

Leo Tolstoy



*The Light
Shines
in Darkness*

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THE LIGHT SHINES IN DARKNESS

ACT I Scene 1

The scene represents the verandah of a fine country-house, in front of which a croquet-lawn and tennis-court are shown, also a flower-bed. The children are playing croquet with their governess. Mary Ivánovna Sarýntsova, a handsome elegant woman of forty; her sister, Alexándra Ivánovna Kóhovtseva, a stupid, determined woman of forty-five; and her husband, Peter Semyónovich Kóhovtsef, a fat flabby man, dressed in a summer suit, with a pince-nez, are sitting on the verandah at a table with a samovár and

coffee-pot. Mary Ivánovna Sarýntsova, Alexándra Ivánovna Kóhovtseva, and Peter Semyónovich Kóhovtsev are drinking coffee, and the latter is smoking.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. If you were not my sister, but a stranger, and Nicholas Ivánovich not your husband, but merely an acquaintance, I should think all this very original, and perhaps I might even encourage him, J'aurais trouvé tout ça très gentil;[1] but when I see that your husband is playing the fool—yes, simply playing the fool—then I can't help telling you what I think about 326it. And I shall tell your husband, Nicholas, too. Je lui dirai son fait, ma chère.[2] I am not afraid of anyone.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. I don't feel the least bit hurt; don't I see it all myself? but I don't think it so very important.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. No. You don't think so, but I tell you that, if you let it go on, you will be beggared. Du train que cela va ...[3]

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Come! Beggared indeed! Not with an income like theirs.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, beggared! And please don't interrupt me, my dear! Anything a man does always seems right to you!

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Oh! I don't know. I was saying——

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But you never do know what you are saying, because when you men begin playing the fool, il n'y a pas de raison que ça finisse.[4] I am only saying that if I were in your place, I should not allow it. J'aurais mis bon ordre à toutes ces lubies.[5] What does it all mean? A husband, the head of a family, has no occupation, abandons everything, gives everything away, et fait le généreux à

droite et à gauche.[6] I know how it will end! Nous en savons quelque chose.[7]

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH [to Mary Ivánovna]. But do explain to me, Mary, what is this new movement? Of course I understand Liberalism, County Councils, the Constitution, schools, reading-rooms, and tout ce qui s'en suit;[8] as well as Socialism, strikes, and an eight-hour day; but what is this? Explain it to me.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. But he told you about it yesterday.

327 PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. I confess I did not understand. The Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount—and that churches are unnecessary! But then how is one to pray, and all that?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Yes. That is the worst of it. He would destroy everything, and give us nothing in its place.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. How did it begin?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. It began last year, after his sister died. He was very fond of her, and her death had a very great effect on him. He became quite morose, and was always talking about death; and then, you know, he fell ill himself with typhus. When he recovered, he was quite a changed man.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. But, all the same, he came in spring to see us again in Moscow, and was very nice, and played bridge. Il était très gentil et comme tout le monde. [9]

MARY IVÁNOVNA. But, all the same, he was then quite changed.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. In what way?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. He was completely indifferent to his family, and purely and simply had l'idée fixe. He read the

Gospels for days on end, and did not sleep. He used to get up at night to read, made notes and extracts, and then began going to see bishops and hermits—consulting them about religion.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And did he fast, or prepare for communion?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. From the time of our marriage—that's twenty years ago—till then he had never fasted nor taken the sacrament, but at that time he did once take the sacrament in a monastery, and then immediately afterwards decided that one should neither take communion nor go to church.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. That's what I say—thoroughly inconsistent!

328 MARY IVÁNOVNA. Yes, a month before, he would not miss a single service, and kept every fast-day; and then he suddenly decided that it was all unnecessary. What can one do with such a man?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. I have spoken and will speak to him again.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Yes! But the matter is of no great importance.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. No? Not to you! Because you men have no religion.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Do let me speak. I say that that is not the point. The point is this: if he denies the Church, what does he want the Gospels for?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Well, so that we should live according to the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount, and give everything away.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. But how is one to live if one gives everything away?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. And where has he found in the Sermon on the Mount that we must shake hands with footmen? It says "Blessed are the meek," but it says nothing about shaking hands!

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Yes, of course, he gets carried away, as he always used to. At one time it was music, then shooting, then the school. But that doesn't make it any the easier for me!

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Why has he gone to town to-day?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. He did not tell me, but I know it is about some trees of ours that have been felled. The peasants have been cutting trees in our wood.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. In the pine-tree plantation?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Yes, they will probably be sent to prison and ordered to pay for the trees. Their case was to be heard to-day, he told me of it, so I feel certain that is what he has gone about.

329 ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. He will pardon them, and to-morrow they will come to take the trees in the park.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Yes, that is what it leads to. As it is, they break our apple-trees and tread down the green cornfields, and he forgives them everything.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. Extraordinary!

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. That is just why I say that it must not be allowed to go on. Why, if it goes on like that, tout y passera.[10] I think it is your duty as a mother to prendre tes mesures.[11]

MARY IVÁNOVNA. What can I do?

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What indeed! Stop him! Explain to him that this cannot go on. You have your children! What sort of an example is it for them?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Of course, it is hard; but I go on bearing it, and hoping it will pass, like his former infatuations.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. Yes, but "Aide toi et Dieu t'aidera!"[12] You must make him feel that he has not only himself to think of, and that one can't live like that.

MARY IVÁNOVNA. The worst of all is that he no longer troubles about the children, and I have to decide everything myself. I have an unweaned baby, besides the older children: girls and boys, who have to be looked after, and need guidance. And I have to do it all single-handed. He used to be such an affectionate and attentive father, but now he seems no longer to care. Yesterday I told him that Ványa is not studying properly, and will not pass his exam., and he replied that it would be by far the best thing for him to leave school altogether.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. To go where?

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Nowhere! That's the most terrible thing about it; everything we do is wrong, but he does not say what would be right.

PETER SEMYÓNOVICH. That's odd.

ALEXÁNDRA IVÁNOVNA. What is there odd about it? It is just your usual way. Condemn everything, and do nothing yourself!

MARY IVÁNOVNA. Styópa has now finished at the University, and ought to choose a career; but his father says nothing about it. He wanted to take a post in the Civil Service, but Nicholas Ivánovich says he ought not to do so.