

Diary of a Lunatic

Leo Tolstoy

1903

This morning I underwent a medical examination in the government council room. The opinions of the doctors were divided. They argued among themselves and came at last to the conclusion that I was not mad. But this was due to the fact that I tried hard during the examination not to give myself away. I was afraid of being sent to the lunatic asylum, where I would not be able to go on with the mad undertaking I have on my hands. They pronounced me subject to fits of excitement, and something else, too, but nevertheless of sound mind. The doctor prescribed a certain treatment, and assured me that by following his directions my trouble would completely disappear. Imagine, all that torments me disappearing completely! Oh, there is nothing I would not give to be free from my trouble. The suffering is too great!

I am going to tell explicitly how I came to undergo that examination; how I went mad, and how my madness was revealed to the outside world.

Up to the age of thirty-five I lived like the rest of the world, and nobody had noticed any peculiarities in me. Only in my early childhood, before I was ten, I had occasionally been in a mental state similar to the present one, and then only at intervals, whereas now I am continually conscious of it.

I remember going to bed one evening, when I was a child of five or six. Nurse Euprasia, a tall, lean woman in a brown dress, with a double chin, was undressing me, and was just lifting me up to put me into bed.

“I will get into bed myself,” I said, preparing to step over the net at the bedside.

“Lie down, Fedinka. You see, Mitinka is already lying quite still,” she said, pointing with her head to my brother in his bed.

I jumped into my bed still holding nurse’s hand in mine. Then I let it go, stretched my legs under the blanket and wrapped myself up. I felt so nice and warm! I grew silent all of a sudden and began thinking: “I love nurse, nurse loves me and Mitinka, I love Mitinka too, and he loves me and nurse. And nurse loves Taras; I love Taras too, and so does Mitinka. And Taras loves me and nurse. And mother loves me and nurse, nurse loves mother and me and father; everybody loves everybody, and everybody is happy.”

Suddenly the housekeeper rushed in and began to shout in an angry voice something about a sugar basin she could not find. Nurse got cross and said she did not take it. I felt frightened; it was all so strange. A cold horror came over me, and I hid myself under the blanket. But I felt no

better in the darkness under the blanket. I thought of a boy who had got a thrashing one day in my presence — of his screams, and of the cruel face of Foka when he was beating the boy.

“Then you won’t do it any more; you won’t!” he repeated and went on beating.

“I won’t,” said the boy; and Foka kept on repeating over and over, “You won’t, you won’t!” and did not cease to strike the boy.

That was when my madness came over me for the first time. I burst into sobs, and they could not quiet me for a long while. The tears and despair of that day were the first signs of my present trouble.

I well remember the second time my madness seized me. It was when aunt was telling us about Christ. She told His story and got up to leave the room. But we held her back: “Tell us more about Jesus Christ!” we said.

“I must go,” she replied.

“No, tell us more, please!” Mitinka insisted, and she repeated all she had said before. She told us how they crucified Him, how they beat and martyred Him, and how He went on praying and did not blame them.

“Auntie, why did they torture Him?”

“They were wicked.”

“But wasn’t he God?”

“Be still — it is nine o’clock, don’t you hear the clock striking?”

“Why did they beat Him? He had forgiven them. Then why did they hit Him? Did it hurt Him? Auntie, did it hurt?”

“Be quiet, I say. I am going to the dining-room to have tea now.”

“But perhaps it never happened, perhaps He was not beaten by them?”

“I am going.”

“No, Auntie, don’t go!...” And again my madness took possession of me. I sobbed and sobbed, and began knocking my head against the wall.

Such had been the fits of my madness in my childhood. But after I was fourteen, from the time the instincts of sex awoke and I began to give way to vice, my madness seemed to have passed, and I was a boy like other boys. Just as happens with all of us who are brought up on rich, over-abundant food, and are spoiled and made effeminate, because we never do any physical work, and are surrounded by all possible temptations, which excite our sensual nature when in the company of other children similarly spoiled, so I had been taught vice by other boys of my age and I indulged in it. As time passed other vices came to take the place of the first. I began to know women, and so I went on living, up to the time I was thirty-five, looking out for all kinds of pleasures and enjoying them. I had a perfectly sound mind then, and never a sign of madness. Those twenty years of my normal life passed without leaving any special record on my memory, and now it is only with a great effort of mind and with utter disgust, that I can concentrate my thoughts upon that time.

Like all the boys of my set, who were of sound mind, I entered school, passed on to the university and went through a course of law studies. Then I entered the State service for a short time, married, and settled down in the country, educating — if our way of bringing up children can be called educating — my children, looking after the land, and filling the post of a Justice of the Peace.

It was when I had been married ten years that one of those attacks of madness I suffered from in my childhood made its appearance again. My wife and I had saved up money from her

inheritance and from some Government bonds of mine which I had sold, and we decided that with that money we would buy another estate. I was naturally keen to increase our fortune, and to do it in the shrewdest way, better than any one else would manage it. I went about inquiring what estates were to be sold, and used to read all the advertisements in the papers. What I wanted was to buy an estate, the produce or timber of which would cover the cost of purchase, and then I would have the estate practically for nothing. I was looking out for a fool who did not understand business, and there came a day when I thought I had found one. An estate with large forests attached to it was to be sold in the Pensa Government. To judge by the information I had received the proprietor of that estate was exactly the imbecile I wanted, and I might expect the forests to cover the price asked for the whole estate. I got my things ready and was soon on my way to the estate I wished to inspect.

We had first to go by train (I had taken my man-servant with me), then by coach, with relays of horses at the various stations. The journey was very pleasant, and my servant, a good-natured youth, liked it as much as I did. We enjoyed the new surroundings and the new people, and having now only about two hundred miles more to drive, we decided to go on without stopping, except to change horses at the stations. Night came on and we were still driving. I had been dozing, but presently I awoke, seized with a sudden fear. As often happens in such a case, I was so excited that I was thoroughly awake and it seemed as if sleep were gone for ever. "Why am I driving? Where am I going?" I suddenly asked myself. It was not that I disliked the idea of buying an estate at a bargain, but it seemed at that moment so senseless to journey to such a far away place, and I had a feeling as if I were going to die there, away from home. I was overcome with terror.

My servant Sergius awoke, and I took advantage of the fact to talk to him. I began to remark upon the scenery around us; he had also a good deal to say, of the people at home, of the pleasure of the journey, and it seemed strange to me that he could talk so gaily. He appeared so pleased with everything and in such good spirits, whereas I was annoyed with it all. Still, I felt more at ease when I was talking with him. Along with my feelings of restlessness and my secret horror, however, I was fatigued as well, and longed to break the journey somewhere. It seemed to me my uneasiness would cease if I could only enter a room, have tea, and, what I desired most of all, sleep.

We were approaching the town Arzamas.

"Don't you think we had better stop here and have a rest?"

"Why not? It's an excellent idea."

"How far are we from the town?" I asked the driver.

"Another seven miles."

The driver was a quiet, silent man. He was driving rather slowly and wearily.

We drove on. I was silent, but I felt better, looking forward to a rest and hoping to feel the better for it. We drove on and on in the darkness, and the seven miles seemed to have no end. At last we reached the town. It was sound asleep at that early hour. First came the small houses, piercing the darkness, and as we passed them, the noise of our jingling bells and the trotting of our horses sounded louder. In a few places the houses were large and white, but I did not feel less dejected for seeing them. I was waiting for the station, and the samovar, and longed to lie down and rest.

At last we approached a house with pillars in front of it. The house was white, but it seemed to me very melancholy. I felt even frightened at its aspect and stepped slowly out of the carriage. Sergius was busying himself with our luggage, taking what we needed for the night, running

about and stepping heavily on the doorsteps. The sound of his brisk tread increased my weariness. I walked in and came into a small passage. A man received us; he had a large spot on his cheek and that spot filled me with horror. He asked us into a room which was just an ordinary room. My uneasiness was growing.

“Could we have a room to rest in?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, I have a very nice bedroom at your disposal. A square room, newly whitewashed.”

The fact of the little room being square was — I remember it so well — most painful to me. It had one window with a red curtain, a table of birchwood and a sofa with a curved back and arms. Sergius boiled the water in the samovar and made the tea. I put a pillow on the sofa in the meantime and lay down. I was not asleep; I heard Sergius busy with the samovar and urging me to have tea. I was afraid to get up from the sofa, afraid of driving away sleep; and just to be sitting in that room seemed awful. I did not get up, but fell into a sort of doze. When I started up out of it, nobody was in the room and it was quite dark. I woke up with the very same sensation I had the first time and knew sleep was gone. “Why am I here? Where am I going? Just as I am I must be for ever. Neither the Pensa nor any other estate will add to or take anything away from me. As for me, I am unbearably weary of myself. I want to go to sleep, to forget — and I cannot, I cannot get rid of self.”

I went out into the passage. Sergius was sleeping there on a narrow bench, his hand hanging down beside it. He was sleeping soundly, and the man with the spot on his cheek was also asleep. I thought, by going out of the room, to get away from what was tormenting me. But *it* followed me and made everything seem dark and dreary. My feeling of horror, instead of leaving me, was increasing.

“What nonsense!” I said to myself. “Why am I so dejected? What am I afraid of?” “You are afraid of me” — I heard the voice of Death — “I am here.”

I shuddered. Yes, — Death! Death will come, it will come and it ought not to come. Even in facing actual death I would certainly not feel anything of what I felt now. Then it would be simply fear, whereas now it was more than that. I was actually seeing, feeling the approach of death, and along with it I felt that death ought not to exist.

My entire being was conscious of the necessity of the right to live, and at the same time of the inevitability of dying. This inner conflict was causing me unbearable pain. I tried to shake off the horror; I found a half-burnt candle in a brass candlestick and lighted it. The candle with its red flame burnt down until it was not much taller than the low candlestick. The same thing seemed to be repeated over and over: nothing lasts, life is not, all is death — but death ought not to exist. I tried to turn my thoughts to what had interested me before, to the estate I was to buy and to my wife. Far from being a relief, these seemed nothing to me now. To feel my life doomed to be taken from me was a terror shutting out any other thought. “I must try to sleep,” I decided. I went to bed, but the next instant I jumped up, seized with horror. A sickness overcame me, a spiritual sickness not unlike the physical uneasiness preceding actual illness — but in the spirit, not in the body. A terrible fear similar to the fear of death, when mingled with the recollections of my past life, developed into a horror as if life were departing. Life and death were flowing into one another. An unknown power was trying to tear my soul into pieces, but could not bend it. Once more I went out into the passage to look at the two men asleep; once more I tried to go to sleep. The horror was always the same — now red, now white and square. Something was tearing within but could not be torn apart. A torturing sensation! An arid hatred deprived me of every spark of kindly feeling. Just a dull and steady hatred against myself and against that which had created

me. What did create me? God? We say God... "What if I tried to pray?" I suddenly thought. I had not said a prayer for more than twenty years and I had no religious sentiment, although just for formality's sake I fasted and partook of the communion every year. I began saying prayers; "God, forgive me," "Our Father," "Our Lady," I was composing new prayers, crossing myself, bowing to the earth, looking around me all the while for fear I might be discovered in my devotional attitude. The prayers seemed to divert my thoughts from the previous terror, but it was more the fear of being seen by somebody that did it. I went to bed again. but the moment I shut my eyes the very same feeling of terror made me jump up. I could not stand it any longer. I called the hotel servant, roused Sergius from his sleep, ordered him to harness the horses to the carriage and we were soon driving on once more. The open air and the drive made me feel much better. But I realised that something new had come into my soul, and had poisoned the life I had lived up to that hour.

We reached our destination in the evening. The whole day long I remained struggling with despair, and finally conquered it; but a horror remained in the depth of my soul. It was as if a misfortune had happened to me, and although I was able to forget it for a while, it remained at the bottom of my soul, and I was entirely dominated by it.

The manager of the estate, an old man, received us in a very friendly manner, though not exactly with great joy; he was sorry that the estate was to be sold. The clean little rooms with upholstered furniture, a new, shining samovar on the tea-table, nice large cups, honey served with the tea, — everything was pleasant to see. I began questioning him about the estate without any interest, as if I were repeating a lesson learned long ago and nearly forgotten. It was so uninteresting. But that night I was able to go to sleep without feeling miserable. I thought this was due to having said my prayers again before going to bed.

After that incident I resumed my ordinary life; but the apprehension that this horror would again come upon me was continual. I had to live my usual life without any respite, not giving way to my thoughts, just like a schoolboy who repeats by habit and without thinking the lesson learned by heart. That was the only way to avoid being seized again by the horror and the despair I had experienced in Arzamas.

I had returned home safe from my journey; I had not bought the estate — I had not enough money. My life at home seemed to be just as it had always been, save for my having taken to saying prayers and to going to church. But now, when I recollect that time, I see that I only imagined my life to be the same as before. The fact was I merely continued what I had previously started, and was running with the same speed on rails already laid; but I did not undertake anything new.

Even in those things which I had already taken in hand my interest had diminished. I was tired of everything, and was growing very religious. My wife noticed this, and was often vexed with me for it. No new fit of distress occurred while I was at home. But one day I had to go unexpectedly to Moscow, where a lawsuit was pending. In the train I entered into conversation with a land-owner from Kharkov. We were talking about the management of estates, about bank business, about the hotels in Moscow, and the theatres. We both decided to stop at the "Moscow Court," in the Miasnizkaia Street, and go that evening to the opera, to *Faust*. When we arrived I was shown into a small room, the heavy smell of the passage being still in my nostrils. the porter brought in my portmanteau, and the amid lighted the candle, the flame of which burned up brightly and then flickered, as it usually does. In the room next to mine I heard somebody coughing, probably an old man. The maid went out, and the porter asked whether I wished him

to open my bag. In the meanwhile the candle flame had flared up, throwing its light on the blue wallpaper with yellow stripes, on the partition, on the shabby table, on the small sofa in the front of it, on the mirror hanging on the wall, and on the window. I saw what the small room was like, and suddenly felt the horror of the Arzamas night awakening within me.

“My God! Must I stay here for the night? How can I?” I thought. “Will you kindly unfasten my bag?” I said to the porter, to keep him longer in the room. “And now I’ll dress quickly and go to the theatre,” I said to myself.

When the bag had been untied I said to the porter, “Please tell the gentleman in Number 8 — the one who came with me — that I shall be ready presently, and ask him to wait for me.”

The porter left, and I began to dress in haste, afraid to look at the walls. “But what nonsense!” I said to myself. “Why am I frightened like a child? I am not afraid of ghosts —” Ghosts! — to be afraid of ghosts is nothing to what I was afraid of! “But what is it? Absolutely nothing. I am only afraid of myself...Nonsense!”

I slipped into a cold, rough, starched shirt, stuck in the studs, put on evening dress and new boots, and went to call for the Kharkov landowner, who was ready. We started for the opera house. He stopped on the way to have his hair curled, while I went to a French hairdresser to have mine cut, where I talked a little to the Frenchwoman in the shop and bought a pair of gloves. Everything seemed all right. I had completely forgotten the oblong room in the hotel, and the walls.

I enjoyed the *Faust* performance very much, and when it was over my companion proposed that we should have supper. This was contrary to my habits; but just at that moment I remembered the walls in my room, and accepted.

We returned home after one. I had two glasses of wine — an unusual thing for me — in spite of which I was feeling quite at ease.

But the moment we entered the passage with the lowered lamp lighting it, the moment I was surrounded by the peculiar smell of the hotel. I felt a cold shudder of horror running down my back. But there was nothing to be done. I shook hands with my new friend, and stepped into my room.

I had a frightful night — much worse than the night at Arzamas; and it was not until dawn, when the old man in the next room was coughing again, that I fell asleep — and then not in my bed, but, after getting in and out of it many times, on the sofa.

I suffered the whole night unbearably. Once more my soul and my body were tearing themselves apart within me. the same thoughts came again: “I am living, I have lived up till now, I have the right to live; but all around me is death and destruction. Then why live? Why not die? Why not kill myself immediately? No; I could not. I am afraid. Is it better to wait for death to come when it will? No, that is even worse; and I am also afraid of that. Then, I must live. But what for? In order to die?” I could not get out of that circle. I took a book, and began reading. For a moment it made me forget my thoughts. But then the same questions and the same horror came again. I got into bed, lay down, and shut my eyes. That made the horror worse. God had created things as they are. But why? They say, “Don’t ask; pray.” Well, I did pray; I was praying now, just as I did at Arzamas. At that time I had prayed simply, like a child. now my prayers had a definite meaning: “If Thou exist, reveal Thy existence to me. To what end am I created? What am I?” I was bowing to the earth, repeating all the prayers I knew, composing new ones; and I was adding each time, “Reveal Thy existence to me!” I became quiet, waiting for an answer. But no answer came, as if there were nothing to answer. I was alone, alone with myself and was

answering my own questions in place of him who would not answer. "What am I created for?" "To live in a future life," I answered. "Then why this uncertainty and torment? I cannot believe in future life. I did believe when I asked, but not with my whole soul. Now I cannot, I cannot! If Thou didst exist, Thou wouldst reveal it to me, to all men. But Thou dost not exist, and there is nothing true but distress." But I cannot accept that! I rebelled against it; I implored Him to reveal His existence to me. I did all that everybody does, but He did not reveal Himself to me. "Ask and it shall be given unto you," I remembered, and began to entreat; in doing so I felt no real comfort, but just surcease of despair. Perhaps it was not entreaty on my part, but only denial of Him. You retreat a step from Him, and He goes from you a mile. I did not believe in Him, and yet here I was entreating Him. But He did not reveal Himself. I was balancing my accounts with Him, and was blaming Him. I simply did not believe.

The next day I used all my endeavors to get through with my affairs somehow during the day, in order to be saved from another night in the hotel room. Although I had not finished everything, I left for home in the evening.

That night at Moscow brought a still greater change into my life, which had been changing ever since the night at Arzamas. I was now paying less attention to my affairs, and grew more and more indifferent to everything around me. My health was also getting bad. My wife urged me to consult a doctor. To her my continual talk about God and religion was a sign of ill-health, whereas I knew I was ill and weak, because of the unsolved questions of religion and of God.

I was trying not to let that question dominate my mind, and continued living amid the old unaltered conditions, filling up my time with incessant occupations. On Sundays and feast days I went to church; I even fasted as I had begun to do since my journey to Pensa, and did not cease to pray. I had no faith in my prayers, but somehow I kept the demand note in my possession instead of tearing it up, and was always presenting it for payment, although I was aware of the impossibility of getting paid. I did it just on the chance. I occupied my days, not with the management of the estate — I felt disgusted with all business because of the struggle it involved — but with the reading of papers, magazines, and novels, and with card-playing for small stakes. The only outlet for my energy was hunting. I had kept that up from habit, having been fond of this sport all my life.

One day in winter, a neighbor of mine came with his dogs to hunt wolves. Having arrived at the meeting place we put on snowshoes to walk over the snow and move rapidly along. The hunt was unsuccessful; the wolves contrived to escape through the stockade. As I became aware of that from a distance, I took the direction of the forest to follow the fresh track of a hare. This led me far away into a field. There I spied the hare, but he had disappeared before I could fire. I turned to go back, and had to pass a forest of huge trees. The snow was deep, the snowshoes were sinking in, and the branches were entangling me. The wood was getting thicker and thicker. I wondered where I was, for the snow had changed all the familiar places. Suddenly I realised that I had lost my way. How should I get home or reach the hunting party? Not a sound to guide me! I was tired and bathed in perspiration. If I stopped, I would probably freeze to death; if I walked on, my strength would forsake me. I shouted, but all was quiet, and no answer came. I turned in the opposite direction, which was wrong again, and looked round. Nothing but the wood on every hand. I could not tell which was east or west. I turned back again, but I could hardly move a step. I was frightened, and stopped. The horror I had experienced in Arzamas and in Moscow seized me again, only a hundred times greater. My heart was beating, my hands and feet were

shaking. Am I to die here? I don't want to! Why death? What is death? I was about to ask again, to reproach God, when I suddenly felt I must not; I ought not. I had not the right to present any account to him; He had said all that was necessary, and the fault was wholly mine. I began to implore His forgiveness for I felt disgusted with myself. The horror, however, did not last long. I stood still one moment, plucked up courage, took the direction which seemed to be the right one, and was actually soon out of the wood. I had not been far from its edge when I lost my way. As I came out on the main road, my hands and feet were still shaking, and my heart was beating violently. But my soul was full of joy. I soon found my party, and we all returned home together. I was not quite happy but I knew there was a joy within me which I would understand later on; and that joy proved real. I went to my study to be alone and prayed remembering my sins, and asking for forgiveness. They did not seem to be numerous; but when I thought of what they were they were hateful to me.

Then I began to read the Scriptures. The Old Testament I found incomprehensible but enchanting, the New touching in its meekness. But my favorite reading was now the lives of the saints; they were consoling to me, affording example which seemed more and more possible to follow. Since that time I have grown even less interested in the management of affairs and in family matters. These things even became repulsive to me. Everything was wrong in my eyes. I did not quite realise why they were wrong, but I knew that the things of which my whole life had consisted, now counted for nothing. This was plainly revealed to me again on the occasion of the projected purchase of an estate, which was for sale in our neighborhood on very advantageous terms. I went to inspect it. Everything was very satisfactory, the more so because the peasants on that estate had no land of their own beyond their vegetable gardens. I grasped at once that in exchange for the right of using the landowner's pasture-grounds, they would do all the harvesting for him; and the information I was given proved that I was right. I saw how important that was, and was pleased, as it was in accordance with my old habits of thought. But on my way home I met an old woman who asked her way, and I entered into a conversation with her, during which she told me about her poverty. On returning home, when telling my wife about the advantages the estate afforded, all at once I felt ashamed and disgusted. I said I was not going to buy that estate, for its profits were based on the sufferings of the peasants. I was struck at that moment with the truth of what I was saying, the truth of the peasants having the same desire to live as ourselves, of their being our equals, our brethren, the children of the Father, as the Gospel says. But unexpectedly something which had been gnawing within me for a long time became loosened and was torn away, and something new seemed to be born instead.

My wife was vexed with me and abused me. But I was full of joy. This was the first sign of my madness. My utter madness began to show itself about a month later.

This began by my going to church; I was listening to the Mass with great attention and with a faithful heart, when I was suddenly given a wafer; after which every one began to move forward to kiss the Cross, pushing each other on all sides. As I was leaving church, beggars were standing on the steps. It became instantly clear to me that this ought not to be, and in reality was not. But if this is not, then there is no death and no fear, and nothing is being torn asunder within me, and I am not afraid of any calamity which may come.

At that moment the full light of the truth was kindled in me, and I grew into what I am now. If all this horror does not necessarily exist around me, then it certainly does not exist within me. I distributed on the spot all the money I had among the beggars in the porch, and walked home instead of driving in my carriage as usual, and all the way I talked with the peasants.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Leo Tolstoy
Diary of a Lunatic
1903

Retrieved on 9th June 2021 from en.wikisource.org
Translated by Constance Garnett

theanarchistlibrary.org