed his hand over his forehead, confused, like a man who has been dreaming aloud.

"Where could a student be running if not to his lectures in the morning? At night it's another matter. I did not care if all the house had been there to look at me. But I don't suppose there was anyone. It's best not to be seen or heard. Aha! The people that are neither seen nor heard are the lucky ones--in Russia. Don't you admire my luck?"

"Astonishing," she said. "If you have luck as well as determination, then indeed you are likely to turn out an invaluable acquisition for the work in hand."

Her tone was earnest; and it seemed to Razumov that it was speculative, even as though she were already apportioning him, in her mind, his share of the work. Her eyes were cast down. He waited, not very alert now, but with the grip of the ever-present danger giving him an air of attentive gravity. Who could have written about him in that letter from Petersburg? A fellow student, surely--some imbecile victim of revolutionary propaganda, some foolish slave of foreign, subversive ideals. A long, famine-stricken, red-nosed figure presented itself to his mental search. That must have been the fellow!

He smiled inwardly at the absolute wrong-headedness of the whole thing, the self-deception of a criminal idealist shattering his existence like a thunder-clap out of a clear sky, and re-echoing amongst the wreckage in the false assumptions of those other fools. Fancy that hungry and piteous imbecile furnishing to the

curiosity of the revolutionist refugees this utterly fantastic detail! He appreciated it as by no means constituting a danger. On the contrary. As things stood it was for his advantage rather, a piece of sinister luck which had only to be accepted with proper caution.

"And yet, Razumov," he heard the musing voice of the woman, "you have not the face of a lucky man." She raised her eyes with renewed interest. "And so that was the way of it. After doing your work you simply walked off and made for your rooms. That sort of thing succeeds sometimes. I suppose it was agreed beforehand that, once the business over, each of you would go his own way?"

Razumov preserved the seriousness of his expression and the deliberate, if cautious, manner of speaking.

"Was not that the best thing to do?" he asked, in a dispassionate tone. "And anyway," he added, after waiting a moment, "we did not give much thought to what would come after. We never discussed formally any line of conduct. It was understood, I think."

She approved his statement with slight nods.

"You, of course, wished to remain in Russia?"

"In St. Petersburg itself," emphasized Razumov. "It was the only safe course for me. And, moreover, I had nowhere else to go."

"Yes! Yes! I know. Clearly. And the other--this wonderful Haldin appearing only to be regretted--you don't know what he intended?"

Razumov had foreseen that such a question would certainly come to meet him sooner or later. He raised his hands a little and let them fall helplessly by his side--nothing more.

It was the white-haired woman conspirator who was the first to break the silence.

"Very curious," she pronounced slowly. "And you did not think, Kirylo Sidorovitch, that he might perhaps wish to get in touch with you again?"

Razumov discovered that he could not suppress the trembling of his lips. But he thought that he owed it to himself to speak. A negative sign would not do again. Speak he must, if only to get at the bottom of what that St. Petersburg letter might have contained.

"I stayed at home next day," he said, bending down a little and plunging his glance into the black eyes of the woman so that she should not observe the trembling of his lips. "Yes, I stayed at home. As my actions are remembered and written about, then perhaps you are aware that I was not seen at the lectures next day. Eh? You didn't know? Well, I stopped at home-the live-long day."

As if moved by his agitated tone, she murmured a sympathetic "I see! It must have been trying enough."

"You seem to understand one's feelings," said Razumov steadily. "It was trying. It was horrible; it was an atrocious day. It was not the last."

"Yes, I understand. Afterwards, when you heard they had got him. Don't I know how one feels after losing a comrade in the good fight? One's ashamed of being left. And I can remember so many. Never mind. They shall be avenged before long. And what is death? At any rate, it is not a shameful thing like some kinds of life."

Razumov felt something stir in his breast, a sort of feeble and unpleasant tremor.

"Some kinds of life?" he repeated, looking at her searchingly.

"The subservient, submissive life. Life? No! Vegetation on the filthy heap of iniquity which the world is. Life, Razumov, not to be vile must be a revolt--a pitiless protest--all the time."

She calmed down, the gleam of suffused tears in her eyes dried out instantly by the heat of her passion, and it was in her capable, businesslike manner that she went on--

"You understand me, Razumov. You are not an enthusiast, but there is an immense force of revolt in you. I felt it from the first, directly I set my eyes on you--you remember--in Zurich. Oh! You are full of bitter revolt. That is good. Indignation flags sometimes, revenge itself may become a weariness, but that uncompromising sense of necessity and justice which armed your and Haldin's hands to strike down that fanatical brute...for it was that--nothing but that! I have been thinking it out. It could have been nothing else but that."

Razumov made a slight bow, the irony of which was concealed by an almost sinister immobility of feature.

"I can't speak for the dead. As for myself, I can assure you that my conduct was dictated by necessity and by the sense of--well--retributive justice."

"Good, that," he said to himself, while her eyes rested upon him, black and impenetrable like the mental caverns where revolutionary thought should sit plotting the violent way of its dream of changes. As if anything could be changed! In this world of men nothing can be changed--neither happiness nor misery. They can only be displaced at the cost of corrupted consciences and broken lives--a futile game for arrogant philosophers and sanguinary triflers. Those thoughts darted through Razumov's head while he stood facing the old revolutionary hand, the respected, trusted, and influential Sophia Antonovna, whose word had such a weight in the "active" section of every party. She was much more representative than the great Peter Ivanovitch. Stripped of rhetoric, mysticism, and theories, she was the true spirit of destructive revolution. And she was the personal adversary he had to meet. It gave him a feeling of triumphant pleasure to deceive her out of her own mouth. The epigrammatic saying that speech has been given to us for the purpose of concealing our thoughts came into his mind. Of that cynical theory this was a very subtle and a very scornful application, flouting in its own words the very spirit of ruthless revolution, embodied in that woman with her white hair and black eyebrows, like slightly sinuous lines of Indian ink, drawn together by the perpendicular folds of a thoughtful frown.

"That's it. Retributive. No pity!" was the conclusion of her silence. And this once broken, she went on impulsively in short, vibrating sentences--

"Listen to my story, Razumov!..." Her father was a clever but unlucky artisan. No joy had lighted up his laborious days. He died at fifty; all the years of his life he had panted under the thumb of masters whose rapacity exacted from him the price of the water, of the salt, of the very air he breathed; taxed the sweat of his brow and claimed the blood of his sons. No protection, no guidance! What had society to say to him? Be submissive and be honest. If you rebel I shall kill you. If you steal I shall imprison you. But if you suffer I have nothing for you--nothing except perhaps a beggarly dole of bread--but no consolation for your trouble, no respect for your manhood, no pity for the sorrows of your miserable life.

And so he laboured, he suffered, and he died. He died in the hospital. Standing by the common grave she thought of his tormented existence--she saw it whole. She reckoned the simple joys of life, the birthright of the humblest, of which his gentle heart had been robbed by the crime of a society which nothing can absolve.

"Yes, Razumov," she continued, in an impressive, lowered voice, "it was like a lurid light in which I stood, still almost a child, and cursed not the toil, not the misery which had been his lot, but the great social iniquity of the system resting on unrequited toil and unpitied sufferings. From that moment I was a revolutionist."

Razumov, trying to raise himself above the dangerous weaknesses of contempt or compassion, had preserved an impassive countenance. She, with an unaffected touch of mere bitterness, the first he could notice since he had come in contact with the woman, went on--

"As I could not go to the Church where the priests of the system exhorted such unconsidered vermin as I to resignation, I went to the secret societies as soon as I knew how to find my way. I was sixteen years old--no more, Razumov! And--look at my white hair."

In these last words there was neither pride nor sadness. The bitterness too was gone.

"There is a lot of it. I had always magnificent hair, even as a child of a girl. Only, at that time we were cutting it short and thinking that there was the first step towards crushing the social infamy. Crush the Infamy! A fine watchword! I would placard it on the walls of prisons and palaces, carve it on hard rocks, hang it out in letters of fire on that empty sky for a sign of hope and terror--a portent of the end...."

"You are eloquent, Sophia Antonovna," Razumov interrupted suddenly. "Only, so far you seem to have been writing it in water...."

She was checked but not offended. "Who knows? Very soon it may become a fact written all over that great land of ours," she hinted meaningly. "And then one would have lived long enough. White hair won't matter."

Razumov looked at her white hair: and this mark of so many uneasy years seemed nothing but a testimony to the invincible vigour of revolt. It threw out into an astonishing relief the unwrinkled face, the brilliant black glance, the upright compact figure, the simple, brisk self-possession of the mature personality--as though in her revolutionary pilgrimage she had discovered the secret, not of everlasting youth, but of everlasting endurance.

How un-Russian she looked, thought Razumov. Her mother might have been a Jewess or an Armenian or devil knew what. He reflected that a revolutionist is seldom true to the settled type. All revolt is the expression of strong individualism--ran his thought vaguely. One can tell them a mile off in any society, in any surroundings. It was astonishing that the police....

"We shall not meet again very soon, I think," she was saying. "I am leaving tomorrow."

"For Zurich?" Razumov asked casually, but feeling relieved, not from any distinct apprehension, but from a feeling of stress as if after a wrestling match.

"Yes, Zurich--and farther on, perhaps, much farther. Another journey. When I think of all my journeys! The last must come some day. Never mind, Razumov. We had to have a good long talk. I would have certainly tried to see you if we had not met. Peter Ivanovitch knows where you live? Yes. I meant to have asked him--but it's better like this. You see, we expect two more men; and I had much rather wait here talking with you than up there at the house with...."

Having cast a glance beyond the gate, she interrupted herself. "Here they are," she said rapidly. "Well, Kirylo Sidorovitch, we shall have to say good-bye, presently."