

VII. THE EXPEDITION TO THE MONASTERY

Several times that night I woke in terror at the thought that I might be oversleeping myself, and by six o'clock was out of bed, although the dawn was hardly peeping in at the window. I put on my clothes and boots (all of which were lying tumbled and unbrushed beside the bed, since Nicola, of course had not been in yet to tidy them up), and, without a prayer said or my face washed, emerged, for the first time in my life, into the street ALONE.

Over the way, behind the green roof of a large building, the dim, cold dawn was beginning to blush red. The keen frost of the spring morning which had stiffened the pools and mud and made them crackle under my feet now nipped my face and hands also. Not a cab was to be seen, though I had counted upon one to make the journey out and home the quicker. Only a file of waggons was rumbling along the Arbat Prospect, and a couple of bricklayers talking noisily together as they strode along the pavement. However, after walking a verst or so I began to meet men and women taking baskets to market or going with empty barrels to fetch the day's water supply; until at length, at the cross streets near the Arbat Gate, where a pieman had set up his stall and a baker was just opening his shop, I espied an old cabman shaking himself after indulging in a nap on the box of his be-scratched old blue-painted, hobble-de-hoy wreck of a drozhki. He seemed barely awake as he asked twenty copecks as the fare to the monastery and back, but came to himself a moment afterwards, just as I was about to get in, and, touching up his horse with the spare

end of the reins, started to drive off and leave me. "My horse wants feeding," he growled, "I can't take you, barin.[Sir]"

With some difficulty and a promise of FORTY copecks I persuaded him to stop. He eyed me narrowly as he pulled up, but nevertheless said: "Very well. Get in, barin." I must confess that I had some qualms lest he should drive me to a quiet corner somewhere, and then rob me, but I caught hold of the collar of his ragged driving-coat, close to where his wrinkled neck showed sadly lean above his hunched-up back, and climbed on to the blue-painted, curved, rickety scat. As we set off along Vozdvizhenka Street, I noticed that the back of the drozhki was covered with a strip of the same greenish material as that of which his coat was made. For some reason or another this reassured me, and I no longer felt nervous of being taken to a quiet spot and robbed.

The sun had risen to a good height, and was gilding the cupolas of the churches, when we arrived at the monastery. In the shade the frost had not yet given, but in the open roadway muddy rivulets of water were coursing along, and it was through fast-thawing mire that the horse went clip-clopping his way. Alighting, and entering the monastery grounds, I inquired of the first monk whom I met where I could find the priest whom I was seeking.

"His cell is over there," replied the monk as he stopped a moment and pointed towards a little building up to which a flight of steps led.

"I respectfully thank you," I said, and then fell to wondering what all the monks (who at that moment began to come filing out of the church) must be thinking of me as they glanced in my direction. I was neither a grown-up nor a child, while my face was unwashed, my hair unbrushed, my clothes tumbled, and my boots unblackened and muddy. To what class of persons were the brethren assigning me--for they stared at me hard enough? Nevertheless I proceeded in the direction which the young priest had pointed out to me.

An old man with bushy grey eyebrows and a black cassock met me on the narrow path to the cells, and asked me what I wanted. For a brief moment I felt inclined to say "Nothing," and then run back to the drozhki and drive away home; but, for all its beetling brows, the face of the old man inspired confidence, and I merely said that I wished to see the priest (whom I named).

"Very well, young sir; I will take you to him," said the old man as he turned round. Clearly he had guessed my errand at a stroke. "The father is at matins at this moment, but he will soon be back," and, opening a door, the old man led me through a neat hall and corridor, all lined with clean matting, to a cell.

"Please to wait here," he added, and then, with a kind, reassuring glance, departed.

The little room in which I found myself was of the smallest possible

dimensions, but extremely neat and clean. Its furniture only consisted of a small table (covered with a cloth, and placed between two equally small casement-windows, in which stood two pots of geraniums), a stand of ikons, with a lamp suspended in front of them, a bench, and two chairs. In one corner hung a wall clock, with little flowers painted on its dial, and brass weights to its chains, while upon two nails driven into a screen (which, fastened to the ceiling with whitewashed pegs, probably concealed the bed) hung a couple of cassocks. The windows looked out upon a whitewashed wall, about two arshins distant, and in the space between them there grew a small lilac-bush.

Not a sound penetrated from without, and in the stillness the measured, friendly stroke of the clock's pendulum seemed to beat quite loudly. The instant that I found myself alone in this calm retreat all other thoughts and recollections left my head as completely as though they had never been there, and I subsided into an inexpressibly pleasing kind of torpor. The rusty alpaca cassocks with their frayed linings, the worn black leather bindings of the books with their metal clasps, the dull-green plants with their carefully watered leaves and soil, and, above all, the abrupt, regular beat of the pendulum, all spoke to me intimately of some new life hitherto unknown to me--a life of unity and prayer, of calm, restful happiness.

"The months, the years, may pass," I thought to myself, "but he remains alone--always at peace, always knowing that his conscience is pure before God, that his prayer will be heard by Him." For fully half

an hour I sat on that chair, trying not to move, not even to breathe loudly, for fear I should mar the harmony of the sounds which were telling me so much, and ever the pendulum continued to beat the same--now a little louder to the right, now a little softer to the left.