

***MAKSIM
GORKY***

A woman with long dark hair is shown in a dark, moody setting. She is covering her eyes with both hands, with only one eye visible through the fingers of her right hand. She is wearing several bracelets on her left wrist. The overall atmosphere is one of fear or distress.

***THE MAN
WHO WAS
AFRAID***

Maksim Gorky

The Man Who Was Afraid

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FOMA GORDYEEF

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Dedicated to

ANTON P. CHEKHOV

By

Maxim Gorky

CHAPTER I

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ABOUT sixty years ago, when fortunes of millions had been made on the Volga with fairy-tale rapidity, Ignat Gordyeff, a young fellow, was working as water-pumper on one of the barges of the wealthy merchant Zayev.

Built like a giant, handsome and not at all stupid, he was one of those people whom luck always follows everywhere—not because they are gifted and industrious, but rather because, having an enormous stock of energy at their command, they cannot stop to think over the choice of means when on their way toward their aims, and, excepting their own will, they know no law. Sometimes they speak of their conscience with fear, sometimes they really torture themselves struggling with it, but conscience is an unconquerable power to the faint-hearted only; the strong master it quickly and make it a slave to their desires, for they unconsciously feel that, given room and freedom, conscience would fracture life. They sacrifice days to it; and if it should happen that conscience conquered their souls, they are never wrecked, even in defeat—they are just as healthy and strong under its sway as when they lived without conscience.

At the age of forty Ignat Gordyeff was himself the owner of three steamers and ten barges. On the Volga he was respected as a rich and clever man, but was nicknamed “Frantic,” because his life did not flow along a straight channel, like that of other people of his kind, but now and again, boiling up turbulently, ran out of its rut, away from

gain—the prime aim of his existence. It looked as though there were three Gordyeeffs in him, or as though there were three souls in Ignat's body. One of them, the mightiest, was only greedy, and when Ignat lived according to its commands, he was merely a man seized with untamable passion for work. This passion burned in him by day and by night, he was completely absorbed by it, and, grabbing everywhere hundreds and thousands of roubles, it seemed as if he could never have enough of the jingle and sound of money. He worked about up and down the Volga, building and fastening nets in which he caught gold: he bought up grain in the villages, floated it to Rybinsk on his barges; he plundered, cheated, sometimes not noticing it, sometimes noticing, and, triumphant, he openly laughed at by his victims; and in the senselessness of his thirst for money, he rose to the heights of poetry. But, giving up so much strength to this hunt after the rouble, he was not greedy in the narrow sense, and sometimes he even betrayed an inconceivable but sincere indifference to his property. Once, when the ice was drifting down the Volga, he stood on the shore, and, seeing that the ice was breaking his new barge, having crushed it against the bluff shore, he ejaculated:

“That's it. Again. Crush it! Now, once more! Try!”

“Well, Ignat,” asked his friend Mayakin, coming up to him, “the ice is crushing about ten thousand out of your purse, eh?”

“That's nothing! I'll make another hundred. But look how the Volga is working! Eh? Fine? She can split the whole world, like curd, with a knife. Look, look! There you have my

‘Boyarinya!’ She floated but once. Well, we’ll have mass said for the dead.”

The barge was crushed into splinters. Ignat and the godfather, sitting in the tavern on the shore, drank vodka and looked out of the window, watching the fragments of the “Boyarinya” drifting down the river together with the ice.

“Are you sorry for the vessel, Ignat?” asked Mayakin.

“Why should I be sorry for it? The Volga gave it to me, and the Volga has taken it back. It did not tear off my hand.”

“Nevertheless.”

“What—nevertheless? It is good at least that I saw how it was all done. It’s a lesson for the future. But when my ‘Volgar’ was burned—I was really sorry—I didn’t see it. How beautiful it must have looked when such a woodpile was blazing on the water in the dark night! Eh? It was an enormous steamer.”

“Weren’t you sorry for that either?”

“For the steamer? It is true, I did feel sorry for the steamer. But then it is mere foolishness to feel sorry! What’s the use? I might have cried; tears cannot extinguish fire. Let the steamers burn. And even though everything be burned down, I’d spit upon it! If the soul is but burning to work, everything will be erected anew. Isn’t it so?”

“Yes,” said Mayakin, smiling. “These are strong words you say. And whoever speaks that way, even though he loses all, will nevertheless be rich.”

Regarding losses of thousands of roubles so philosophically, Ignat knew the value of every kopeika; he gave to the poor very seldom, and only to those that were

altogether unable to work. When a more or less healthy man asked him for alms, Ignat would say, sternly:

“Get away! You can work yet. Go to my dvornik and help him to remove the dung. I’ll pay you for it.”

Whenever he had been carried away by his work he regarded people morosely and piteously, nor did he give himself rest while hunting for roubles. And suddenly—it usually happened in spring, when everything on earth became so bewitchingly beautiful and something reproachfully wild was breathed down into the soul from the clear sky—Ignat Gordyeff would feel that he was not the master of his business, but its low slave. He would lose himself in thought and, inquisitively looking about himself from under his thick, knitted eyebrows, walk about for days, angry and morose, as though silently asking something, which he feared to ask aloud. They awakened his other soul, the turbulent and lustful soul of a hungry beast. Insolent and cynical, he drank, led a depraved life, and made drunkards of other people. He went into ecstasy, and something like a volcano of filth boiled within him. It looked as though he was madly tearing the chains which he himself had forged and carried, and was not strong enough to tear them. Excited and very dirty, his face swollen from drunkenness and sleeplessness, his eyes wandering madly, and roaring in a hoarse voice, he tramped about the town from one tavern to another, threw away money without counting it, cried and danced to the sad tunes of the folk songs, or fought, but found no rest anywhere—in anything.

It happened one day that a degraded priest, a short, stout little bald-headed man in a torn cassock, chanced on

Ignat, and stuck to him, just as a piece of mud will stick to a shoe. An impersonal, deformed and nasty creature, he played the part of a buffoon: they smeared his bald head with mustard, made him go upon all-fours, drink mixtures of different brandies and dance comical dances; he did all this in silence, an idiotic smile on his wrinkled face, and having done what he was told to do, he invariably said, outstretching his hand with his palm upward:

“Give me a rouble.”

They laughed at him and sometimes gave him twenty kopeiks, sometimes gave him nothing, but it sometimes happened that they threw him a ten-rouble bill and even more.

“You abominable fellow,” cried Ignat to him one day. “Say, who are you?”

The priest was frightened by the call, and bowing low to Ignat, was silent.

“Who? Speak!” roared Ignat.

“I am a man—to be abused,” answered the priest, and the company burst out laughing at his words.

“Are you a rascal?” asked Ignat, sternly.

“A rascal? Because of need and the weakness of my soul?”

“Come here!” Ignat called him. “Come and sit down by my side.”

Trembling with fear, the priest walked up to the intoxicated merchant with timid steps and remained standing opposite him.

“Sit down beside me!” said Ignat, taking the frightened priest by the hand and seating him next to himself. “You are

a very near man to me. I am also a rascal! You, because of need; I, because of wantonness. I am a rascal because of grief! Understand?"

"I understand," said the priest, softly. All the company were giggling.

"Do you know now what I am?"

"I do."

"Well, say, 'You are a rascal, Ignat!'"

The priest could not do it. He looked with terror at the huge figure of Ignat and shook his head negatively. The company's laughter was now like the rattling of thunder. Ignat could not make the priest abuse him. Then he asked him:

"Shall I give you money?"

"Yes," quickly answered the priest.

"And what do you need it for?"

He did not care to answer. Then Ignat seized him by the collar, and shook out of his dirty lips the following speech, which he spoke almost in a whisper, trembling with fear:

"I have a daughter sixteen years old in the seminary. I save for her, because when she comes out there won't be anything with which to cover her nakedness."

"Ah," said Ignat, and let go the priest's collar. Then he sat for a long time gloomy and lost in thought, and now and again stared at the priest. Suddenly his eyes began to laugh, and he said:

"Aren't you a liar, drunkard?"

The priest silently made the sign of the cross and lowered his head on his breast.

“It is the truth!” said one of the company, confirming the priest’s words.

“True? Very well!” shouted Ignat, and, striking the table with his fist, he addressed himself to the priest:

“Eh, you! Sell me your daughter! How much will you take?”

The priest shook his head and shrank back.

“One thousand!”

The company giggled, seeing that the priest was shrinking as though cold water was being poured on him.

“Two!” roared Ignat, with flashing eyes.

“What’s the matter with you? How is it?” muttered the priest, stretching out both hands to Ignat.

“Three!”

“Ignat Matveyich!” cried the priest, in a thin, ringing voice. “For God’s sake! For Christ’s sake! Enough! I’ll sell her! For her own sake I’ll sell her!”

In his sickly, sharp voice was heard a threat to someone, and his eyes, unnoticed by anybody before, flashed like coals. But the intoxicated crowd only laughed at him foolishly.

“Silence!” cried Ignat, sternly, straightening himself to his full length and flashing his eyes.

“Don’t you understand, devils, what’s going on here? It’s enough to make one cry, while you giggle.”

He walked up to the priest, went down on his knees before him, and said to him firmly:

“Father now you see what a rascal I am. Well, spit into my face!”

Something ugly and ridiculous took place. The priest too, knelt before Ignat, and like a huge turtle, crept around near his feet, kissed his knees and muttered something, sobbing. Ignat bent over him, lifted him from the floor and cried to him, commanding and begging:

“Spit! Spit right into my shameless eyes!”

The company, stupefied for a moment by Ignat’s stern voice, laughed again so that the panes rattled in the tavern windows.

“I’ll give you a hundred roubles. Spit!”

And the priest crept over the floor and sobbed for fear, or for happiness, to hear that this man was begging him to do something degrading to himself.

Finally Ignat arose from the floor, kicked the priest, and, flinging at him a package of money, said morosely, with a smile:

“Rabble! Can a man repent before such people? Some are afraid to hear of repentance, others laugh at a sinner. I was about to unburden myself completely; the heart trembled. Let me, I thought. No, I didn’t think at all. Just so! Get out of here! And see that you never show yourself to me again. Do you hear?”

“Oh, a queer fellow!” said the crowd, somewhat moved.

Legends were composed about his drinking bouts in town; everybody censured him strictly, but no one ever declined his invitation to those drinking bouts. Thus he lived for weeks.

And unexpectedly he used to come home, not yet altogether freed from the odour of the kabaks, but already crestfallen and quiet. With humbly downcast eyes, in which

shame was burning now, he silently listened to his wife's reproaches, and, humble and meek as a lamb, went away to his room and locked himself in. For many hours in succession he knelt before the cross, lowering his head on his breast; his hands hung helplessly, his back was bent, and he was silent, as though he dared not pray. His wife used to come up to the door on tiptoe and listen. Deep sighs were heard from behind the door—like the breathing of a tired and sickly horse.

“God! You see,” whispered Ignat in a muffled voice, firmly pressing the palms of his hands to his broad breast.

During the days of repentance he drank nothing but water and ate only rye bread.

In the morning his wife placed at the door of his room a big bottle of water, about a pound and a half of bread, and salt. He opened the door, took in these victuals and locked himself in again. During this time he was not disturbed in any way; everybody tried to avoid him. A few days later he again appeared on the exchange, jested, laughed, made contracts to furnish corn as sharp-sighted as a bird of prey, a rare expert at anything concerning his affairs.

But in all the moods of Ignat's life there was one passionate desire that never left him—the desire to have a son; and the older he grew the greater was this desire. Very often such conversation as this took place between him and his wife. In the morning, at her tea, or at noon during dinner hour he gloomily glared at his wife, a stout, well-fed woman, with a red face and sleepy eyes, and asked her:

“Well, don't you feel anything?”

She knew what he meant, but she invariably replied:

“How can I help feeling? Your fists are like dumb-bells.”

“You know what I’m talking about, you fool.”

“Can one become pregnant from such blows?”

“It’s not on account of the blows that you don’t bear any children; it’s because you eat too much. You fill your stomach with all sorts of food—and there’s no room for the child to engender.”

“As if I didn’t bear you any children?”

“Those were girls,” said Ignat, reproachfully. “I want a son! Do you understand? A son, an heir! To whom shall I give my capital after my death? Who shall pray for my sins? Shall I give it to a cloister? I have given them enough! Or shall I leave it to you? What a fine pilgrim you are! Even in church you think only of fish pies. If I die, you’ll marry again, and my money will be turned over to some fool. Do you think this is what I am working for?”

And he was seized with sardonic anguish, for he felt that his life was aimless if he should have no son to follow him.

During the nine years of their married life his wife had borne him four daughters, all of whom had passed away. While Ignat had awaited their birth tremblingly, he mourned their death but little—at any rate they were unnecessary to him. He began to beat his wife during the second year of their married life; at first he did it while being intoxicated and without animosity, but just according to the proverb: “Love your wife like your soul and shake her like a pear-tree;” but after each confinement, deceived in his expectation, his hatred for his wife grew stronger, and he began to beat her with pleasure, in revenge for not bearing him a son.

Once while on business in the province of Samarsk, he received a telegram from relatives at home, informing him of his wife's death. He made the sign of the cross, thought awhile and wrote to his friend Mayakin:

“Bury her in my absence; look after my property.”

Then he went to the church to serve the mass for the dead, and, having prayed for the repose of the late Aquilina's soul, he began to think that it was necessary for him to marry as soon as possible.

He was then forty-three years old, tall, broad-shouldered, with a heavy bass voice, like an arch-deacon; his large eyes looked bold and wise from under his dark eyebrows; in his sunburnt face, overgrown with a thick, black beard, and in all his mighty figure there was much truly Russian, crude and healthy beauty; in his easy motions as well as in his slow, proud walk, a consciousness of power was evident—a firm confidence in himself. He was liked by women and did not avoid them.

Ere six months had passed after the death of his wife, he courted the daughter of an Ural Cossack. The father of the bride, notwithstanding that Ignat was known even in Ural as a “pranky” man, gave him his daughter in marriage, and toward autumn Ignat Gordyeff came home with a young Cossack-wife. Her name was Natalya. Tall, well-built, with large blue eyes and with a long chestnut braid, she was a worthy match for the handsome Ignat. He was happy and proud of his wife and loved her with the passionate love of a healthy man, but he soon began to contemplate her thoughtfully, with a vigilant eye.

Seldom did a smile cross the oval, demure face of his wife—she was always thinking of something foreign to life, and in her calm blue eyes something dark and misanthropic was flashing at times. Whenever she was free from household duties she seated herself in the most spacious room by the window, and sat there silently for two or three hours. Her face was turned toward the street, but the look of her eyes was so indifferent to everything that lived and moved there beyond the window, and at the same time it was so fixedly deep, as though she were looking into her very soul. And her walk, too, was queer. Natalya moved about the spacious room slowly and carefully, as if something invisible restrained the freedom of her movements. Their house was filled with heavy and coarsely boastful luxury; everything there was resplendent, screaming of the proprietor's wealth, but the Cossack-wife walked past the costly furniture and the silverware in a shy and somewhat frightened manner, as though fearing lest they might seize and choke her. Evidently, the noisy life of the big commercial town did not interest this silent woman, and whenever she went out driving with her husband, her eyes were fixed on the back of the driver. When her husband took her visiting she went and behaved there just as queerly as at home; when guests came to her house, she zealously served them refreshments, taking no interest whatever in what was said, and showing preference toward none. Only Mayakin, a witty, droll man, at times called forth on her face a smile, as vague as a shadow. He used to say of her:

“It’s a tree—not a woman! But life is like an inextinguishable wood-pile, and every one of us blazes up sometimes. She, too, will take fire; wait, give her time. Then we shall see how she will bloom.”

“Eh!” Ignat used to say to her jestingly. “What are you thinking about? Are you homesick? Brighten up a bit!”

She would remain silent, calmly looking at him.

“You go entirely too often to the church. You should wait. You have plenty of time to pray for your sins. Commit the sins first. You know, if you don’t sin you don’t repent; if you don’t repent, you don’t work out your salvation. You better sin while you are young. Shall we go out for a drive?”

“I don’t feel like going out.”

He used to sit down beside her and embrace her. She was cold, returning his caresses but sparingly. Looking straight into her eyes, he used to say:

“Natalya! Tell me—why are you so sad? Do you feel lonesome here with me?”

“No,” she replied shortly.

“What then is it? Are you longing for your people?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“I am not thinking.”

“What then?”

“Oh, nothing!”

Once he managed to get from her a more complete answer:

“There is something confused in my heart. And also in my eyes. And it always seems to me that all this is not real.”

She waved her hand around her, pointing at the walls, the furniture and everything. Ignat did not reflect on her words, and, laughing, said to her:

“That’s to no purpose! Everything here is genuine. All these are costly, solid things. If you don’t want these, I’ll burn them, I’ll sell them, I’ll give them away—and I’ll get new ones! Do you want me to?”

“What for?” said she calmly.

He wondered, at last, how one so young and healthy could live as though she were sleeping all the time, caring for nothing, going nowhere, except to the church, and shunning everybody. And he used to console her:

“Just wait. You’ll bear a son, and then an altogether different life will commence. You are so sad because you have so little anxiety, and he will give you trouble. You’ll bear me a son, will you not?”

“If it pleases God,” she answered, lowering her head.

Then her mood began to irritate him.

“Well, why do you wear such a long face? You walk as though on glass. You look as if you had ruined somebody’s soul! Eh! You are such a succulent woman, and yet you have no taste for anything. Fool!”

Coming home intoxicated one day, he began to ply her with caresses, while she turned away from him. Then he grew angry, and exclaimed:

“Natalya! Don’t play the fool, look out!”

She turned her face to him and asked calmly:

“What then?”

Ignat became enraged at these words and at her fearless look.

“What?” he roared, coming up close to her.

“Do you wish to kill me?” asked she, not moving from her place, nor winking an eye.

Ignat was accustomed to seeing people tremble before his wrath, and it was strange and offensive to him to see her calm.

“There,” he cried, lifting his hand to strike her. Slowly, but in time, she eluded the blow; then she seized his hand, pushed it away from her, and said in the same tone:

“Don’t you dare to touch me. I will not allow you to come near me!”

Her eyes became smaller and their sharp, metallic glitter sobered Ignat. He understood by her face that she, too, was a strong beast, and if she chose to she wouldn’t admit him to her, even though she were to lose her life.

“Oh,” he growled, and went away.

But having retreated once, he would not do it again: he could not bear that a woman, and his wife at that, should not bow before him—this would have degraded him. He then began to realise that henceforth his wife would never yield to him in any matter, and that an obstinate strife for predominance must start between them.

“Very well! We’ll see who will conquer,” he thought the next day, watching his wife with stern curiosity; and in his soul a strong desire was already raging to start the strife, that he might enjoy his victory the sooner.

But about four days later, Natalya Fominichna announced to her husband that she was pregnant.

Ignat trembled for joy, embraced her firmly, and said in a dull voice:

“You’re a fine fellow, Natalya! Natasha, if it should be a son! If you bear me a son I’ll enrich you! I tell you plainly, I’ll be your slave! By God! I’ll lie down at your feet, and you may trample upon me, if you like!”

“This is not within our power; it’s the will of the Lord,” said she in a low voice.

“Yes, the Lord’s!” exclaimed Ignat with bitterness and drooped his head sadly.

From that moment he began to look after his wife as though she were a little child.

“Why do you sit near the window? Look out. You’ll catch cold in your side; you may take sick,” he used to say to her, both sternly and mildly. “Why do you skip on the staircase? You may hurt yourself. And you had better eat more, eat for two, that he may have enough.”

And the pregnancy made Natalya more morose and silent, as though she were looking still deeper into herself, absorbed in the throbbing of new life within her. But the smile on her lips became clearer, and in her eyes flashed at times something new, weak and timid, like the first ray of the dawn.

When, at last, the time of confinement came, it was early on an autumn morning. At the first cry of pain she uttered, Ignat turned pale and started to say something, but only waved his hand and left the bedroom, where his wife was shrinking convulsively, and went down to the little room which had served his late mother as a chapel. He ordered vodka, seated himself by the table and began to drink sternly, listening to the alarm in the house and to the moans of his wife that came from above. In the corner of the room,

the images of the ikons, indifferent and dark, stood out confusedly, dimly illumined by the glimmering light of the image lamp. There was a stamping and scraping of feet over his head, something heavy was moved from one side of the floor to the other, there was a clattering of dishes, people were bustling hurriedly, up and down the staircase. Everything was being done in haste, yet time was creeping slowly. Ignat could hear a muffled voice from above,

“As it seems, she cannot be delivered that way. We had better send to the church to open the gates of the Lord.”

Vassushka, one of the hangers-on in his house, entered the room next to Ignat’s and began to pray in a loud whisper:

“God, our Lord, descend from the skies in Thy benevolence, born of the Holy Virgin. Thou dost divine the helplessness of human creatures. Forgive Thy servant.”

And suddenly drowning all other sounds, a superhuman, soul-rending cry rang out, and a continuous moan floated softly over the room and died out in the corners, which were filled now with the twilight. Ignat cast stern glances at the ikons, heaved a deep sigh and thought:

“Is it possible that it’s again a daughter?”

At times he arose, stupidly stood in the middle of the room, and crossed himself in silence, bowing before the ikons; then he went back to the table, drank the vodka, which had not made him dizzy during these hours, dozed off, and thus passed the whole night and following morning until noon.

And then, at last, the midwife came down hastily, crying to him in a thin, joyous voice.

“I congratulate you with a son, Ignat Matveyich!”

“You lie!” said he in a dull voice. “What’s the matter with you, batushka!” Heaving a sigh with all the strength of his massive chest, Ignat went down on his knees, and clasping his hands firmly to his breast, muttered in a trembling voice:

“Thank God! Evidently Thou didst not want that my stem should be checked! My sins before Thee shall not remain without repentance. I thank Thee, Oh Lord. Oh!” and, rising to his feet, he immediately began to command noisily:

“Eh! Let someone go to St. Nicholas for a priest. Tell him that Ignat Matveyich asked him to come! Let him come to make a prayer for the woman.”

The chambermaid appeared and said to him with alarm:

“Ignat Matveyich, Natalya Fominichna is calling you. She is feeling bad.”

“Why bad? It’ll pass!” he roared, his eyes flashing cheerfully. “Tell her I’ll be there immediately! Tell her she’s a fine fellow! I’ll just get a present for her and I’ll come! Hold on! Prepare something to eat for the priest. Send somebody after Mayakin!”

His enormous figure looked as though it had grown bigger, and intoxicated with joy, he stupidly tossed about the room; he was smiling, rubbing his hands and casting fervent glances at the images; he crossed himself swinging his hand wide. At last he went up to his wife.

His eyes first of all caught a glimpse of the little red body, which the midwife was bathing in a tub. Noticing him, Ignat stood up on tiptoes, and, folding his hands behind his back, walked up to him, stepping carefully and comically

putting forth his lips. The little one was whimpering and sprawling in the water, naked, impotent and pitiful.

“Look out there! Handle him more carefully! He hasn’t got any bones yet,” said Ignat to the midwife, softly.

She began to laugh, opening her toothless mouth, and cleverly throwing the child over from one hand to the other.

“You better go to your wife.”

He obediently moved toward the bed and asked on his way:

“Well, how is it, Natalya?”

Then, on reaching her, he drew back the bed curtain, which had thrown a shadow over the bed.

“I’ll not survive this,” said she in a low, hoarse voice.

Ignat was silent, fixedly staring at his wife’s face, sunk in the white pillow, over which her dark locks were spread out like dead snakes. Yellow, lifeless, with black circles around her large, wide-open eyes—her face was strange to him. And the glance of those terrible eyes, motionlessly fixed somewhere in the distance through the wall—that, too, was unfamiliar to Ignat. His heart, compressed by a painful foreboding, slackened its joyous throbbing.

“That’s nothing. That’s nothing. It’s always like this,” said he softly, bending over his wife to give her a kiss. But she moaned right into his face:

“I’ll not survive this.”

Her lips were gray and cold, and when he touched them with his own he understood that death was already within her.

“Oh, Lord!” he uttered, in an alarmed whisper, feeling that fright was choking his throat and suppressing his

breath.

“Natasha? What will become of him? He must be nursed! What is the matter with you?”

He almost began to cry at his wife. The midwife was bustling about him; shaking the crying child in the air. She spoke to him reassuringly, but he heard nothing—he could not turn his eyes away from the frightful face of his wife. Her lips were moving, and he heard words spoken in a low voice, but could not understand them. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he spoke in a dull and timid voice: “Just think of it! He cannot do without you; he’s an infant! Gather strength! Drive this thought away from you! Drive it away.”

He talked, yet he understood he was speaking useless words. Tears welled up within him, and in his breast there came a feeling heavy as stone and cold as ice.

“Forgive me. Goodbye! Take care. Look out. Don’t drink,” whispered Natalya, soundlessly.

The priest came, and, covering her face with something, and sighing, began to read gentle, beseeching words:

“Oh God, Almighty Lord, who cureth every disease, cure also Thy servant Natalya, who has just given birth to a child; and restore her from the bed on which she now lies, for in the words of David, ‘We indulge in lawlessness and are wicked in Thine eyes.’”

The old man’s voice was interrupted now and then, his thin face was stern and from his clothes came the odour of rock-rose.

“Guard the infant born of her, guard him from all possible temptation, from all possible cruelty, from all possible storms, from evil spirits, night and day.”

Ignat listened to the prayer, and wept silently. His big, hot tears fell on the bare hand of his wife. But the hand, evidently, did not feel that the tears were dropping upon it: it remained motionless, and the skin did not tremble from the fall of the tears. After the prayer Natalya became unconscious and a day later she died, without saying another word—she died just as quietly as she had lived. Having arranged a pompous funeral, Ignat christened his son, named him Foma, and unwillingly gave his boy into the family of the godfather, his old friend Mayakin, whose wife, too, had given birth to a child not long before. The death of his wife had sown many gray hairs in Ignat's dark beard, but in the stern glitter of his eyes appeared a new expression, gentle, clear and mild.

CHAPTER II

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MAYAKIN lived in an enormous two-story house near a big palisade, where sturdy, old spreading linden trees were growing magnificently. The rank branches covered the windows with a dense, dark embroidery, and the sun in broken rays peeped into the small rooms, which were closely crowded with miscellaneous furniture and big trunks, wherefore a stern and melancholy semi-darkness always reigned there supreme. The family was devout—the odour of wax, of rock-rose and of image-lamp oil filled the house, and penitent sighs and prayers soared about in the air. Religious ceremonials were performed infallibly, with pleasure, absorbing all the free power of the souls of the dwellers of the house. Feminine figures almost noiselessly moved about the rooms in the half-dark, stifling, heavy atmosphere. They were dressed in black, wore soft slippers on their feet, and always had a penitent look on their faces.

The family of Yakov Tarazovich Mayakin consisted of himself, his wife, a daughter and five kinswomen, the youngest of whom was thirty-four years old. These were alike devout and impersonal, and subordinate to Antonina Ivanovna, the mistress of the house. She was a tall, thin woman, with a dark face and with stern gray eyes, which had an imperious and intelligent expression. Mayakin also had a son Taras, but his name was never mentioned in the house; acquaintances knew that since the nineteen-year-old Taras had gone to study in Moscow—he married there three years later, against his father's will—Yakov disowned him.

Taras disappeared without leaving any trace. It was rumoured that he had been sent to Siberia for something.

Yakov Mayakin was very queerly built. Short, thin, lively, with a little red beard, sly greenish eyes, he looked as though he said to each and every one:

“Never mind, sir, don’t be uneasy. Even though I know you for what you are, if you don’t annoy me I will not give you away.”

His beard resembled an egg in shape and was monstrously big. His high forehead, covered with wrinkles, joined his bald crown, and it seemed as though he really had two faces—one an open, penetrating and intellectual face, with a long gristle nose, and above this face another one, eyeless and mouthless, covered with wrinkles, behind which Mayakin seemed to hide his eyes and his lips until a certain time; and when that time had arrived, he would look at the world with different eyes and smile a different smile.

He was the owner of a rope-yard and kept a store in town near the harbour. In this store, filled up to the ceiling with rope, twine, hemp and tow, he had a small room with a creaking glass door. In this room stood a big, old, dilapidated table, and near it a deep armchair, covered with oilcloth, in which Mayakin sat all day long, sipping tea and always reading the same “Moskovskiya Vedomosty,” to which he subscribed, year in and year out, all his life. Among merchants he enjoyed the respect and reputation of a “brainy” man, and he was very fond of boasting of the antiquity of his race, saying in a hoarse voice:

“We, the Mayakins, were merchants during the reign of ‘Mother’ Catherine, consequently I am a pure-blooded man.”

In this family Ignat Gordyeff's son lived for six years. By the time he was seven years old Foma was a big-headed, broad-shouldered boy, seemingly older than his years, both in his size and in the serious look of his dark, almond-shaped eyes. Quiet, silent and persistent in his childish desires, he spent all his days over his playthings, with Mayakin's daughter, Luba, quietly looked after by one of the kinswomen, a stout, pock-marked old maid, who was, for some reason or other, nicknamed "Buzya." She was a dull, somewhat timid creature; and even to the children she spoke in a low voice, in words of monosyllables. Having devoted her time to learning prayers, she had no stories to tell Foma.

Foma was on friendly terms with the little girl, but when she angered or teased him he turned pale, his nostrils became distended, his eyes stared comically and he beat her audaciously. She cried, ran to her mother and complained to her, but Antonina loved Foma and she paid but little attention to her daughter's complaints, which strengthened the friendship between the children still more. Foma's day was long and uniform. Getting out of bed and washing himself, he used to place himself before the image, and under the whispering of the pock-marked Buzya he recited long prayers. Then they drank tea and ate many biscuits, cakes and pies. After tea—during the summer—the children went to the big palisade, which ran down to a ravine, whose bottom always looked dark and damp, filling them with terror. The children were not allowed to go even to the edge of the ravine, and this inspired in them a fear of it. In winter, from tea time to dinner, they played in the

house when it was very cold outside, or went out in the yard to slide down the big ice hill.

They had dinner at noon, "in Russian style," as Mayakin said. At first a big bowl of fat, sour cabbage soup was served with rye biscuits in, but without meat, then the same soup was eaten with meat cut into small pieces; then they ate roast meat—pork, goose, veal or rennet, with gruel—then again a bowl of soup with vermicelli, and all this was usually followed by dessert. They drank kvass made of red bilberries, juniper-berries, or of bread—Antonina Ivanovna always carried a stock of different kinds of kvass. They ate in silence, only now and then uttering a sigh of fatigue; the children each ate out of a separate bowl, the adults eating out of one bowl. Stupefied by such a dinner, they went to sleep; and for two or three hours Mayakin's house was filled with snoring and with drowsy sighs.

Awaking from sleep, they drank tea and talked about local news, the choristers, the deacons, weddings, or the dishonourable conduct of this or that merchant. After tea Mayakin used to say to his wife:

"Well, mother, hand me the Bible."

Yakov Tarasovich used to read the Book of Job more often than anything else. Putting his heavy, silver-framed spectacles on his big, ravenous nose, he looked around at his listeners to see whether all were in their places.

They were all seated where he was accustomed to see them and on their faces was a familiar, dull and timid expression of piety.

"There was a man in the land of Uz," began Mayakin, in a hoarse voice, and Foma, sitting beside Luba on the lounge

in the corner of the room, knew beforehand that soon his godfather would become silent and pat his bald head with his hand. He sat and, listening, pictured to himself this man from the land of Uz. The man was tall and bare, his eyes were enormously large, like those of the image of the Saviour, and his voice was like a big brass trumpet on which the soldiers played in the camps. The man was constantly growing bigger and bigger; and, reaching the sky, he thrust his dark hands into the clouds, and, tearing them asunder, cried out in a terrible voice:

“Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?”

Dread fell on Foma, and he trembled, slumber fled from his eyes, he heard the voice of his godfather, who said, with a light smile, now and then pinching his beard:

“See how audacious he was!”

The boy knew that his godfather spoke of the man from the land of Uz, and the godfather’s smile soothed the child. So the man would not break the sky; he would not rend it asunder with his terrible arms. And then Foma sees the man again—he sits on the ground, “his flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust, his skin is broken.” But now he is small and wretched, he is like a beggar at the church porch.

Here he says:

“What is man, that he should be clean? And he which is born of woman, that he should be righteous?” [These words attributed by Mayakin to Job are from Eliphaz the Temanite’s reply—Translator’s Note.]

“He says this to God,” explained Mayakin, inspired. “How, says he, can I be righteous, since I am made of flesh? That’s