

Posthumous notes of the hermit Fedor Kuzmích

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Contents

MY LIFE	7
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(Posthumous notes of the hermit, Fëdor Kuzmích, who died in Siberia in a hut belonging to Khrómov, the merchant, near the town of Tomsk, on the 20th January 1864)

During the lifetime of the hermit Fëdor Kuzmích, who appeared in Siberia in 1836 and lived there in different parts for twenty-seven years, strange rumors were rife that he – concealing his real name and rank – was none other than Alexander the First. After his death these rumors became more definite and widespread. That he really was Alexander the First was believed during the reign of Alexander III not only by the common people, but also in Court circles and even by members of the Imperial family. Among others, the historian Schilder, who wrote a history of Alexander's reign, believed it.

These rumors were occasioned by the following facts: first, Alexander died quite unexpectedly without any previous serious illness; secondly, he died far from his family in the out-of-the-way town of Taganróg.¹ Thirdly, those who saw him placed in his coffin said he had so changed as to be unrecognizable, and he was therefore covered up and not shown to anyone. Fourthly, Alexander had repeatedly said and written – especially of late years – that he only desired to be free from his position and retire from the world. Fifthly – a little-known fact – in the official report describing his body it is mentioned that his back and loins were purple-brown and red, which the Emperor's pampered body would certainly not have been.

The reasons why Kuzmích was suspected of being Alexander I in hiding were, in the first place, that the hermit resembled the Emperor in height, figure, and countenance so much that those who had seen Alexander and his portraits (a palace footman, for instance, who recognized Kuzmích as Alexander) noticed a striking resemblance between the two. They were of the same age and had the same characteristic stoop. Secondly, Kuzmích, who gave himself out as a tramp who had forgotten his parentage, knew foreign languages and by his dignified affability showed himself to be a man accustomed to the highest position. Thirdly, the hermit never disclosed his name or calling to anyone, yet by expressions that escaped him involuntarily, betrayed himself as one who had once ranked above everybody else. Fourthly, shortly before his death he destroyed some papers of which a single sheet remained with strange ciphers and the initials A. P.² Fifthly, notwithstanding his great piety the hermit never went to confession, and when a bishop who visited him tried to persuade him to fulfill that Christian duty, he replied, 'If I did not tell the truth about myself at confession the heavens would be amazed, but if I told who I am the earth would be amazed.'

All these guesses and doubts ceased to be doubts and became certainties as a result of the finding of Kuzmích's diary. This diary is here given. It begins as follows:

God bless my invaluable friend Iván Grigórevich³ for this delightful retreat. I do not deserve his kindness and God's mercy. Here I am at peace. Fewer people come and I am alone with my guilty memories and with God. I will try to avail myself of the solitude to give a close description of my life. It may be of use to others.

I was born and spent forty-seven years of my life amid most terrible temptations. I not only did not resist them but reveled in them, was tempted and tempted others, sinned and caused others

¹ A trading port on the Sea of Azov.

² Presumably standing for 'Alexander Pavlovich' (Alexander, son of Paul).

³ Iván Grigórevich Latshév – a peasant of the village of Krasnorechensk, whom Fëdor Kuzmích met and became acquainted with in 1839, and who, after the latter had lived in various places, built him a cell in a wood away from the road, on a hill above a cliff. In this cell Kuzmích began his diary. L. T.

to sin. But God turned his eyes on me, and the whole vileness of my life, which I had tried to justify to myself by laying the blame on others, revealed itself to me at last in its full horror. And God helped me to liberate myself, not from evil – I am still full of it though I struggle against it – but from participation in it. What mental sufferings I endured and what went on in my soul when I understood my whole sinfulness and the necessity of atonement – not a belief in atonement, but real atonement for sins by my own suffering – I will describe in due course. At present I will only describe my actions: how I managed to escape from my position, leaving in place of my body the corpse of a soldier I had tormented to death; and I will begin the description of my life from its very commencement.

My flight occurred in this way:

In Taganróg I lived in the same mad way in which I had been living for the last twenty-four years. I – the greatest of criminals, the murderer of my father, the murderer of hundreds of thousands of men in wars I had occasioned, an abominable debauchee and a miscreant – believed what people told me about myself and considered myself the savior of Europe, a benefactor of mankind, an exceptionally perfect man, un heureux hasard,⁴ as I once expressed it to Madame de Staël. I considered myself such, but God had not quite forsaken me and the never-sleeping voice of conscience troubled me unceasingly. Nothing pleased me, everyone was to blame. I alone was good and no one understood it. I turned to God, prayed to the Orthodox God with Fóti,⁵ then to the Roman Catholic God, then to the Protestant God with Parrot,⁶ then to the God of the Illuminati with Krüdener;⁷ but even to God I only turned in the sight of men, that they might admire me. I despised everybody, and yet the opinion of the peoples despised was the only thing important to me; I lived and acted for its sake alone. It was terrible for me to be alone. Still more terrible was it to be with her – my wife, narrow-minded, deceitful, capricious, malicious, consumptive, and full of pretense. She poisoned my life more than anything else. We were supposed to be spending a second honeymoon, but it was a hell in forms of respectability – false and terrible.

Once I felt particularly wretched. I had received a letter from Arakchéev⁸ the evening before about the assassination of his mistress. He described to me his desperate grief. Strange to say, his continual subtle flattery, and not only flattery but real dog-like devotion – which had begun while my father was alive and when we both swore allegiance to him in secret from my grandmother⁹ – that dog-like devotion of his made me love him, if indeed latterly I loved any man – and though to use the word love of such a monster is wrong. Another thing that bound me to him was his not having taken part in the murder of my father, as many others did who became hateful to me just because they were my accomplices in that crime, but he not only took no part in it but was devoted both to my father and to me; of that later, however.

I slept badly. Strange to say, the murder of that beauty – the spiteful Nastásya (she was extraordinarily voluptuously beautiful) – aroused desire in me, and I could not sleep all night. The

⁴ ‘A fortunate accident.’

⁵ Fóti (1792–1838). An archimandrite who enjoyed much influence in court circles.

⁶ G. F. von Parrot (1767–1852), Member of the Russian Academy of Science. His letters to Alexander I were published in 1894–5.

⁷ Baroness B. J. Krüdener (1764–1824), pietist and authoress, at one time a friend of Alexander I.

⁸ The exceedingly harsh Minister to whom Alexander entrusted the government when he himself began to cease to exercise power.

⁹ The grandmother was Catherine the Great. The father was her half-mad son, afterwards the Emperor Paul, who was assassinated.

fact that my consumptive, abhorrent, and undesired wife lay in the next room but one vexed and tormented me still more. The memory of Márya,¹⁰ who deserted me for an insignificant diplomat, also tormented me. It seemed that both my father and I were fated to be jealous of a Gagárin.¹¹ But I am again letting myself be carried away by reminiscences. I did not sleep all night. Dawn began to break. I drew the curtain, put on my white dressing-gown, and called my valet. All were still asleep. I donned a frock-coat, a civilian overcoat and cap, and went out past the sentinels and into the street.

The sun was just rising over the sea. It was a cool autumn morning, and in the fresh air I immediately felt better and my dark thoughts vanished. I walked towards the sun-flecked sea. Before reaching the green-colored house at the corner I heard the sounds of drums and flutes from the square. I listened, and realized that someone was being made to run the gantlet. I, who had so often sanctioned that form of punishment, had never seen it executed. And strange to say – evidently at the devil’s instigation – the thought of the murdered, voluptuously beautiful Nastásya and of the soldier’s body being lashed by rods, merged into one stimulating sensation. I remembered the men of the Semënov Regiment and the military exiles, hundreds of whom were flogged to death in this way, and the strange idea of witnessing that spectacle suddenly occurred to me. As I was in civilian clothes this was possible.

The nearer I drew the clearer came the rattling of the drums and the sound of the flutes. Being short-sighted I could not see clearly without my lorgnette, but could already make out the rows of soldiers and a tall, white-backed figure moving between them. When I got among the crowd that stood behind the rows watching the spectacle, I drew out my lorgnette and was able to see all that was being done. A tall, round-shouldered man, his bare arms tied to a bayonet, and his bare back here and there already growing red with blood, was advancing between rows of soldiers who held rods. That man was I: he was my double. The same height, the same round shoulders, the same bald head, the same whiskers without a mustache, the same cheek-bones, the same mouth and blue eyes; but his mouth did not smile; it kept opening and twisting as he screamed at the blows, and his eyes, now closing and now opening, were not tender and caressing but started terribly from his head.

When I had looked well at this man I recognized him. It was Struménski, a left-flank noncommissioned officer of the 3rd Company of the Semënov Regiment, at one time well known to all the Guards on account of his likeness to me. They used jokingly to call him Alexander II.

I knew that he had been transferred to garrison-duty with other rioters of the Semënov Regiment, and I guessed that here, in garrison, he had done something – probably deserted – had been recaptured, and was now being punished. I learned later that this was so.

I stood as one spellbound, watching how the unfortunate man moved and how they flogged him, and I felt that something was going on within me. But I suddenly noticed that the people standing beside me, the spectators, were looking at me, and that some drew back from me while others approached. I had evidently been recognized. Having realized this I turned to hurry home. The drums still beat and the flutes played – so the tortures were still going on. My chief feeling was that I ought to approve of what was being done to this double of mine; or if not approve at least acknowledge that it was the proper thing to do, but I could not. Yet I felt that if I did not admit it to be necessary and right, I should have to admit that my whole life and all my actions

¹⁰ Márya Antónovna Narshkina, at one time Alexander’s mistress.

¹¹ The Princes Gagárin are a famous Russian family.

were bad, and should have to do what I had long wished to: abandon everything, go away, and disappear.

I struggled against this feeling that seized me: now admitting that the thing was right – a melancholy necessity – and now admitting that I ought myself to have been in the place of that wretched man. But strangely enough I felt no pity for him, and instead of stopping the torture I went home, fearing only lest I should be recognized.

Soon the sounds of the drums ceased, and on reaching home I seemed to have shaken off the feeling that had come over me. There I drank tea and received a report from Volkónski.¹² Then came the usual lunch, the usual burdensome and insincere relations with my wife; then Diebitsch¹³ with a report confirming information we had had of a secret society. In due time, when I write the whole story of my life, I will, God willing, recount it all in detail; but now I will only say that I received that report too with outward composure. But this lasted only till after dinner, when I went to my study, lay down on the couch, and immediately fell asleep.

I had hardly been asleep five minutes when a shock passing through my whole body seemed to awake me, and I heard the rattling of the drums, the flutes, the sound of the blows, the screams of Struménski, and saw him or myself – I could not tell which of us was I; I saw his look of suffering and the gloomy faces of the soldiers and officers. This delusion did not last long. I jumped up, buttoned my coat, put on my hat and sword, and went out, saying I was going for a walk.

I knew where the military hospital was and went straight to it. My appearance as usual caused a commotion. The head doctor and the head of the staff came running up breathless. I said I wished to go through the wards. In the second ward I saw Struménski's bald head. He was lying prone with his head on his arms, moaning pitifully. 'He has been punished for trying to desert,' I was told.

I said 'Ah!' and made my usual gesture of approval at what I heard, and I walked on.

Next day I sent to inquire how Struménski was, and was told that he had received the sacrament and was dying.

It was brother Michael's name-day,¹⁴ and there was to be a parade and a special service. I said I was unwell after my journey through the Crimea, and I did not attend the Mass. Diebitsch returned, and again reported about the plot in the Second Army, reminding me of what Count Witte had told me before my visit to the Crimea, and of the report of the noncommissioned officer Sherwood.

Only while listening to the report of Diebitsch, who attached such immense importance to all these attempted conspiracies, did I suddenly feel the full significance and strength of the change that had taken place within me. They were conspiring in order to alter our system of government and introduce a Constitution – the very thing that I had wanted to do twenty years back. I had made and unmade Constitutions in Europe, and what and who is any the better for it? And above all who was I that I should do it? All external life, all arrangements of external affairs and all participation in them – had I not participated in them and rearranged the life of the peoples of Europe? – seemed unimportant, unnecessary, and did not touch me. I suddenly realized that none of it was mine; that my business was with myself – my soul. All my old desires to abdicate – formerly ostentatious, with a wish to demonstrate them the grandeur of my soul and to astonish

¹² Field-Marshal Prince P. M. Volkónski, Minister of the Palace.

¹³ General Count Diebitsch, a German by birth, Chief of the Russian General Staff. He constantly accompanied Alexander I.

¹⁴ The day of his patron-saint, which is kept like an English birthday.

people and make them regret me – now returned with fresh force and complete sincerity, except no longer for the show but only for myself, for my soul. It was as if my whole life, a brilliant one in the worldly sense, had been lived only that I might return to that youthful desire – evoked by repentance – to abandon everything; but to abandon it without vanity, without thought of human fame, but only for my own soul's sake, i.e. for God. Then it had been a vague desire, now it was the impossibility of continuing to live as I had done.

But how? Not so as to astonish people and to be praised, but on the contrary, to go away to suffer and so that no one knows. And this thought so pleased and delighted me that I began to think of how to accomplish it. I employed all the powers of my mind and all my characteristic cunning to effect it.

Surprisingly, the execution of my intention was easier than I had expected. My plan was to pretend to be ill and dying, and having persuaded and bribed a doctor to have the dying Struménski put in my place, to go away, to fly – concealing my identity from everyone.

It was as if everything happened expressly for the success of my project. On the 9th,¹⁵ as if on purpose, I fell ill with intermittent fever. I was ill for about a week, during which my intention grew stronger and stronger and I considered my plan thoroughly. On the 16th I got up feeling well.

That day I shaved as usual, and being deep in thought, cut myself badly near the chin. I lost much blood and, feeling faint, fell down. People came running and lifted me. I saw at once that this would help the execution of my plan, and though I felt quite well I pretended to be very weak, went to bed, and had Dr. Vimier's assistant called. Vimier would not have agreed to any deception, but I hoped to be able to bribe this young man. I disclosed my intention and plan to him, and offered him eighty thousand rubles if he would do what I demanded. My plan was this: Struménski, as I had learned that morning, was near death and not expected to live beyond the evening. I went to bed and, pretending to be vexed with everybody, would not let anyone in except the physician I had bribed. That night he was to bring Struménski's body in a bath, put it in my place, and announce my sudden death. Strange to say, everything happened as we had planned, and on the 17th of November I was a free man.

Struménski's body, in its closed coffin, was buried with the greatest pomp, and my brother Nicholas ascended the throne, having banished the conspirators to forced labor in Siberia. I afterwards met some of them there. I experienced sufferings trifling in comparison with my crimes, and the greatest and quite undeserved happiness of which I will speak in due course.

Now, on the brink of the grave, at the age of seventy-two, having understood the vanity of my former life and the significance of the life I have lived and am living as a wanderer, I will try to tell the story of my former life.

MY LIFE

12th December, 1849. Siberian Forest-swamp near Krasnorechinsk

Today is my birthday, I am seventy-two. Seventy-two years ago I was born in Petersburg in the Winter Palace, in the apartments of my mother the Empress, then the Grand Duchess Mária Fëdorovna.

¹⁵ 9th November 1825 o.s. = 21st November, n.s.

I slept pretty well last night. After yesterday's indisposition I feel rather better again. The chief thing is that the spiritual torpor I was in has passed, and I can again communicate with God with my whole soul. Last night I prayed in the dark. I was clearly conscious of my position in the world. My whole life is something required by Him who sent me here, and I can do what He requires or not just as I please. By doing what He requires I conduce towards the welfare of the whole world. By not doing it I deprive myself of welfare – not of all welfare, but of the welfare that might be mine; but I do not deprive the world of the welfare destined for it. What I ought to have done will be done by others, so that His will may be accomplished. That is what my free will consists in. But if He knows what will be, if everything is ordained by Him, is there any freedom? I don't know. Here thought reaches its limits and prayer begins, the simple prayer of childhood and old age. 'Father, not my will but Yours be done.' Simply: 'Lord forgive and have mercy. Yes, Lord forgive and have mercy, and forgive and have mercy. I cannot express it in words but You know the heart. You Yourself dwell therein.'

I fell soundly asleep. As usual, from the weakness of old age, I woke five or six times and dreamed I was bathing in the sea and swimming. The water was greenish and beautiful, and I was surprised that it held me up so high that I did not sink at all. Some men and women were on the shore hindering me from getting out, for I was naked. The meaning of this dream is that the vigor of my body still hinders me, but that the exit is near at hand.

I rose before daybreak and struck a flint, but for a long time could not light the tinder. I put on my elk-skin dressing-gown and went out. Behind the snow-clad larches and pines glowed a rosy-orange sky. I brought in the firewood I chopped yesterday, lit the stove, and chopped some more wood. It grew lighter. I ate some moistened rusks. The stove had grown hot and I closed the damper and sat down to write.

I was born just seventy-two years ago, on the 12th of December, 1777, in Petersburg, in the Winter Palace. By my grandmother's wish I was named Alexander, to betoken, as she told me herself, my becoming as great a man as Alexander the Great and as holy as Alexander Névski. I was christened a week later in the large Palace Church. I was carried on a brocade pillow by the Duchess of Courland. My coverlet was held up by officials of the highest rank. The Empress was my godmother, and the Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia were my godfathers. The room allotted to me had been arranged to my grandmother's plan. (I don't remember it at all, but know of it from hearsay.) In the middle of that spacious room with its three large windows between four pillars, a velvet canopy was fastened to the ceiling with silk hangings descending to the ground. Under the canopy was placed an iron cot with a leather mattress, a small pillow, and a light English blanket. Beyond the hangings was a railing nearly five feet high, to prevent visitors from approaching too near. There was no other furniture in the room, except a bed behind the canopy for my wet-nurse. Every detail of my physical nurture was thought out by my grandmother. Rocking me to sleep was forbidden; I was swaddled in a special way; I wore no socks; was bathed first in warm and then in cold water, and had special clothing without seams or ribbons, but which could all be put on at once. As soon as I could crawl I was placed on the carpet and left to my own devices. I have been told that at first my grandmother herself used often to come and sit on the carpet to play with me. I don't remember anything of this, nor do I remember my wet-nurse at that time.

She was Avdótya Petróvna, the wife of an assistant gardener from Tsárskoe Seló. I did not remember her then. But I met her once when I was eighteen and she came up to me in the garden at Tsárskoe Seló. That was the good period of my life, the early days of my friendship

with Adam Czartoryski, when I was sincerely disgusted at what was going on at both the courts – that of my unfortunate father and of my grandmother, who had then become hateful to me. I was still a human being then, and not even a bad one, having good intentions. I was walking in the park with Adam when a well-dressed woman with an unusually kind, pleasant, smiling, and excited face came down a side-path. She approached me quickly, fell on her knees, seized my hand, and began kissing it.

‘My dear, your Highness! Now, God has granted—’

‘Who are you?’

‘Your nurse, Avdótya – Dunyásha – I nursed you eleven months. God grants me to see you again.’

I raised her with difficulty, asked where she lived, and promised to go to see her. The delightful home life in her clean little house, her sweet daughter, my foster-sister - a genuine Russian beauty engaged to one of the Court grooms, - my nurse’s husband, the gardener, just as smiling as his wife, and their crowd of smiling children seemed to light up the darkness around me. ‘Here is true life, real happiness!’ thought I. ‘It is all so simple, so clear. No intrigues, jealousies, or quarrels.’

It was this amiable Dunyásha who nursed me. My head nurse was Sophia Ivánovna Benkendorf, a German; and the second nurse was an Englishwoman named Hessler. Sophia Ivánovna Benkendorf was a stout, white-skinned, straight-nosed woman, of majestic appearance when giving orders in the nursery but surprisingly servile in grandmother’s presence – bowing and curtsying low to her who was a head shorter than herself. She was very obsequious to me and yet severe. Sometimes she was a queen, in her broad skirts and with her majestic straight-nosed face, and then suddenly she became an affected young hussy.

Praskóvya Ivánovna Hessler,¹⁶ my English nurse, was a long-faced, red-haired, serious Englishwoman; but when she smiled her whole face beamed so that one could not help smiling with her. I liked her tidiness, her equanimity, her cleanliness, and her gentle firmness. It seemed as if she knew something nobody else knew – neither my mother, nor my father, nor even my grandmother herself.

My mother I first recollect as a strange, sad, supernatural and charming vision. Handsome, elegant, glittering with diamonds, silks, and laces, and with her round, white arms bare, she would enter my room, and with a strange, melancholy expression on her face, alien to me and having no reference to me, would caress me, take me up in her strong beautiful arms, lift me to her still more beautiful face, and shaking back her thick, scented hair, would kiss me and cry, and once she even let me slip from her arms and fell down in a faint.

It is strange, but whether by my grandmother’s influence, or as a result of my mother’s behavior to me, or because with a child’s quick instinct I was aware of the intrigues that centered around me, it so happened that I had no simple feeling, or indeed any feeling, of love for my mother. I felt something strained in her treatment of me. She seemed to be parading herself through me, oblivious of me, and I felt it. So it really was. My grandmother took me from my parents entirely into her own hands, in order to pass the crown on to me and to disinherit her son, my unfortunate father, whom she hated. Of course I knew nothing about this till long after; but from my earliest consciousness, without understanding the reason, I was aware of being the object of some enmity and competition – a tool in some intrigue – and I was sensible of a

¹⁶ It was customary in Russia for people of other nationalities to adopt a Russian Christian name and patronymic, so in this case Miss Hessler assumed the names Praskóvya Ivánovna.

coldness and indifference to myself, to my childish soul which desired no crown, but only simple love which was lacking. There was my mother, always sad in my presence. Once when she was speaking German to Sophia Ivánovna about something, she burst out crying and almost ran out of the room on hearing grandmother's footsteps. There was my father, who sometimes came to our room, and to whom, later on, my brother and I used to be taken; but at the sight of me my unfortunate father expressed his dissatisfaction and suppressed anger to a greater extent and more decidedly than my mother.

I remember being taken with my brother Constantine to our parents' part of the palace. This was when my father was starting on his journey abroad in 1781. He suddenly pushed me aside with his hand and jumped up from his arm-chair with a terrible look in his eyes, and in a choking voice said something about me and my grandmother. I did not understand what it was, but remember the words, *Après '62 tout est possible*.¹⁷ I became frightened and began to cry. My mother took me on her arm and began kissing me, and then carried me to him. He hurriedly gave me his blessing and ran out of the room clattering with his high heels. Long afterwards I came to understand the meaning of that outburst. He and my mother were starting to travel as *Comte et Comtesse du Nord* – my grandmother wished them to do so – and he was afraid that during their absence he would be deprived of his right to the throne and I should be appointed heir.... Oh, my God, my God! He prized what ruined both him and me physically and spiritually – and I, unfortunate that I was, also prized it!

Someone has come knocking, saying: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son.' I have answered 'Amen'. I will now put my writing away and go and open the door. God willing, I will continue tomorrow.

13th December –

I slept little and had bad dreams: some unpleasant and weak woman was clinging to me, and though I was not afraid of her or of sinning, I was afraid my wife would see it and reproach me again. Seventy-two, and I am not free yet. When awake one can deceive oneself, but a dream gives a true valuation of the state one has attained to. I also dreamed – and this again shows the low level of morality on which I stand – that someone had brought me here some sweetmeats wrapped in moss – some unusual kind of sweetmeats – and we picked them out of the moss and divided them. But after the division some sweetmeats were left over and I began picking them out for myself; and just then a black-eyed and unpleasant boy, something like the Sultan of Turkey's son, stretched out towards the sweets and took them in his hand, and I pushed him away, though I knew that it is much more natural for a child to eat sweets than for me to do so. I did not let him have them, and knowing that this was wrong felt ill will towards him.

And strangely enough a similar thing really happened to me today. Márya Martemyánovna came. Yesterday a messenger from her had knocked at my door asking if she might come. I said she might. These visits are trying to me, but I knew that a refusal would hurt her. So she came today. The runners of her sledge could be heard in the distance squeaking over the snow. And when she entered in her fur cloak and several shawls, she brought in some bags of eatables (dumplings, Lenten oil, and apples), and so much cold air that I had to put on my dressing-gown. She came to ask my advice: whether to let her daughter marry a rich widower who is wooing her. Their belief in my sagacity is very trying to me, and all I say to correct it they attribute to

¹⁷ 'After '62 everything is possible.' The Emperor Peter III, Catherine's husband, had been dethroned by a conspiracy and murdered, in July 1762.

my humility. I said what I always say: that chastity is better than marriage, but, as St Paul says, it is better to marry than to lust. With her came her son-in-law Nikanór Ivánovich – the one who invited me to come and live in his house and who has since unceasingly pestered me with his visits.

Nikanór Ivánovich is a great trial to me. I cannot overcome my antipathy and aversion for him. ‘O Lord, grant me to see my own iniquities and not to judge my brother-man.’ But I see all his faults, discern them with the penetration of malignity, see all his weaknesses, and cannot conquer my antipathy for him – my brother-man, who like myself proceeds from God.

What do such feelings mean? I have experienced them more than once in my long life. My two strongest aversions were for Louis XVIII, with his big stomach, hooked nose, repulsive white hands, and his self-confidence, insolence, and obtuseness – there, I cannot keep from criticizing him – and the other antipathy is for this Nikanór Ivánovich who tormented me for two hours yesterday. Everything about him, from the sound of his voice to his hair and his nails, evokes repulsion in me, and to explain my gloominess to Márya Martemyánovna I told her a lie, saying that I was not well. After they had gone I prayed, and after the prayer I grew calm. I thank You, O Lord, that the one and only thing I need is in my own power. I remembered that Nikanór Ivánovich had been an infant and that he would die. I recalled the same with reference to Louis XVIII, knowing him to be already dead, and I regretted that Nikanór Ivánovich was no longer here that I might express my goodwill to him.

Márya Martemyánovna brought me some candles so that I can write in the evenings. I went out. To the left the bright stars have disappeared in a wonderful aurora borealis. How beautiful, how beautiful! But now I will continue.

My father and mother had gone abroad, and I and my brother Constantine, born two years after me, were in our grandmother’s complete control for the whole of their absence. My brother had been named Constantine to denote that he was to become Emperor of Constantinople.

Children love everybody and especially those who love and caress them. My grandmother caressed and praised me, and I loved her in spite of the smell, repulsive to me, which always hung about her, notwithstanding her perfumes, and was especially noticeable when she took me on her lap. Her hands too were unpleasant to me – clean, yellowish, shriveled, slippery, and shiny, with fingers bent inwards and with long nails from which the skin had been pushed back unnaturally far. Her eyes were dull, weary, almost lifeless, and this together with her smiling, toothless mouth, created a painful though not exactly repulsive impression. I attributed that expression of her eyes – which I now remember with loathing – to her exertions on behalf of her people, as it was explained to me, and I pitied her for that languid expression. Once or twice I saw Potëmkin¹⁸ – a one-eyed, squinting, enormous, dark, perspiring, and dirty man who was terrible. He seemed to me particularly terrible because he alone was not afraid of grandmother, but spoke loud in her presence in his bellowing voice, and boldly caressed and teased me, though addressing me as ‘your Highness’.

Among those I saw with her in my early childhood was Lanský.¹⁹ He was always with her and everybody noticed him and paid court to him. My grandmother especially looked back at him continually. Of course I did not then understand what it meant, and Lanský pleased me

¹⁸ Field-Marshal Count G. A. Potëmkin (1739–91). For a long time the most influential of Catherine’s favorites.

¹⁹ Count A. D. Lanský (1754–84), a General and a favorite of Catherine II.

very much. I liked his curls, his handsome thighs in tightly stretched elk-skin breeches, his well-shaped calves, his merry careless smile, and the diamonds that glittered all over him.

It was a very merry time. We were taken to Tsárskoe Seló, where we boated, dug in the garden, went for walks, and rode on horseback. Constantine, plump, red-haired, un petit Bacchus, as grandmother called him, amused everybody by his tricks, his boldness, and his devices. He mimicked everybody, including Sophia Ivánovna and even grandmother herself.

The most important event of that time was Sophia Ivánovna Bénkendorf's death. It happened one evening at Tsárskoe Seló, in grandmother's presence. Sophia Ivánovna had just brought us in after dinner and was smilingly saying something, when her face suddenly became grave, she reeled, leant against the door, slipped, and fell heavily. People came running in and we were taken away. But next day we learned that she was dead. I cried for a long time and was depressed and not myself. Everybody thought I was crying about Sophia Ivánovna, but it was not for her that I cried, but that people should die – that death should exist. I could not understand and could not believe that it was the fate of everybody. I remember that in my childish, five-year-old soul the questions, What is death? and, What is life which ends in death? then arose in their full significance – those chief questions which confront all mankind and to which the wise seek and find replies, and which the frivolous try to thrust aside and forget. I did what was natural for a child, especially in the world in which I lived: I put the question aside, forgot about death, lived as if it did not exist, and have lived till it has become terrible to me.

Another important event connected with Sophia Ivánovna's death was our being transferred to the charge of a man, and Nicholas Ivánovich Saltykóv being appointed our tutor – not the Saltykóv who in all probability was our grandfather, but Nicholas Ivánovich who was in service at my father's court; a little man with a huge head and a stupid face with a continual grimace, which my little brother Constantine imitated wonderfully. Being entrusted to a man grieved me, because it meant parting from my dear nurse, Praskóvya Ivánovna.

Those who have not the misfortune to be born in a royal family must, I think, find it difficult to realize how distorted is the view of people and of our relation towards them which is instilled into us and was instilled into me. Instead of the feeling of dependence on grown-up and older persons natural to a child, instead of gratitude for all the blessings which we enjoyed, we were led to believe that we were some kind of exceptional beings who not only ought to be supplied with all the good things a human being can have, but by a word or a smile alone would not only more than pay for all those blessings, but would also reward people and make them happy. It is true that we were expected to treat people politely, but with my childish instinct I realized that this was only for show, and was done not for the sake of the people to whom we had to be polite but for our own sake, so that our grandeur should be still more noticeable.

One fête-day we were driving along the Névski Prospect in an enormous landau: we two brothers and Nicholas Ivánovich Saltykóv. We sat in the chief seats. Two powdered footmen in red liveries stood behind. It was a bright spring day. I wore an unbuttoned uniform with a white waistcoat and the blue St Andrew's ribbon across it. Constantine was dressed in the same way; on our heads we wore plumed hats which we continually raised as we bowed. The people everywhere stopped and bowed; some of them ran after us. 'On vous salue,'²⁰ Nicholas Ivánovich kept repeating. 'A droite.'²¹

²⁰ 'They are bowing to you.'

²¹ 'On the right.'

We went past the guard-house and the guards ran out. Those I always noticed, for I loved soldiers and military exercises from my childhood. We were told, especially by grandmother – the very one who believed it least of all – that all men are equal and that we ought to remember this, but I knew that those who said so did not believe it.

I remember once how Sása Golitzin, who was playing with me at barricades, accidentally knocked me and hurt me.

‘How dare you!’

‘I did not mean to. What does it matter?’

I felt the blood rush to my heart with vexation and anger. I complained to Nicholas Ivánovich and was not ashamed when Golitzin begged my pardon.

That is enough for today. My candle has burnt low and I have yet to chop sticks, my ax is blunt and I have nothing to sharpen it on, besides which I don’t know how to.

16th December –

I have not written for three days. I was not well. I have been reading the Gospel but could not arouse in myself that understanding of it, that communion with God, which I experienced before. I used often to think that man cannot help having desires. I always had and still have desires. First I wished to conquer Napoleon, I wished to give peace to Europe, I wished to be released from my crown: and all my wishes were either fulfilled and as soon as that happened ceased to attract me, or became impossible of fulfillment and I ceased to wish for them. But while my wishes were being fulfilled or becoming impossible, new wishes arose, and so it went on and goes on to the end. I wished for the winter – it has come; I wished for solitude – and have almost attained it; now I wish to describe my life, and to do it in the best way possible, that it may be of use to others. And whether this wish is fulfilled or not, new wishes will awaken. Life consists in that. And it occurs to me that if the whole of life consists in the birth of wishes and the joy of life lies in their fulfillment, then is there a wish which would be natural to man, to every human being, always, and would always be fulfilled or rather would be approaching fulfillment? And it has become clear to me that this would be so for a man who desired death. His whole life would be an approach to the fulfillment of that wish and the wish would certainly be fulfilled.

At first this seemed strange to me. But having considered it I suddenly saw that it really is so; that it is in this alone, in the approaching toward death, is the only reasonable wish a man can have. A wish not for death itself, but for the movement of life which leads to death. That movement consists in a release of that spiritual element which dwells in every man from passions and temptations. I feel this now - having freed myself from most of the things that used to hide from me what is essential in my soul, used to hide God – its oneness with God. I arrived at it unconsciously. But if I placed my welfare first (and this is not only possible, but is what ought to be) and considered my highest welfare to lie in liberation from passions and an approach towards God, then everything that brought me nearer to death – old age, and illness – would be a fulfillment of my one great desire. That is so, and I feel it when I am well. But when I have indigestion, as was the case yesterday and the day before, I cannot awaken that feeling, and though I do not resist death I am unable to wish to draw nearer to it. Well, such a condition is one of spiritual sleep. One has to wait quietly.

I will now go on from where I left off. What I write about my childhood I recount mainly from hearsay, and often what was told me about myself gets mixed up with what I experienced; so that I sometimes do not know what I myself experienced and what I heard from others.

My whole life from my birth to my present old age makes me think of a place enveloped in a thick mist, or even of the battlefield at Dresden: everything is hidden, nothing visible, and suddenly here and there little islands open out, des éclaircies²² in which one sees people and objects unconnected with anything else and surrounded on all sides by an impenetrable curtain. Such are my childish recollections. For the time of my childhood these éclaircies very very rarely open out amid the sea of mist or smoke, afterwards they occur more and more frequently; but even now I have times that leave no memories behind. In childhood there are very few memories, and the farther back the fewer there are.

I have spoken of the clearings that belong to my early life: Sophia Bénkendorf's death, the good-bye to my parents, and Constantine's mimicking, but several other memories of that period open out now as I think of the past. For instance, I don't at all remember when Kóstya²³ appeared and we began to live together; but I well remember how once when I was seven and he five we went to bed after service on Christmas eve and taking advantage of the fact that everybody had left our room, we got into one bed together. Kóstya in his little shirt climbed over to me and we began playing a merry game which consisted in slapping one another on our bare bodies; and we laughed till our stomachs ached and were very happy, when suddenly Nicholas Ivánovich, with his huge powdered head, entered wearing his embroidered coat and his orders, and rushed towards us with staring eyes, in horror which I could not at all explain to myself, and separated us and angrily promised to punish us and to tell our grandmother.

Another occurrence I well remember happened rather late – when I was about nine; it was an encounter in grandmother's room, and almost in our presence, between Alexéy Grigóre-vich Orlóv and Potëmkin. It was not long before grandmother's journey to the Crimea and our first journey to Moscow. Nicholas Ivánovich had taken us as usual to see grandmother. The large room, the ceiling of which was ornamented with stucco-work and paintings, was full of people. Grandmother's hair had already been done. It was combed back from the forehead and very skillfully arranged on the temples. She sat at her dressing-table in a white powder-mantle. Her maid stood behind her adjusting her hair. She looked at us with a smile, continuing her conversation with a big, tall, and stout General decorated with the ribbon of St Andrew, who had a terrible scar across his cheek from mouth to ear. This was Orlóv, 'Le balafré'. It was there I saw him for the first time. Grandmother's Anderson hare-hounds were beside her, and my favorite Mimi jumped up from her skirt and leaping at me put its feet on my shoulders and licked my face. We came up to grandmother and kissed her white, plump hand. She turned it round and her bent fingers caught my face and caressed me. In spite of her perfumes I was aware of her disagreeable smell. She went on looking at Balafré and speaking to him.

'A fine fellow,' she said, with her strong German accent, pointing to me, 'you had not seen him before.'

'They are both fine fellows,' said the count, kissing my hand and Constantine's.

'It's all right, it's all right,' she said to her maid who was putting her cap on for her. That maid was Márya Stepánovna, painted red and white, a kindhearted woman who always caressed me.

'Où est ma tabatière?'

Lanskóy came up and handed her an open snuff-box. Grandmother took a pinch and looked at her jester Matrëna Danílovna, who was approaching her...

²² Clearings.

²³ A pet name for Constantine.

(The story breaks off here; it was left in this unfinished state when Tolstoy died.)
1905

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Leo Tolstoy
Posthumous notes of the hermit Fedor Kuzmich
1905

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