

Albert

Leo Tolstoy

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Chapter I

Five wealthy young men had come, after two in the morning, to amuse themselves at a small Petersburg party.

Much champagne had been drunk, most of the men were very young, the girls were pretty, the piano and violin indefatigably played one polka after another, and dancing and noise went on unceasingly: yet for some reason it was dull and awkward, and, as often happens, everybody felt that it was all unnecessary and was not the thing.

Several times they tried to get things going, but forced merriment was worse even than boredom.

One of the five young men, more dissatisfied than the others with himself, with the others, and with the whole evening, rose with a feeling of disgust, found his hat, and went out quietly, intending to go home.

There was no one in the ante-room, but in the adjoining room he heard two voices disputing. The young man stopped to listen.

“You can’t, there are guests there,” said a woman’s voice.

“Let me in, please. I’m all right!” a man’s weak voice entreated.

“No, I won’t let you in without Madame’s permission,” said the woman. “Where are you going? Ah! What a man you are!”

The door burst open and a strange figure of a man appeared on the threshold. The servant on seeing a visitor no longer protested, and the strange figure, bowing timidly, entered the room, swaying on his bent legs. He was of medium height, with a narrow, stooping back, and long tangled hair. He wore a short overcoat, and narrow torn trousers over a pair of rough uncleaned boots. A necktie, twisted into a cord, was fastened round his long white neck. A dirty shirt showed from under his coat and hung over his thin hands.

Yet despite the extreme emaciation of his body, his face was white and delicate, and freshness and colour played on his cheeks above his scanty black beard and whiskers. His unkempt hair, thrown back, revealed a rather low and extremely clear forehead. His dark languid eyes looked softly, imploringly, and yet with dignity, before him. Their expression corresponded alluringly with that of the fresh lips, curved at the corners, which showed from under his thin moustache.

Having advanced a few steps he stopped, turned to the young man, and smiled. He seemed to smile with difficulty, but when the smile lit up his face the young man – without knowing why – smiled too.

“Who is that?” he whispered to the servant, when the strange figure had passed into the room from which came the sounds of a dance.

“A crazy musician from the theatre,” replied the maid. “He comes sometimes to see the mistress.”

“Where have you been, Delesov?” someone just then called out, and the young man, who was named Delesov, returned to the ballroom.

The musician was standing at the door and, looking at the dancers, showed by his smile, his look, and the tapping of his foot, the satisfaction the spectacle afforded him.

“Come in and dance yourself,” said one of the visitors to him. The musician bowed and looked inquiringly at the hostess.

“Go, go ... Why not, when the gentlemen ask you to?” she said.

The thin, weak limbs of the musician suddenly came into active motion, and winking, smiling, and twitching, he began to prance awkwardly and heavily about the room. In the middle of the quadrille a merry officer, who danced very vivaciously and well, accidentally bumped into the musician with his back. The latter's weak and weary legs did not maintain their balance and after a few stumbling steps aside, he fell full length on the floor. Notwithstanding the dull thud produced by his fall, at first nearly everyone burst out laughing. But the musician did not get up. The visitors grew silent and even the piano ceased. Delesov and the hostess were the first to run up to the fallen man. He was lying on his elbow, staring with dull eyes at the floor. When they lifted him and seated him on a chair, he brushed the hair back from his forehead with a quick movement of his bony hand and began to smile without answering their questions.

"Mr. Albert! Mr. Albert!" said the hostess. "Have you hurt yourself? Where? There now, I said you ought not to dance. He is so weak," she continued, addressing her guests, "— he can hardly walk. How could he dance?"

"Who is he?" they asked her.

"A poor man — an artist. A very good fellow, but pitiable, as you see."

She said this unembarrassed by the presence of the musician. He suddenly came to himself and, as if afraid of something, shrank into a heap and pushed those around him away.

"It's all nothing!" he suddenly said, rising from his chair with an obvious effort.

And to show that he was not at all hurt he went into the middle of the room and tried to jump about, but staggered and would have fallen down again had someone not supported him.

Everyone felt awkward, and looking at him they all became silent.

The musician's eyes again grew dim, and evidently oblivious of everyone he began rubbing his knee with his hand. Suddenly he raised his head, advanced a trembling leg, threw back his hair with the same heedless movement as before, and going up to the violinist took his violin from him.

"It's nothing!" he said once more, flourishing the violin. "Gentlemen, let's have some music!"

"What a strange person!" the visitors remarked to one another.

"Perhaps a fine talent is perishing in this unfortunate creature," said one of the guests.

"Yes, he's pitiable, pitiable!" said a third.

"What a beautiful face! ... There is something extraordinary about him," said Delesov. "Let us see ..."

Chapter II

Albert meanwhile, paying no attention to anyone, pressed the violin to his shoulder and paced slowly up and down by the piano tuning it. His lips took on an impassive expression, his eyes could not be seen, but his narrow bony back, his long white neck, his crooked legs and shaggy black head, presented a queer — but for some reason not at all ridiculous — spectacle. Having tuned the violin he briskly struck a chord, and throwing back his head turned to the pianist who was preparing to accompany him.

"Melancolie G-dur!" he said, addressing the pianist with a gesture of command. Then, as if begging forgiveness for that gesture, he smiled meekly, and glanced around at the audience with that same smile. Having pushed back his hair with the hand in which he held the bow, he stopped

at the corner of the piano, and with a smooth and easy movement drew the bow across the strings. A clear melodious sound was borne through the room and complete silence ensued.

After that first note the theme flowed freely and elegantly, suddenly illumining the inner world of every listener with an unexpectedly clear and tranquilizing light. Not one false or exaggerated sound impaired the acquiescence of the listeners: the notes were all clear, elegant, and significant. Everyone silently followed their development with tremulous expectation. From the state of dullness, noisy distraction and mental torpor in which they had been, these people were suddenly and imperceptibly carried into another quite different world that they had forgotten.

Now a calm contemplation of the past arose in their souls, now an impassioned memory of some past happiness, now a boundless desire for power and splendour, now a feeling of resignation, of unsatisfied love and sadness. Sounds now tenderly sad, now vehemently despairing, mingled freely, flowing and flowing one after the other so elegantly, so strongly, and so unconsciously, that the sounds themselves were not noticed, but there flowed of itself into the soul a beautiful torrent of poetry, long familiar but only now expressed. At each note Albert grew taller and taller. He was far from appearing misshapen or strange. Pressing the violin with his chin and listening to his notes with an expression of passionate attention, he convulsively moved his feet. Now he straightened himself to his full height, now he strenuously bent his back. His left arm seemed to have become set in the bent position to which he had strained it and only the bony fingers moved convulsively: the right arm moved smoothly, elegantly, and almost imperceptibly. His face shone with uninterrupted, ecstatic joy; his eyes burnt with a bright, dry brilliance, his nostrils expanded, his red lips opened with delight.

Sometimes his head bent closer to the violin, his eyes closed, and his face, half covered by his hair, lit up with a smile of mild rapture. Sometimes he drew himself up rapidly, advancing one foot, and his clear brow and the beaming look he cast round the room gleamed with pride, dignity, and a consciousness of power. Once the pianist blundered and struck a wrong chord. Physical suffering was apparent in the whole face and figure of the musician. He paused for an instant and stamping his foot with an expression of childish anger, cried: "Moll, ce moll!" The Pianist recovered himself. Albert closed his eyes, smiled, and again forgetting himself, the others, and the whole world, gave himself up rapturously to his task.

All who were in the room preserved a submissive silence while Albert was playing, and seemed to live and breathe only in his music.

The merry officer sat motionless on a chair by a window, directing a lifeless gaze upon the floor and breathing slowly and heavily. The girls sat in complete silence along the walls, and only occasionally threw approving and bewildered glances at one another. The hostess's fat smiling face expanded with pleasure. The pianist riveted his eyes on Albert's face and, with a fear of blundering which expressed itself in his whole taut figure, tried to keep up with him. One of the visitors who had drunk more than the others lay prone on the sofa, trying not to move for fear of betraying his agitation. Delesov experienced an unaccustomed sensation. It was as if a cold circle, now expanding, now contracting, held his head in a vice. The roots of his hair became sensitive, cold shivers ran up his spine, something rising higher and higher in his throat pricked his nose and palate as if with fine needles, and tears involuntarily wetted his cheeks. He shook himself, tried to restrain them and wipe them unperceived, but others rose and ran down his cheeks. By some strange concatenation of impressions the first sounds of Albert's violin carried Delesov back to his early youth. Now no longer very young, tired of life and exhausted, he suddenly felt himself a self-satisfied, good-looking, blissfully foolish and unconsciously happy lad of seventeen.

He remembered his first love — for his cousin in a little pink dress;; remembered his first declaration of love made in a linden avenue; remembered the warmth and incomprehensible delight of a spontaneous kiss, and the magic and undivined mystery of the Nature that then surrounded him. In the memories that returned to him she shone out amid a mist of vague hopes, uncomprehended desires, and questioning faith in the possibility of impossible happiness. All the unappreciated moments of that time arose before him one after another, not as insignificant moments of a fleeting present, but as arrested, growing, reproachful images of the past. He contemplated them with joy, and wept — wept not because the time was past that he might have spent better (if he had it again he would not have undertaken to employ it better), but merely because it was past and would never return. Memories rose up of themselves, and Albert's violin repeated again and again: "For you that time of vigour, love, and happiness has passed for ever, and will not return. Weep for it, shed all your tears, die weeping for that time — that is the best happiness left for you."

Towards the end of the last variation Albert's face grew red, his eyes burnt and glowed, and large drops of perspiration ran down his cheeks. The veins of his forehead swelled up, his whole body came more and more into motion, his pale lips no longer closed, and his whole figure expressed ecstatic eagerness for enjoyment.

Passionately swaying his whole body and tossing back his hair he lowered the violin, and with a smile of proud dignity and happiness surveyed the audience. Then his back sagged, his head hung down, his lips closed, his eyes grew dim, and he timidly glanced round as if ashamed of himself, and made his way stumblingly into the other room.

Chapter III

Something strange occurred with everyone present and something strange was felt in the dead silence that followed Albert's playing. It was as if each would have liked to express what all this meant, but was unable to do so. What did it mean — this bright hot room, brilliant women, the dawn in the windows, excitement in the blood, and the pure impression left by sounds that had flowed past? But no one even tried to say what it all meant: on the contrary everyone, unable to dwell in those regions which the new impression had revealed to them, rebelled against it.

"He really plays well, you know!" said the officer.

"Wonderfully!" replied Delesov, stealthily wiping his cheek with his sleeve.

"However, it's time for us to be going," said the man who was lying on the sofa, having somewhat recovered. "We must give him something. Let's make a collection."

Meanwhile Albert sat alone on a sofa in the next room. Leaning his elbows on his bony knees he stroked his face and ruffled his hair with his moist and dirty hands, smiling happily to himself.

They made a good collection, which Delesov offered to hand to Albert.

Moreover it had occurred to Delesov, on whom the music had made an unusual and powerful impression, to be of use to this man. It occurred to him to take him home, dress him, get him a place somewhere, and in general rescue him for his sordid condition.

"Well, are you tired?" he asked, coming up to him.

Albert smiled.

"You have real talent. You ought to study music seriously and give public performances."

"I'd like to have something to drink," said Albert, as if just awake.

Delesov brought some wine, and the musician eagerly drank two glasses.

“What excellent wine!” he said.

“What a delightful thing that Melancolie is!” said Delesov.

“Oh, yes, yes!” replied Albert with a smile — “but excuse me: I don’t know with whom I have the honour of speaking, maybe you are a count, or a prince: could you, perhaps, lend me a little money?” He paused a little “I have nothing ... I am a poor man. I couldn’t pay it back.”

Delesov flushed: he felt awkward, and hastily handed the musician the money that had been collected.

“Thank you very much!” said Albert, seizing the money. “Now let’s have some music. I’ll play for you as much as you like — only let me have a drink of something, a drink...” he added rising.

Delesov brought him some more wine and asked him to sit beside him.

“Excuse me if I am frank with you,” he said, “your talent interests me so much. It seems to me you are not in good circumstances.”

Albert looked now at Delesov and now at his hostess who had entered the room.

“Allow me to offer you my services,” continued Delesov. “If you are in need of anything I should be glad if you would stay with me for a time. I am living alone and could perhaps be of use to you.”

Albert smiled and made no reply.

“Why don’t you thank him?” said the hostess. “Of course it is a godsend for you. Only I should not advise you to,” she continued, turning to Delesov and shaking her head disapprovingly.

“I am very grateful to you!” said Albert, pressing Delesov’s hand with his own moist ones — “Only let us have some music now, please.”

But the other visitors were preparing to leave, and despite Albert’s endeavours to persuade them to stay they went out into the hall. Albert took leave of the hostess, put on his shabby broad-brimmed hat and old summer cloak, which was his only winter clothing, and went out into the porch with Delesov.

When Delesov had seated himself with his new acquaintance in his carriage, and became aware of the unpleasant odour of drunkenness and uncleanness which emanated so strongly from the musician, he began to repent of his action and blamed himself for childish softheartedness and imprudence. Besides, everything Albert said was so stupid and trivial, and the fresh air suddenly made him so disgustingly drunk that Delesov was repelled. “What am I to do with him?” he thought.

When they had driven for a quarter of an hour Albert grew silent, his hat fell down at his feet, and he himself tumbled into a corner of the carriage and began to snore. The wheels continued to creak monotonously over the frozen snow; the feeble light of dawn hardly penetrated the frozen windows.

Delesov turned and looked at his companion. The long body covered by the cloak lay lifelessly beside him. The long head with its big black nose seemed to sway on that body, but looking closer Delesov saw that what he had taken for nose and face was hair, and that the real face hung lower. He stooped and was able to distinguish Albert’s features. Then the beauty of the forehead and calmly closed lips struck him again.

Under the influence of tired nerves, restlessness from lack of sleep at that hour of the morning, and of the music he had heard, Delesov, looking at that face, let himself again be carried back to the blissful world into which he had glanced that night; he again recalled the happy and

magnanimous days of his youth and no longer repented of what he had done. At that moment he was sincerely and warmly attached to Albert, and firmly resolved to be of use to him.

Chapter IV

Next morning when he was awakened to go to his office, Delesov with a feeling of unpleasant surprise saw around him his old screen, his old valet, and his watch lying on the small side-table. "But what did I expect to see if not what is always around me?" he asked himself. Then he remembered the musician's black eyes and happy smile, the motif of *Melancolie*, and all the strange experiences of the previous night passed through his mind.

He had no time however to consider whether he had acted well or badly by taking the musician into his house. While dressing he mapped out the day, took his papers, gave the necessary household orders, and hurriedly put on his overcoat and overshoes.

Passing the dining-room door he looked in. Albert, after tossing about, had sunk his face in the pillow, and lay in his dirty ragged shirt, dead asleep on the leather sofa where he had been deposited unconscious the night before. "There's something wrong!" thought Delesov involuntarily.

"Please go to Boryuzovski and ask him to lend me a violin for a couple of days," he said to his manservant. "When he wakes up, give him coffee and let him have some underclothing and old clothes of mine. In general, make him comfortable — please!"

On returning late in the evening Delesov was surprised not to find Albert.

"Where is he?" he asked his man.

"He went away immediately after dinner," replied the servant. "He took the violin and went away. He promised to be back in an hour, but he's not here yet."

"Tut, tut! How provoking!" muttered Delesov. "Why did you let him go, Zakhar?"

Zakhar was a Petersburg valet who had been in Delesov's service for eight years. Delesov, being a lonely bachelor, could not help confiding his intentions to him, and liked to know his opinions about all his undertakings.

"How could I dare not to let him?" Zakhar replied, toying with the fob of his watch. "If you had told me to keep him in I might have amused him at home. But you only spoke to me about clothes."

"Pshaw! How provoking! Well, and what was he doing here without me?"

Zakhar smiled.

"One can well call him an 'artist', sir. [Note: In addition to its proper meaning, the word "artist" was used in Russian to denote a thief, or a man dextrous at anything, good or bad.] As soon as he woke he asked for Madeira, and then he amused himself with the cook and with the neighbours manservant. He is so funny. However, he is good-natured. I gave him tea and brought him dinner. He would not eat anything himself, but kept inviting me to do so. But when it comes to playing the violin, even Izler has few artists like him. One may well befriend such a man. When he played *Down the Little Mother Volga* to us it was as if a man were weeping. It was too beautiful. Even the servants from all the flats came to our back entrance to hear him."

"Well, and did you get him dressed?" his master interrupted him.

"Of course. I gave him a night-shirt of yours and put my own paletot on him. A man like that is worth helping — he really is a dear fellow!" Zakhar smiled.

“He kept asking me what your rank is, whether you have influential acquaintances, and how many serfs you own.”

“Well, all right, but now he must be found, and in future don’t let him have anything to drink, or it’ll be worse for him.”

“That’s true,” Zakhar interjected. “He is evidently feeble; our old master had a clerk like that...”

But Delesov who had long known the story of the clerk who took hopelessly to drink, did not let Zakhar finish, and telling him to get everything ready for the night, sent him out to find Albert and bring him back.

He then went to bed and put out the light, but could not fall asleep for a long time, thinking about Albert. “Though it may seem strange to many of my acquaintances,” he thought, “yet one so seldom does anything for others that one ought to thank God when such an opportunity presents itself, and I will not miss it. I will do anything — positively anything in my power — to help him. He may not be mad at all, but only under the influence of drink. It won’t cost me very much. Where there’s enough for one there’s enough for two. Let him live with me awhile, then we’ll find him a place or arrange a concert for him and pull him out of the shallows, and then see what happens.”

He experienced a pleasant feeling of self-satisfaction after this reflection. “Really I’m not altogether a bed fellow,” he thought. “Not at all bad even — when I compare myself with others.”

He was already falling asleep when the sound of opening doors and of footsteps in the hall roused him.

“Well, I’ll be stricter with him,” he thought, “that will be best; and I must do it.”

He rang.

“Have you brought him back?” he asked when Zakhar entered.

“A pitiable man, sir,” said Zakhar, shaking his head significantly and closing his eyes.

“Is he drunk?”

“He is very weak.”

“And has he the violin?”

“I’ve brought it back. The lady gave it me.”

“Well, please don’t let him in here now. Put him to bed, and tomorrow be sure not to let him leave the house on any account.”

But before Zakhar was out of the room Albert entered it

Chapter V

“Do you want to sleep already?” asked Albert with a smile. “And I have been at Anna Ivanovna’s and had a very pleasant evening. We had music, and laughed, and there was delightful company. Let me have a glass of something,” he added, taking hold of a water-bottle that stood on a little table, “- but not water.”

Albert was just the same as he had been the previous evening: the same beautiful smile in his eyes and on his lips, the same bright inspired forehead, and the same feeble limbs. Zakhar’s paletot fitted him well, and the clean wide unstarched collar of the nightshirt encircled his thin white neck picturesquely, giving him a particularly childlike and innocent look. He sat down on Delesov’s bed and looked at him silently with a happy and grateful smile. Delesov looked into his eyes, and again suddenly felt himself captivated by that smile. He no longer wanted to sleep, he

forgot that it was his duty to be stern: on the contrary he wished to make merry, to hear music, and to chat amicably with Albert till morning. He told Zakhar to bring a bottle of wine, some cigarettes, and the violin.

“There, that’s splendid!” said Albert. “It’s still early, and we’ll have some music. I’ll play for you as much as you like.”

Zakhar, with evident pleasure, brought a bottle of Lafitte, two tumblers, some mild cigarettes such as Albert smoked, and the violin. But instead of going to bed as his master told him to, he himself lit a cigar and sat down in the adjoining room.

“Let us have a talk,” said Delesov to the musician, who was about to take up the violin.

Albert submissively sat down on the bed and again smiled joyfully.

“Oh yes!” said he, suddenly striking his forehead with his hand and assuming an anxiously inquisitive expression. (A change of expression always preceded anything he was about to say.) “Allow me to ask- “ he made a slight pause — “that gentleman who was there with you last night — you called him N — , isn’t he the son of the celebrated N — ?”

“His own son,” Delesov answered, not at all understanding how that could interest Albert.

“Exactly!” said Albert with a self-satisfied smile. “I noticed at once something particularly aristocratic in his manner. I love aristocrats: there is something particularly beautiful and elegant in an aristocrat. And that officer who dances so well?” he asked. “I liked him very much too: he is so merry and so fine. Isn’t he Adjutant N.N.?”

“Which one?” asked Delesov.

“The one who bumped against me when we were dancing. He must be an excellent fellow.”

“No, he’s a shallow fellow,” Delesov replied.

“Oh, no!” Albert warmly defended him. “There is something very, very pleasant about him. He is a capital musician,” he added. “He played something there out of an opera. It’s a long time since I took such a liking to anyone.”

“Yes, he plays well, but I don’t like his playing,” said Delesov, wishing to get his companion to talk about music. “He does not understand classical music — Donizetti and Bellini, you know, are not music. You think so too, no doubt?”

“Oh, no, no, excuse me!” began Albert with a gentle, pleading look. “The old music is music, and the new music is music. There are extraordinary beauties in the new music too. *Sonnambula*, and the finale of *Lucia*, and Chopin, and Robert! [Note: *Sonnambula*, opera by Bellini, produced in 1831. *Lucia di Lammermoor*, opera by Donizetti, produced in 1835. *Robert the Devil*, opera by Meyerbeer, produced in 1831; or possibly the allusion may be to *Roberto Devereux*, by Donizetti.] I often think — “ he paused, evidently collecting his thoughts — “that if Beethoven were alive he would weep with joy listening to *Sonnambula* for the first time when Viardot and Rubini were here. [Note: Pauline Viardot-Garcia, the celebrated operatic singer with whom Turgenev had a close friendship for many years. Rubini, an Italian tenor who had great success in Russia in the ‘forties of the last century.] It was like this ... “ he said, and his eyes glistened as he made a gesture with both arms as though tearing something out of his breast. “A little more and it would have been impossible to bear it.”

“And what do you think of the opera at the present time?” asked Delesov.

“Bosio is good, very good,” [Note: *Angidina Bosio*, an Italian singer, who was in Petersburg in 1856–9.] he said, “extraordinarily exquisite, but she does not touch one here,” pointing to his sunken chest. “A singer needs passion, and she has none. She gives pleasure but does not torment.”

“How about Lablache?” [Note: Luigi Lablache. He was regarded as the chief basso of modern times.]

“I heard him in Paris in the *Barbier de Seville*. He was unique then, but now he is old: he cannot be an artist, he is old.”

“Well, what if he is old? He is still good in *morceaux d’ensemble*,” said Delesov, who was in the habit of saying that of Lablache.

“How ‘what if he is old?’” rejoined Albert severely. “He should not be old. An artist should not be old. Much is needed for art, but above all, fire!” said he with glittering eyes and stretching both arms upwards.

And a terrible inner fire really seemed to burn in his whole body.

“O my God!” he suddenly exclaimed. “Don’t you know Petrov, the artist?”

“No, I don’t,” Delesov replied, smiling.

“How I should like you to make his acquaintance! You would enjoy talks with him. How well he understands art, too! I used often to meet him at Anna Ivanovna’s, but now she is angry with him for some reason. I should very much like you to know him. He has great talent, great talent!”

“Does he paint now?” Delesov asked.

“I don’t know, I think not, but he was an Academy artist. What ideas he has! It’s wonderful when he talks sometimes. Oh, Petrov has great talent, only he leads a very gay life ... that’s a pity,” Albert added with a smile. After that he got off the bed, took the violin, and began tuning it.

“Is it long since you were at the opera?” Delesov asked.

Albert looked round and sighed.

“Ah, I can’t go there any more!” he said. “I will tell you!” And clutching his head he again sat down beside Delesov and muttered almost in a whisper: “I can’t go there. I can’t play there — I have nothing — nothing! No clothes, no home, no violin. It is a miserable life! A miserable life!” he repeated several times. And why should I go there? What for? No need!” he said, smiling. “Ah! Don Juan ... ”

He struck his head with his hand.

“Then let us go there together sometime,” said Delesov.

Without answering, Albert jumped up, seized the violin, and began playing the finale of the first act of *Don Juan*, telling the story of the opera in his own words.

Delesov felt the hair stir on his head as Albert played the voice of the dying commandant.

“No!” said Albert, putting down the violin. “I cannot play today. I have had too much to drink.”

But after that he went up to the table, filled a tumbler with wine, drank it at a gulp, and again sat down on Delesov’s bed.

Delesov looked at Albert, not taking his eyes off him. Occasionally Albert smiled, and so did Delesov. They were both silent; but their looks and smiles created more and more affectionate relations between them. Delesov felt himself growing fonder of the man, and experienced an incomprehensible joy.

“Have you ever been in love?” he suddenly asked.

Albert thought for a few seconds, and then a sad smile lit up his face. He leaned over to Delesov and looked attentively in his eyes.

“Why have you asked me that?” he whispered. “I will tell you everything, because I like you,” he continued, after looking at him for a while and then glancing round. “I won’t deceive you, but will tell you everything from the beginning, just as it happened.” He stopped, his eyes wild

and strangely fixed. "You know that my mind is weak," he suddenly said. "Yes, yes," he went on. "Anna Ivanovna is sure to have told you. She tells everybody that I am mad! That is not true; she says it as a joke, she is a kindly woman, and I have really not been quite well for some time."

He stopped again and gazed with fixed wide-open eyes at the dark doorway. "You asked whether I have been in love? ... Yes, I have been in love," he whispered, lifting his brows. "It happened long ago, when I still had my job in the theatre. I used to play second violin at the Opera, and she used to have the lower-tier box next the stage, on the left."

He got up and leaned over to Delesov's ear.

"No, why should I name her?" he said. "You no doubt know her — everybody knows her. I kept silent and only looked at her; I knew I was a poor artist, and she an aristocratic lady. I knew that very well. I only looked at her and planned nothing..."

Albert reflected, trying to remember.

How it happened I don't remember; but I was once called in to accompany her on the violin... but what was I, a poor artist?" he said, shaking his head and smiling. "But no, I can't tell it..." he added, clutching head. "How happy I was!"

"Yes? And did you often go to her house?" Delesov asked.

"Once! Once only...but it was my own fault. I was mad! I was a poor artist, and she an aristocratic lady. I ought not to have said anything to her. But I went mad and acted like a fool. Since then all has been over for me. Petrov told the truth, that it would have been better for me to have seen her only at the theatre..."

"What was it you did?" asked Delesov.

"Ah, wait! Wait! I can't speak of that!"

With his face hidden in his hands he remained silent for some time.

"I came late to the orchestra. Petrov and I had been drinking that evening, and I was distracted. She was sitting in her box talking to a general. I don't know who that general was. She sat at the very edge of the box, with her arm on the ledge; she had on a white dress and pearls round her neck. She talked to him and looked at me. She looked at me twice. Her hair was done like this. I was not playing, but stood near the basses and looked at her. Then for the first time I felt strange. She smiled at the general and looked at me. I felt she was speaking about me, and I suddenly saw that I was not in the orchestra, but in the box beside her and holding her arm, just there... How was that?" Albert asked after a short silence.

"That was vivid imagination," said Delesov.

"No, no! ... but I don't know how to tell it," Albert replied, frowning. "Even then I was poor and had no lodging, and when I went to the theatre I sometimes stayed the night there."

"What, at the theatre? In that dark, empty place?"

"Oh, I am not afraid of such nonsense. Wait a bit... When they had all gone away I would go to the box where she had been sitting and sleep there. That was my one delight. What nights I spent there! But once it began again. Many things appeared to me in the night, but I can't tell you much." Albert glanced at Delesov with downcast eyes. "What was it?" he asked.

"It is strange!" said Delesov.

"No, wait, wait!" he continued, whispering in Delesov's ear. "I kissed her hand, wept there beside her, and talked much with her. I inhaled the scent of her perfume and heard her voice. She told me much in one night. Then I took my violin and played softly; and I played splendidly. But I felt frightened. I am not afraid of those foolish things and don't believe in them, but I was afraid for my head," he said, touching his forehead with an amiable smile. "I was frightened for

my poor wits. It seemed to me that something had happened to my head. Perhaps it's nothing. What do you think?"

Both were silent for some minutes.

"Und wenn die Wolken sie verhullen Die Sonne bleibt doch ewig klar." ["And even if the clouds do hide it, The sun remains for ever clear."]

Albert said with a soft smile. "Is not that so?" he added.

"Ich auch habe gelebt und genossen..." ["I, too, have lived and enjoyed."]

"Ah, how well old Petrov would have explained it all to you!"

Delesov looked silently and in terror at the pale and agitated face of his companion. "Do you know the "Juristen-Waltzer?" Albert suddenly exclaimed, and without awaiting an answer he jumped up, seized the violin, and began to play the merry waltz tune, forgetting himself completely, and evidently imagining that a whole orchestra was playing with him. He smiled, swayed, shifted his feet, and played superbly.

"Eh! Enough of merrymaking!" he said when he had finished, and flourished the violin.

"I am going," he said, after sitting silently for a while — "won't you come with me?"

"Where to?" Delesov asked in surprise.

"Let's go to Anna Ivanovna's again. It's gay there — noise, people, music!"

At first Delesov almost consented, but bethinking himself he tried to persuade Albert not to go that night.

"Only for a moment."

"No, really, you'd better not!"

Albert sighed and put down the violin.

"So, I must stay here?"

And looking again at the table (there was no wine left) he said goodnight and left the room.

Delesov rang.

"See that you don't let Mr. Albert go anywhere without my permission," he said to Zakhar.

Chapter VI

The next day was a holiday.

Delesov was already awake and sitting in his drawing-room drinking coffee and reading a book. Albert had not yet stirred in the next room.

Zakhar cautiously opened the door and looked into the dining-room.

"Would you believe it, sir? He is asleep on the bare sofa! He wouldn't have anything spread on it, really. Like a little child. Truly an artist."

Towards noon groaning and coughing were heard through the door.

Zakhar again went into the dining-room, and Delesov could hear his kindly voice and Albert's weak, entreating one.

"Well?" he asked, when Zakhar returned.

"He's fretting, sir, won't wash, and seems gloomy. He keeps asking for a drink."

"No. Having taken this matter up I must show character," said Delesov to himself.

He ordered that no wine should be given to Albert and resumed his book, but involuntarily listened to what was going on in the dining-room. There was no sound of movement there and an occasional deep cough and spitting was all that could be heard. Two hours passed. Having

dressed, Delesov decided to look in at his visitor before going out. Albert was sitting motionless at the window, his head resting on his hand. He looked round. His face was yellow, wrinkled, and not merely sad but profoundly miserable. He tried to smile by way of greeting, but his face took on a still more sorrowful expression. He seemed ready to cry. He rose with difficulty and bowed.

“If I might just have a glass of simple vodka!” he said with a look of entreaty. “I am so weak — please!”

“Coffee will do you more good. Have some of that instead.”

Albert’s face suddenly lost its childlike expression; he looked coldly, dim-eyed, out of the window, and sank feebly onto his chair.

“Or would you like some lunch?”

“No thank you, I have no appetite.”

“If you wish to play the violin you will not disturb me,” said Delesov, laying the violin on the table.

Albert looked at the violin with a contemptuous smile.

“No,” he said. “I am too weak, I can’t play,” and he pushed the instrument away from him.

After that, whatever Delesov might say, offering to go for a walk with him, and to the theatre in the evening, he only bowed humbly and remained stubbornly silent. Delesov went out, paid several calls, dined with friends, and before going to the theatre returned home to change and to see what the musician was doing. Albert was sitting in the dark hall, leaning his head in his hands and looking at the heated stove. He was neatly dressed, washed, and his hair was brushed; but his eyes were dim and lifeless, and his whole figure expressed weakness and exhaustion even more than in the morning.

“Have you dined, Mr. Albert?” asked Delesov.

Albert made an affirmative gesture with his head and, after a frightened look at Delesov, lowered his eyes. Delesov felt uncomfortable.

“I spoke to the director of the theatre about you today,” he said, also lowering his eyes. “He will be very glad to receive you if you will let him hear you.” “Thank you, I cannot play!” muttered Albert under his breath, and went into his room, shutting the door behind him very softly.

A few minutes later the door-knob was turned just as gently, and he came out of the room with the violin. With a rapid and hostile glance at Delesov he placed the violin on a chair and disappeared again.

Delesov shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“What more am I to do? In what am I to blame?” he thought.

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“Well, how is the musician?” was his first question when he returned home late that evening.

“Bad!” said Zakhar, briefly and clearly. “He has been sighing and coughing and says nothing, except that he started begging for vodka four or five times. At last I gave him one glass — or else we might finish him off, sir. Just like the clerk ...”

“Has he not played the violin?”

“Didn’t even touch it. I took it to him a couple of times, but he just took it up gently and brought it out again,” Zakhar answered with a smile. “So your orders are not to give him any drink?”

“No, we’ll wait another day and see what happens. And what’s he doing now?” “He has locked himself up in the drawing-room.”

Delesov went into his study and chose several French books and a German Bible. “Put these books in his room tomorrow, and see that you don’t let him out,” he said to Zakhar.

Next morning Zakhar informed his master that the musician had not slept all night: he had paced up and down the rooms, and had been into the pantry, trying to open the cupboard and the door, but he (Zakhar) had taken care to lock everything up. He said that while he pretended to be asleep he had heard Albert in the dark muttering something to himself and waving his arms about.

Albert grew gloomier and more taciturn every day. He seemed to be afraid of Delesov, and when their eyes met his face expressed sickly fear. He did not touch the books or the violin, and did not reply to questions put to him. On the third day of the musician’s stay Delesov returned home late, tired and upset. He had been driving about all day attending to a matter that had promised to be very simple and easy but, as often happens, in spite of strenuous efforts he had been quite unable to advance a single step with it. Besides that he had called in at his club and had lost at whist. He was in bad spirits.

“Well, let him go his way!” he said to Zakhar, who told him of Albert’s sad plight. “Tomorrow I’ll get a definite answer out of him, whether he wants to stay here and follow my advice, or not. If not, he needn’t! It seems to me that I have done all I could.”

“There now, try doing good to people!” he thought to himself. “I put myself out for him, I keep that dirty creature in my house, so that I can’t receive a visitor in the morning. I bustle and run about, and he looks on me as if I were a villain who for his own pleasure has locked him up in a cage. And above all, he won’t take a single step to help himself. They are all like that.” (The “they” referred to people in general, and especially to those with whom he had had business that day.) “And what is the matter with him now? What is he thinking about and pining for? Pining for the debauchery from which I have dragged him? For the humiliation in which he was? For the destitution from which I have saved him? Evidently he has fallen so low that it hurts him to see a decent life ...”

“No, it was a childish act,” Delesov concluded. “How can I improve others, when God knows whether I can manage myself?” He thought of letting Albert go at once, but after a little reflection put it off till the next day.

During the night he was roused by the sound of a table falling in the hall, and the sound of voices and footsteps. He lit a candle and listened in surprise.

“Wait a bit. I’ll tell my master,” Zakhar was saying; Albert’s voice muttered something incoherently and heatedly.

Delesov jumped up and ran into the hall with the candle.

Zakhar stood against the front door in his night attire, and Albert, with his hat and cloak on, was pushing him aside and shouting in a tearful voice:

“You can’t keep me here! I have a passport [Note: To be free to go from place to place it was necessary to have a properly stamped passport from the police.], and have taken nothing of yours. You may search me. I shall go to the chief of police!...”

“Excuse me, sir!” Zakhar said, addressing his master while continuing to guard the door with his back. “He got up during the night, found the key in my overcoat pocket, and drank a whole decanter of liqueur vodka. Is that right? And now he wants to go away. You ordered me not to let him out, so I dare not let him go.”

On seeing Delesov Albert made for Zakhar still more excitedly.

“No one dare hold me! No one has a right to!” he shouted, raising his voice more and more.

“Step aside, Zakhar!” said Delesov. I can’t and don’t want to keep you, but I advise you to stay till the morning,” he said to Albert.

“No one can keep me! I’ll go to the chief of police!” Albert cried louder and louder, addressing himself to Zakhar alone and not looking at Delesov.

“Help!” he suddenly screamed in a furious voice.

“What are you screaming like that for? Nobody is keeping you!” said Zakhar, opening the door.

Albert stopped shouting. “You didn’t succeed, did you? Wanted to do for me — did you!” he muttered to himself, putting on his galoshes. Without taking leave, and continuing to mutter incoherently, he went out. Zakhar held a light for him as far as the gate, and then came back.

“Well, God be thanked, sir!” he said to his master. “Who knows what might happen? As it is I must count the silver plate...”

Delesov merely shook his head and did not reply. He vividly recalled the first two evenings he had spent with the musician, and recalled the last sad days which by his fault Albert had spent there, and above all he recalled that sweet, mixed feeling of surprise, affection and pity, which that strange man had aroused in him at first sight, and he felt sorry for him. “And what will become of him now?” he thought. Without money, without warm clothing, alone in the middle of the night...” He was about to send Zakhar after him, but it was too late.

“Is it cold outside?” he inquired.

“A hard frost, sir,” replied Zakhar. “I forgot to inform you, but we shall have to buy more wood for fuel before the spring.”

“How is that? You said that we should have some left over.”

Chapter VII

It was indeed cold outside, but Albert, heated by the liquor he had drunk and by the dispute, did not feel it. On reaching the street he looked round and rubbed his hands joyfully.

The street was empty, but the long row of lamps still burned with ruddy light; the sky was clear and starry. “There now!” he said, addressing the lighted window of Delesov’s lodging, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets under his cape, and stooping forward. He went with heavy, uncertain steps down the street to the right. He felt an unusual weight in his legs and stomach, something made a noise in his head, and some invisible force was throwing him from side to side, but he still went on in the direction of Anna Ivanovna’s house.

Strange, incoherent thoughts passed through his mind. Now he remembered his last altercation with Zakhar, then for some reason the sea and his first arrival in Russia by steamboat, then a happy night he had passed with a friend in a small shop he was passing, then suddenly a familiar motif began singing itself in his imagination, and he remembered the object of his passion and the dreadful night in the theatre.

Despite their incoherence all these memories presented themselves so clearly to his mind that, closing his eyes, he did not know which was the more real: what he was doing, or what he was thinking. He did not realize or feel how his legs were moving, how he swayed and bumped against the wall, how he looked around him, or passed from street to street. He realized and felt only the things that, intermingling and fantastically following one another, rose in his imagination.

Passing along the Little Morskaya Street, Albert stumbled and fell. Coming to his senses for a moment he saw an immense and splendid building before him and went on. In the sky no stars, nor moon, nor dawn, were visible, nor were there any street lamps, but everything was clearly outlined. In the windows of the building that towered at the end of the street lights were shining, but those lights quivered like reflections. The building stood out nearer and nearer and clearer and clearer before him. But the lights disappeared directly he entered the wide portals. All was dark within. Solitary footsteps resounded under the vaulted ceiling, and some shadows slit rapidly away as he approached.

“Why have I come here?” thought he; but some irresistible force drew him on into the depths of the immense hall. There was some kind of platform, around which some small people stood silently.

“Who is going to speak?” asked Albert. No one replied, except that someone pointed to the platform. A tall thin man with bristly hair and wearing a parti-coloured dressing-gown was already standing there, and Albert immediately recognized his friend Petrov.

“How strange that he should be here!” thought he.

“No, brothers!” Petrov was saying, pointing to someone. “You did not understand a man living among you; you have not understood him! He is not a mercenary artist, not a mechanical performer, not a lunatic or a lost man. He is a genius — a great musical genius who has perished among you unnoticed and unappreciated!”

Albert at once understood of whom his friend was speaking, but not wishing to embarrass him he modestly lowered his head.

“The holy fire that we all serve has consumed him like a blade of straw!” the voice went on, “but he has fulfilled all that God implanted in him and should therefore be called a great man. You could despise, torment, humiliate him,” the voice continued, growing louder and louder — “but he was, is, and will be, immeasurably higher than you all. He is happy, he is kind. He loves or despises all alike, but serves only that which was implanted in him from above. He loves but one thing — beauty, the one indubitable blessing in the world. Yes, such is the man! Fall prostrate before him, all of you! On your knees!” he cried aloud.

But another voice came mildly from the opposite corner of the hall: “I do not wish to bow my knees before him,” said the voice, which Albert immediately recognized as Delesov’s. “Wherein is he great? Why should we bow before him? Did he behave honourably and justly? Has he been of any use to society? Don’t we know how he borrowed money and did not return it, and how he carried away his fellow-artist’s violin and pawned it? ...”

(“Oh God, how does he know all that?” thought Albert, hanging his head still lower.)

“Do we not know how he flattered the most insignificant people, flattered them for the sake of money?” Delesov continued — “Don’t we know how he was expelled from the theatre? And how Anna Ivanovna wanted to send him to the police?”

(“O God! That is all true, but defend me, Thou who alone knowest why I did it!” muttered Albert.)

“Cease, for shame!” Petrov’s voice began again. “What right have you to accuse him? Have you lived his life? Have you experienced his rapture? (“True, true!” whispered Albert.)

“Art is the highest manifestation of power in man. It is given to a few of the elect, and raises the chosen one to such a height as turns the head and makes it difficult for him to remain sane. In Art, as in every struggle, there are heroes who have devoted themselves entirely to its service and have perished without having reached the goal.”

Petrov stopped, and Albert raised his head and cried out: "True, true!" but his voice died away without a sound.

"It does not concern you," said the artist Petrov, turning to him severely. "Yes, humiliate and despise him," he continued, "but yet he is the best and happiest of you all."

Albert, who had listened to these words with rapture in his soul, could not restrain himself, and went up to his friend wishing to kiss him.

"Go away! I do not know you!" Petrov said, "Go your way, or you won't get there."

"Just see how the drink's got hold of you! You won't get there," shouted a policeman at the crossroad.

Albert stopped, collected his strength and, trying not to stagger, turned into the side street.

Only a few more steps were left to Anna Ivanovna's door. From the hall of her house the light fell on the snow in the courtyard, and sledges and carriages stood at the gate.

Holding onto the banister with his numbed hands, he ran up the steps and rang. The sleepy face of a maid appeared in the opening of the doorway, and she looked angrily at Albert.

"You can't!" she cried. "The orders are not to let you in," and she lammed the door to.

The sound of music and of women's voices reached the steps. Albert sat down, leaned his head against the wall, and closed his eyes. Immediately a throng of disconnected but kindred visions beset him with renewed force, engulfed him in their waves, and bore him away into the free and beautiful realm of dreams.

"Yes, he was the best and happiest!" ran involuntarily through his imagination.

The sounds of a polka came through the door. These sounds also told him that he was the best and happiest. The bells in the nearest church rang out for early service, and these bells also said: "Yes, he is the best and happiest!" ...

"I will go back to the hall," thought Albert. "Petrov must tell me much more."

But there was no one in the hall now, and instead of the artist Petrov, Albert himself stood on the platform and played on the violin all that the voice had said before. But the violin was of strange construction; it was made of glass and it had to be held in both hands and slowly pressed to the breast to make it produce sounds. The sounds were the most delicate and delightful Albert had ever heard. The closer he pressed the violin to his breast the more joyful and tender he felt. The louder the sounds grew the faster the shadows dispersed and the brighter the walls of the hall were lit up by transparent light. But it was necessary to play the violin very warily so as not to break it. He played the glass instrument very carefully and well. He played such things as he felt no one would ever hear again.

He was beginning to grow tired when another distant, muffled sound distracted his attention. It was the sound of a bell, but it spoke words:

"Yes," said the bell, droning somewhere high up and far away, "he seems to you pitiful, you despise him, yet he is the best and happiest of men! No one will ever again play that instrument."

These familiar words suddenly seemed so wise, so new, and so true to Albert that he stopped playing and, trying not to move, raised his arms and eyes to heaven. He felt that he was beautiful and happy. Although there was no one else in the hall he expanded his chest and stood on the platform with head proudly erect so that all might see him.

Suddenly someone's hand lightly touched his shoulder; he turned and saw a woman in the faint light. She looked at him sadly and shook her head deprecatingly. He immediately realized that what he was doing was bad, and felt ashamed of himself.

"Whither?" he asked her.

She again gave him a long fixed look and sadly inclined her head. It was she — none other than she whom he loved, and her garments were the same; on her full white neck a string of pearls, and her superb arms bare to above the elbow. She took his hand and led him out of the hall.

“The exit is on the other side,” said Albert, but without replying she smiled and led him out.

At the threshold of the hall Albert saw the moon and some water. But the water was not below as it usually is, nor was the moon a white circle in one place up above as it usually is. Moon and water were together and everywhere — above, below, at the sides, and all around them both. Albert threw himself with her into the moon and the water, and realized that he could now embrace her, whom he loved more than anything in the world. He embraced her and felt unutterable happiness.

“Is this not a dream?” he asked himself. But no! It was more than reality: it was reality and recollection combined. Then he felt that the unutterable bliss he had at that moment enjoyed had passed and would never return.

“What am I weeping for?” he asked her.

She looked at him silently and sadly. Albert understood what she meant by that.

“But how can it be, since I am alive?” he muttered.

Without replying or moving she looked straight before her.

“This is terrible! How can I explain to her that I am alive?” he thought with horror. “O Lord! I am alive, do understand me!” he whispered.

“He is the best and happiest!” a voice was saying.

But something was pressing more and more heavily on Albert. Whether it was the moon and the water, her embraces, or his tears, he did not know, but he felt he would not be able to say all that was necessary, and that soon all would be over.

Two visitors, leaving Anna Ivanovna’s house, stumbled over Albert, who lay stretched out on the threshold. One of them went back and called the hostess.

“Why, this is inhuman!” he said. “You might let a man freeze like that!”

“Ah, that is Albert! I’m sick to death of him!” replied the hostess.

“Annushka, lay him down somewhere in a room,” she said to the maid.

“But I am alive — why bury me?” muttered Albert, as they carried him insensible into the room.

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Leo Tolstoy
Albert
1858

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