

THE LOVER OF SILVER

a novella

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Translated from the Russian

I

In an ordinary Siberian city, on an unremarkable street, there lived a man of about forty. His height was unremarkable too, and indeed the one remarkable thing about him was his eyes — some sort of clear grey eyes, very much alive — and his kind face. In short, he was a kind man. He worked at an ordinary job for an ordinary wage, as a design engineer. And it fell out that on a certain August night he had to fly away on a business trip.

Now, that city, Yuzhnomorsk, was notable indeed for standing upon the sea coast, and beside his hotel there was a wonderful forest. The hotel, incidentally, had also been carefully chosen by him: next to it stood some interesting abandoned monastery in a fairly decrepit condition. But the main thing was the sea — and the sea was near. Before he could get to that sea, however, he had to attend a council of design engineers and architects, which was in fact the substance of his trip.

All of this would have been joyful enough, were it not for those accursed sixty thousand which had to be paid to service the mortgage. That money held their whole family in bondage; it was a kind of redemption payment which they were obliged to render to the landowner for the use of his land, while less than half remained to themselves. And so Andrey Vladimirovich Nikiforov set off for this city — as the one chance to rest by the sea. He deeply regretted the impossibility of sending his wife and children there, of whom there were a good many.

His wife was packing his suitcase. Having packed everything, she announced:

"There's an eclipse tomorrow, you know, I saw it on the television."

"And what is that to me? I am no astronomer."

"Well, I don't even know how it affects people."

"It affects them well," Andrey answered with assurance. "A good man it affects well, a bad one badly. The main thing is not to pay attention to trifles. You know, even a good man may have an eclipse on any day of the year, and in any eclipse there is a good day."

At this his wife did not argue. She knew that Andrey would always find some word to explain a thing with. Andrey, though he particularly believed in nothing of the other world, was a spiritual man. Such was his wife too; but, unlike him, Anna Vladimirovna believed in eclipses, and in horoscopes, and in this, and in that.

And so an ordinary day was going on in their flat: the television was on in the sitting room, the children were playing in their room. It was very crowded in a family of five, but at the same time Andrey felt very heavy at heart. The advance had been spent, the money had not been paid on time, bondage... On the screen everybody was laughing and roaring, Larisa Guzeyeva had thought up another joke, Roza Syabitova had picked out yet another bridegroom — while in his soul there ran no comedies and no cartoons, but the little tragedies of Alexander Sergeyevich, set on repeat.

"Oh, let it all go," his wife said suddenly. "Why do you weigh yourself down? I shall find work in the end. The main thing is, don't fret; go on your trip, have a heart-to-

heart with somebody there, and perhaps they will give you a bit more.”

Anna was a woman who believed in miracles, and she said it with genuine hope.

“Well, perhaps the devil really may take this money. We shall pay it all off.”

This he said calmly, and thought: and why am I in a minor key here? Why, tomorrow I shall be grumbling with these chief engineers and project managers, and afterwards I shall be swimming in that salt water, foaming like Abrau-Dyurso. So let this money go hang — as I shall myself, for that matter! Why, one can walk through that damp southern forest and breathe in the stifling air of the south! Something melted in his soul.

They put everyone to bed.

II

"Andryusha, get up!" his wife woke him. Five fifty.

He felt brisk enough, because he had to get up not for work but, in essence, for a rest.

And so, having drunk his coffee with some sort of breakfast (one cannot remember every dish), he set off for the airport by taxi.

"Papa, bring me back a goldfish!" his daughter cried.

"Bring me back some pebbles from the shore!" said his son.

"Only let Papa not bring back that nasty old woman who wanted too much and squandered the goldfish," said Anna.

"Why, I live with her," Andrey joked, but saw that his wife had already shown him her fist.

Then, having taken leave of them all, he jumped into the yellow carriage of a taxi with a coachman from Central Asia, and was borne away.

And there he sat in the airport, looking at everything: now at some girders, now at all manner of blocks, now at how the lift ran — it was all professionally interesting to him.

He sat for a good while and, it must be admitted, all but lost his cheerfulness of spirit. But he got into the aeroplane.

And there he felt that pre-flight sensation of stirring and rustling: everybody was dawdling and talking. But soon the centrifuge started up and soared into the heights; forests and mountains rushed past in the little window. And it should be noted that Andrey had flown

out in rainy weather, and at that moment he caught the scent of the Siberian taiga and the sound of those pines. Rainy drops ran down the porthole, but then the sky cleared and became a bright blue. Only little clouds at the edges. Everything so solemn. And in my head at such a moment there would have been the waltzes of Strauss ringing — because there is no such grandeur anywhere else: to go straight from the earth to the clear halls of heaven.

And Andrey? He was fed well out of a little box, and now do not disturb him: the man is asleep, he was up at nearly five in the morning. But in the aeroplane the pilot kept switching on the “fasten seat belts” sign — turbulence, sir — and now he switched it on for the last time. Whereupon Andrey woke.

They began to descend into a harbour flooded with sunlight. It was malachite bordered with the topaz of waters. From the little window one could see fields, cypress groves, the south.

And then that door which divides home from another land opened, and everything was lit up with heat, damp heat. And with the air of asphalt. That scent is beyond compare for people of the north. Usually it is noticed in tropical countries, but in our south it is noticeable too. And now another taxi-carriage sent him off to his hotel.

III

Having looked over his clean enough room, he decided to glance out of the window.

Just as promised — the sea and the ruins of the monastery, thought Andrey. And why is it all so old, so lopsided? Lord, how does it still stand? It is cultural heritage, after all. But what a sea, and this forest nearby, and everywhere...

He decided to rest a few hours in his room: in the evening a meeting awaited him.

He woke already at the dinner hour; it was time to go. Having put on his black suit with a blue shirt, he set off through the streets of the city. Having determined the address of his destination, he understood that he lived a good way from it: the Verdi café stood some ten kilometres away, in the centre. He called a taxi and went straight there.

Driving out of his half-rural quarter, he made for the other shore of the sea, and there he was met by Catherinian buildings of the classical style; in the centre chestnut trees spread out very beautifully, crowds of people strolled along the streets, and many were in formal suits. One was striding along in a black jacket, rather too warm for the weather here. The restaurant Yakor could be seen, in which a waiter in a waistcoat was carrying round expensive dishes. And the Verdi restaurant stood at the very edge of the sea and was a block of glass with panoramic windows.

Here, having settled with the driver, he entered the hall. Everything was spread with beautiful carpets,

waiters ran about on every floor (there were particularly many guests in the evening hours), and all of it presented an enormous staircase along which people ran up and down. Somebody was sitting by a window with a view of the sea, holding a glass of wine. There was a veranda on the roof as well, where the prices were higher still. At such an expensive establishment, which Andrey could permit himself only on business trips, his speech would sometimes fail him from admiration; he anticipated the supper to come.

From this running about and this closeness he was rescued by a waiter, who ran up to him in a white apron and said:

"Come with me, you are expected already."

He was led into a secluded room, where the air was cool; by the window stood an enormous table, at which sat, besides himself, another twelve people.

"At last our thirteenth has come!" somebody said to him in a rather unbuttoned, loud voice.

He was met by a curly-haired man with the eyes of a wolf. Those eyes might have been taken for contemptuous or haughty. They looked out lifelessly and somehow soullessly.

This man of rather short stature, in a blue jacket with a yellow handkerchief, looked upon everyone with an air of openness and sociability. But Andrey saw in those eyes something venomous and evil.

"Morzeyev, Andrey Viktorovich. Your namesake."

And he held out his bony hand with its yellow fingers and its black signet ring.

This seemed very strange: on the ring something red glittered, but it could not be made out.

"Delighted," said Nikiforov, a little frightened.

Usually he met with clients — ordinary people — and with gentlemen of this type he had had no dealings at all, nor did he understand at all why he had been directed precisely to them.

This man sat down in the middle and began to listen to the accounts of the others. They were all discussing their projects: what buildings they were designing, what the revenue was this year. But then the hors d'oeuvres were carried round, and after them alcohol in large quantities, and the conversation opened up. One woman in a blue cardigan told how some people needed to be helped with money in realising their projects.

"And I give money quite calmly, and in very large quantities indeed." Her eyes shone with some sort of interest, while she herself was hunched and spiteful.

"Somebody once told me that one ought to build with a conscience. What conscience have I got? The main thing is that there should be money," said a face already red and drunk.

Here Andrey felt a strange confusion: he had not drunk so very much, and yet these people, who had lately been speaking of something good, had suddenly turned into a sort of talking vices.

"So it comes out that only you, Andrey, take no bribes? Andrey Vladimirovich, is it?"

"That is so."

"And you give no bribes for your projects?"

"Never in my life."

"A saint, are you?" And with that word his face was covered by a yellow, dreadful smile, baring sharp teeth. "Why, even a priest gave. A fat one, in a black cassock.

He was driving an expensive car in those days too — evidently he had already gathered something somewhere.” And here he twisted his mouth once more into a smile. “So I gave this priest a sum, and he, the holy lover of silver, invests it all in property on the sea coast. A woman came to him: Father, we are destitute! And he to her: covet not, my daughter, and keep the fast. While his own belly hangs to his knees.”

And he burst into evil laughter.

“That is how he serves God in church, and afterwards — silver.”

And he spilled the salt.

“So here is what I wished to say,” he said, now seriously. “There is a little church here that hinders me from building a complex. It is old, that sort of lopsided one.”

Nikiforov at once remembered the church beside his hotel.

Morzeyev sat in his dark jacket in the middle and, despite his short stature, seemed to tower above the others. He watched with pleasure as they all got drunk.

Having said this, he spilled the salt cellar over the tablecloth; the waiters at once took it away.

“Well then, an old devil serves there. He gives me no peace, takes no bribes, holds on to his own goods, the cur. I mean to have his church pulled down and be done with it.”

“A good decision!” cried the woman in the sweater, drunk already.

They all spoke in favour, they shouted and were ready to help by every means.

But Nikiforov sat in silence and was for some reason sad. Though he believed in none of this, and was in general little receptive to all these religious questions, here there was something personal: he did not know the local priest, it seemed, nor the situation — yet he held to his inward protest.

“And why do you say nothing?” said Morzeyev, turning to him with a changed tone.

“What has this priest done to you? Well, it stands there — let the church stand, there is other room beside it on the shore. Why, I live right there myself.”

“Ah, it seems you have something personal with him, with this priest; you know him already, perhaps you have called upon him. Now, I marvel at you: knowing nothing of the harm, you make declarations in this matter. But go in there, and you will see what evil is there and why it must be pulled down.”

“Then let me go in.”

At this Morzeyev’s eyes filled with blood, and he said, resolutely and quietly:

“It would be better not to go in there.”

“And why is that? No, you shall not hold me back: where I wish to go, there I go. Is it your house, that you should decide for me?”

Here he saw that the whole table had risen against him: some looked at him with hatred, others with curiosity.

But Morzeyev suddenly, having contained his rage, addressed him in another voice:

“And indeed, I have no right whatever to hold you.”

And he went on with the conversation peaceably. The manager had spoken of this meeting to Nikiforov when

the trip was arranged, but he had not said that this man would be of such a kind.

And the guests were already dispersing.

"Let me invite you to my home," Morzeyev said now in an affable voice.

And there was nothing to be done: to refuse was awkward, and besides, he was the object of the trip, one might say.

As they were going out, they saw that live music was playing in the restaurant: at first something from *La Traviata*, the drinking song, then something else, and then they all struck up the drums, and Verdi's *Dies irae* sounded out. Everything worked fearfully upon the evening, notwithstanding that it was only half past five; everything ran together in this dread. And why had they chosen that music? Something strange.

IV

They got into a black, expensive car with a driver and drove off somewhere along the steppe roads.

Andrey kept thinking that this one might carry him off into the forest as well: he looks like a bandit, with a driver. It is all frightening. But, devil take it, if this man is simply the one I am to meet, why do I fear all this? I must cast off this nonsense.

They drove along steppe and country roads; suddenly, ahead of them, they saw a woman standing in the middle of the road. The off-roader braked, raising a cloud of sand.

In the middle of the road stood a woman in a blue cloak and a red dress; a green kerchief wound about her head, and in her arms she held an infant.

"You she-devil, what are you standing there for?!" Morzeyev shouted furiously, opening the rear window.

"I need to get to the hospital..."

Nikiforov had no time to object before the window closed and the car tore away, leaving dust. Andrey Vladimirovich looked at her for a long time, and then suddenly asked with a deep feeling of vexation:

"Why did you not help her?"

"Her? Why, that is the local madwoman, Mashka. To the devil with her, carrying her about! She has gone out of her mind. They bring her in and she strikes the doctors. Who knows what she wants; and she has got a child from somewhere besides."

From these words the whole cast of Morzeyev's soul became clear to Andrey.

They drove up to a magnificent mansion beside a cliff overlooking the turquoise sea.

"This is my house, be my guest. And please, forget all your grievances, I wish you nothing but good. You are my friend. Why, I can see what a kind and generous man you are," said Morzeyev. "Make yourself at home here."

Herds of servants moved about the rooms, at whom Andrey Viktorovich was rude in secret from his guest: he knew that this man's fine heart would not forgive such a thing.

About the rooms of the magnificent house there strutted a peacock.

"Would you like a feather?" asked Morzeyev.

Before he could answer, Andrey saw Morzeyev give chase to the bird, plucking at its tail until he had torn out a feather. It shimmered in the sunlight.

"I cannot take it, it came to him with pain."

"Pain? All life is arranged upon pain. While one man is contented, another must be in pain. Now, do you eat meat? Is it tasty? And yet the little cow was slaughtered. And will it taste any the worse to you for these sights? Therefore accept everything as it is got — by that painful way."

But the feather was left standing in a vase.

Then they went down to the azure shore.

As they approached it, the cliffs came into view, the azure bay with turquoise spilled through it, and the foam that came and went. Andrey Vladimirovich swam in that bay with its quiet turquoise waves. His dream of swimming in the sea had at last come true. And this man no longer seemed to him so dreadful — or rather, it was

the sea, and it was the sea, most likely, that had eased him; while this man still aroused his wariness.

"Do you see how I live?"

"You live well," Andrey answered his namesake, now with some confidence.

"And do you know how all this came about?" Morzeyev shifted swiftly into that tone. "These cliffs, the house, the sea — and all of it I govern alone. These little people, like ants" (at that word he smirked again), "they alone serve me, and those dreadful crowds of people are nowhere to be seen."

"Can it be that you have nobody who might live with you?"

"I need nobody."

"But can it be that you are never bored?"

"Never. Better to exist without those loathsome creatures, far away."

"How did you come to this? You must have worked for hours on end, chiselling out your happiness."

"No. I was simply able to cross that line which people could not cross..."

"How so?"

"In the sense that I, like you, was an ordinary man; I worked, I started my own company, but the money would not come..."

"And what then?"

"I deceived... very greatly, one man, which led to his losing his firm altogether. It was so attractive, when I brought down my competitor, an honest man who had long acted by the rules. But afterwards I could not stop. Why, everyone envies me, everyone wants to know — how? And I tell them: the main thing is to step over that

line, that pit of morality; for here, upon this earth, there is none. If you wish to live well — deceive, betray, be base, and then...”

“But I could not do so.”

“Then you will get nothing. Bow down to the spirit of accumulation, of gain, of easy money — and it will come to you. You understand, I wish to help you, I wish everything to come out well for you.”

This outraged Nikiforov by the falsehood which was very distinctly felt in all of it, but he did not begin to argue, recognising the uselessness of it.

They set off home.

On the table before him lay a stack of five-thousand notes. Nikiforov first stepped back, then turned away: such money he had never seen.

“These are yours,” said Morzeyev with a smile.

“For what? Why, I have simply come to visit you.”

“And what of your home? Why, here are exactly ten million roubles, the sum required to pay off the mortgage.”

Where had he learned of this? Something cold ran down his spine.

But on the table there really did lie that sum.

“I shall transfer this whole sum to your card, and you will pay it all off by instalments.”

“How do you know?” Nikiforov cried, unable to contain himself.

“And do you suppose I brought you here for nothing?”

His face filled with heat.

“Why, I wish to help you, I wish that you too might become free in the same way. This is no trap, upon my honest word!”

And then he went up to that mountain of money and began shifting the stacks of five-thousand notes between one another.

A flat on a mortgage, disquiet, anxiety over work, this dependence... But how did he learn of it, who told him? No, this money is not mine. And yet there it lay. And all this money — all of it to the bank! And then there is no mortgage — flashed through his head.

He went across to it, but something pulled him back.

"I cannot take it, I have not earned it from you."

"Please, nobody has abolished freedom of choice. I shall step away from it, but know that you need bind it by no obligations to me."

They sat down to dine beside that table spread with money. Andrey glanced round at that table again and again; Morzheyev too watched him with a smile.

"Come, why are we speaking of some sort of rubbish, of money, devil take it! Why, this very evening there is an opera!"

"Which?" asked Nikiforov.

He wondered why this stranger was inviting him there, notwithstanding that he scarcely knew him and yet was already so well disposed towards him.

"Gounod's *Faust*. Let us go there; you may look at our ancient opera house at the same time. A centre of beauty! They sell the best champagne there, I know it myself."

"Very well, I am not averse."

And they all set off along the deserted steppe road.

V

After the changing of the bushes and the lovely views of the sea shore they came out onto the road, and then, through a long changing of southern forest, arrived in the city.

And again the Doric columns flickered past in the centre; everywhere upon the hilly ground of the city some building or other was set.

But the theatre was an enormous edifice with a dome no worse than St Peter's in Rome.

Everywhere there were persons of distinction: some in glittering attire, some in formal suits. Grandmothers and grandfathers had dressed up, while of young people there were very few.

Everywhere expensive champagne was being poured.

And so they took their seats in those rows, saturated through with floral scent.

The music struck up; something played and sang for a long while, but the animation came when Mephistopheles appeared.

There appeared a figure of the crucified Christ, and beside it people danced in frenzy. The whole floor was strewn with coins and banknotes. Somebody was drawing along a golden calf.

Suddenly a small red figure with horns and a furious face ran out and leapt about the stage. He sang the couplets of the golden calf, before which the whole human race bows down.

At this Morzeyev's face came alive, and he fixed his eyes upon the red figure. He looked upon it with rapture and adoration.

Mephistopheles sang of how, for the sake of the god of gold, land rises against land in war, and human blood runs along the steel. And it thundered through the whole hall:

Men perish for metal!

Satan rules the ball!

At these words his face grew altogether heated. When the couplets were over, Morzeyev threw a bouquet he had made ready, in which there shone the peacock feather refused by his guest. And the red body of Mephistopheles graciously received the gifts. In the moment of applause Morzeyev even managed to wink at some woman. And it was she who had been at the dinner, in the sweater.

At last he saw his signet ring: upon it was wrought a horned idol.

He was simply contorted by this horror; only by an effort did he try not to betray his disgust.

They came out of the theatre.

"I would continue the banquet with you..." Morzeyev began to say.

"Forgive me, I am in great haste..."

"Ah, you have taken fright. Well, the devil with you."

"And you yourself are the devil!"

Morzeyev's figure remained motionless, while Nikiforov withdrew into a taxi he had just called.

He was riding now with the driver and thinking how good it was to ride with an ordinary man and not with

that vampire. He was able to talk with this old fellow, who was simply earning his kopecks for a living.

“No change needed.”

“But you have a thousand there.”

“All the same, it is for you, to feed your family.”

“Thank you. May the Lord show you the way.”

Then he took his leave. It was dusk already.

VI

Andrey was already approaching his hotel, but that church stirred his interest: why did he wish to pull it down?

But all the same one must go to one's room, one must get some sleep. But all the same...

Curiosity overcame him, the more so as the church was a stone's throw away.

Going out beyond the hotel grounds, he at once saw a railing, and behind it a ruined column.

The church was already showing white in the evening, and shadows fell upon it beautifully. It shone and rose up, all lopsided; the façade with its pediments had cracked, and the dome too — and yet this little church stood, precisely, proudly.

Coming up to the dome, he heard a cawing. Upon the golden cross sat a heavy black raven.

And it seemed to caw:

"Go away! Caw! Go away!"

But Andrey resolved to go in, hearing that the priest was reading a prayer.

At the entrance he met a man with hair black as pitch.

The man pronounced in an inhuman voice:

"Get out! Be off! Goat!"

The people who heard this gasped; somebody tried to reprove him, but it was useless. The man tumbled down the steps, being, evidently, drunk.

This frightened Andrey greatly, but he resolved to go in all the same, the more so as inside it was crowded,

there was a smell of incense and a service was being held.

Within, the priest was conducting the service and reading a prayer in his meek voice.

Before him, in the crowded church, stood a young woman in a headscarf.

They were holding her; at first she stood calmly, but then she began to break free and to shout:

“Let go, you creature! The priest is a scoundrel!” an inhuman voice burst out.

This interrupted the service, and all the people looked askance at her. The young woman suddenly seized the priest by the beard and began to tear at it. They ran to her, but she did not listen: something was raging within her. She seized a candle from an icon and scorched the beard. It began to burn.

But the priest made an anointing, and something released her. And the priest set about putting out his beard.

“Did she scorch you badly, Father?” somebody asked him.

“It was not she,” he said quietly, “but the demons.”

Then, in a low voice now, she began to say to him:

“Forgive me.”

“It is the demon in you.”

Then the priest continued the service.

And now an old man began to shout and to curse. Everyone turned to him again.

The priest began to make the anointing, and he cried out:

“Where are you anointing, old man! I do not wish to come out!”

After this the old man turned again into an ordinary, meek one and thanked the priest.

The service ended and everyone dispersed; only the priest said to him:

“Follow me, my son.”

Andrey, frightened by this but not in the least abashed, followed him.

“So you, Father, drive out demons?”

“I heal people. What medicine does not heal, the spirit will heal. Why, I was quite ill myself, and yet I was healed.”

Here he went, without long thinking, to the church doors and locked them. This put Andrey on his guard. There was indeed no one left in the church.

“But it was not for this that I called you. The thing is that they wish to pull this church down and to put another building in its place. I know that you have met with a certain bad man. But you were able to keep the light within you. That is why it did not take you.”

These words no longer surprised him after what he had seen.

“Then what must I do?”

“The thing is that tonight something dreadful will happen in the Roman Forest, and you can help me. It is necessary only to hold a candle while I read the prayer.”

“But how can that help?”

“I assure you: until you know the whole of God’s design to the end, you will not understand. Do not try to understand this with the mind, because sometimes the mind may be governed.”

Andrey gazed into this elder and understood that this Morzeyev, most likely, hated him for such kindness and openness.

"Then you need only take an ordinary wax candle. This one."

And the old man handed him a long white candle, thick, the size of a palm.

"With this you shall light everything."

"And what must I do with it?"

"The main thing is, take it and come with it to the shoreline. You will walk along it, and when you see that it adjoins the Roman Forest, there I shall be sitting."

Then he made the sign of the cross over him and let him go.

"Remember," he said, "you are to come out when midnight falls."

VII

Andrey walked back to the hotel along the forest path. After the dark church with its ancient images, the whiteness of the hotel lit him up; there, on the ground floor, somebody was playing the piano. And Andrey meanwhile saw the police taking away some raging man in handcuffs. Somebody let fall the word: eclipse.

And all this trinity joined together in his consciousness.

Having overcome this confusion, he was already going up to his eighth floor. Andrey Vladimirovich went into his room.

The flight is at ten already. One must sleep and not occupy oneself with this nonsense. This old man with his candle. And what does he want it for? Well, very well, he — but what am I to him?

Suddenly he remembered the elder's words that one ought not to think about the meaning. And everything fell into place.

No, I shall help this elder — with what I can I shall deal with this scoundrel... He already hated him in his mind and wished with all his strength to express it.

Meanwhile it was already ten in the evening, and he wanted to eat. Going down to the fourth floor, he entered the little restaurant in the hotel. There he ordered some dish of veal and cranberries, but as soon as it was brought he remembered Morzeyev's words.

Devil take it, and he spoke the truth...

But then, having eaten it, having overcome the thought, he ordered something else and, now distracted, heard a voice:

“A note for you.”

The waiter said this and handed him a folded paper.

On a little scrap of paper was written: “Do not go anywhere tonight.”

At such unexpectedness his fork fell. He really did think of going nowhere, but all the same, having finished his supper, he resolved to consider it all in his room.

VIII

It was eleven o'clock, and everything had sunk into utter darkness. And in the church only one little window was burning: evidently the priest was already making ready in some room.

All the same, ought one to go? It is so very frightening. Andrey looked at the clock, then at the door; nothing seemed to be moving. Since he had resolved upon it, he must go, but that note frightened him. He could not bring himself to go; his legs seemed to have given way.

And perhaps this candle is not needed after all? The devil with this priest, let him settle his own difficulties. And he switched on the television. But the news was showing: as it turned out, the actor who had played Mephistopheles had died after the performance; the cause was unknown.

With an icy finger Andrey switched off the television, and everything drooped into the dark. On the table lay the candle.

"No, if I have resolved upon it, then the matter must be carried through to the end. How can I calmly bear it when this man works so much foulness? And the priest is waging war with him, and I shall help him."

He dressed hurriedly and saw the clock: twenty-three fifty. Ten minutes remained.

Andrey went out onto the balcony, where a box of matches lay in the ashtray; he snatched it up in the darkness of the warm night and, having stood a little by the door, went out.

The dark bedroom gave way to the lighted ground floor of the hotel — and again to night.

IX

Just beyond the hotel grounds one had to turn left, and, walking back a little, the sea shore already opened up.

The sea's abyss splashed in the darkness, and there a monster seemed to be putting out its claws. The blue beast came ever closer.

And meanwhile the disc of the moon shone. And a moon-path lit the water. Here Andrey remembered his wife's words. The eclipse: it would happen in four minutes, at ten past midnight exactly.

And Andrey was already walking along the shore, ever to the left and to the left. To the sides, in the little restaurants, crowds of tourists were gathering, but on the shore it was quiet and fresh with the breeze.

The disc of the moon seemed to flash in the sky; the advancing shadow devoured it and ate away more and more — it grew altogether dark. So that Andrey sat down upon the ground; at once ovations began from the cafés, applause, people already well in drink were shouting.

And Nikiforov went further and further, where there were no more little cafés, and in the distance only one could be seen, flooded with music. Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1* was sounding there.

Ahead of him he saw some strange bald man, in nothing but black trousers, wet — evidently after bathing.

He goggled his black eyes furiously. When he came up, one could see his skeleton's frame and his toothless mouth; his body was tanned all over.

He twisted his toothless mouth and addressed Andrey. The man was deaf and dumb and only wished to mumble something, but all that came out was:

“Ugu-gu-gu-gu-a...”

And here he pointed a finger at the forest and sat down upon the ground. His eyes were flooded with moonlight; he himself shone with madness.

He pointed his bony finger at Andrey.

“I am sorry, I have nothing.”

But the man went on mumbling.

Then a light wind blew up, and he rose to his knees and crossed himself towards the wind. And so he fell.

What is to be done, Lord? Am I to go on? What is the matter with him? But he seems to have got up.

And the old man really did get up.

I must go from here, I shall not stop at all any more.

Andrey walked for a fairly long time yet; he checked his direction, recalled the elder’s words, verifying that he was going the right way.

But here he saw that the last restaurant, from which the *Gymnopédie* was playing, was very close.

On the shore stood a woman.

He was about to ask:

“Miss, is it far to the Roman Forest?” — when she turned her mad blue eyes upon him.

She wore a white dress, as though a wedding dress, and her hair, already wet with water, hung down.

“Hold this,” she said to Andrey, and thrust a knife into his hands.

She herself went into the water.

There her body collapsed, and, floundering all over, she began to laugh. There was no need to save her: her

whole face showed above the water near the shore; one cannot drown so.

She turned her white teeth towards him and said various words incoherently in some language, and then to howl like a wolf.

Andrey, to keep out of sin, buried the dagger in the sand so that the girl could not stab herself with it, and ran.

It was there that the people and the cafés began to disappear.

The beach became altogether wild.

A thicket of forest adjoined it.

But where is the old man? Where is he waiting for me? Has he deceived me? Must I turn back? Why, devil take it, he has led me here, and now I have some three kilometres to walk back with these savages.

But at that very moment he saw a black mantle and a cross.

On the shore sat the hieromonk Vlasy, with his long beard.

"Come to me," he said, almost in a whisper.

He came up and saw in his hands a book, all as old as the church he came from.

"Have you taken the candle?"

"Here it is, and the matches are with me."

"Then let us go."

X

They turned a little above the line of the sea and entered that fairy-tale forest. In it there were no conifers at all; only oaks, hornbeams and chestnuts grew there.

That forest was called the Roman, for here, by tradition, Roman legionaries had hunted, when this fertile land belonged to the Roman Empire.

Andrey, it must be confessed, had never walked at night through forests, especially of such latitudes. The taiga was not at all like this.

Here Vlasy stopped. Somewhere close a noise was sounding. There, from behind the bushes, he saw what he could not believe.

In the centre a fire was burning; beside it sat a man painted all over in red, as in that opera. Around him ran some women, crying out incantations. In his head the music from the aria of Mephistopheles sounded; it tore at his ears. He could not believe that what he saw with his eyes was possible.

These women circled in a round dance and shrieked like madwomen. In the centre lay the body of a goat.

They were all terrified. And Vlasy too was afraid, but he whispered to Andrey:

"Light the candle."

"They will see."

"No, light it closer to the bush."

He struck a match quietly, and the candle caught.

Then Vlasy began to read the prayer very hurriedly, but soon he was reading with more assurance.

Here the sabbath halted. But Vlasy did not notice this: he had his back turned to it all.

Then Andrey hid in the bushes, while Vlasy, seeing nothing now, began in ecstasy to read it all by heart.

Then the participants of the sabbath began to be convulsed, the cries became piercing; these were the cries of women, and they all fell to the ground, one falling into the fire.

From the bush Andrey saw that it was that same woman in the sweater.

But Vlasy did not at all notice how the figure of that horned one was creeping up to him.

There it is, the ring, those eyes — why, it is Morzeyev!

In his hand he held a long dagger and was already raising it over Vlasy, who was immersed in prayer.

Then Andrey found an enormous stone beside him and ran the faster out of the bushes towards Vlasy.

The old man's face shone in prayer, and above him hung an enormous blade, ready in an instant to take off his head. But in an instant Andrey flew at him — and with all his might struck Morzeyev with the stone, splitting open his head.

A little stream gushed from the head, flooding the earth as with a thick juice.

Andrey looked at the ground in horror; his hands began to shake, and the stone fell to the ground.

Then Vlasy took fright, turning round, and cried out quietly.

"What have you done?" he asked.

"He wanted to kill you."

"But perhaps I ought to have gone."

"But perhaps God saved you?"

"Thank you," Vlasy declared, coming to himself.

"But what is to be done with him?" asked Andrey.

On the ground lay a red body with a split skull.

Here I am in it now, thought Andrey; now I shall not even get away from here.

But all the same something satisfied him, notwithstanding all the foulness. And at the same time it horrified him. He felt himself in a foul dream from which it was impossible to escape.

"The thing is," said the old man, having at last come out of his fright, "that I knew all about him. He was holding his sabbath in order to kill you together with me; he meant to catch the two of us in the church."

"And who arranged all these notes and the rest?" said Andrey in a trembling voice.

"This man was no simple one, and you see it yourself now. So that it was only the locked door that did not permit him to accomplish his villainy, and this dagger was for the two of us. But now let it be, leave me here. This is not your affair, you have a family, this is not for you."

"But what of you, Father?"

"I shall think of something."

And so they took their leave.

Andrey could not recover from what he had seen. Upon his palms there was no blood, but something remained within him. Did I kill him? Or only crack his skull? And what of the rest?

XI

The next morning was the flight. Everything went well, and nobody detained him. He flew home and was met. But something gave him no peace.

"News has come that a major figure has gone missing," his wife said. "Did you hear?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Why, you met with him?"

"But all the same I have no notion where he is or what has become of him. I saw him only at the dinner, and called at his house afterwards."

"Gone missing."

Can it be, thought Andrey. So the old man hid the body? Or they have not yet been able to find it. Why? Even if they find him, he will be with red horns, and the dagger with him.

A few more days passed in waiting.

His manager telephoned him:

"Andrey, there is a bonus for you. Two and a half million."

There was a long conversation and thanks from him.

The money, of course, went to pay off the mortgage. But something lay hidden within him and waited. And what if I did kill him after all? What shall I say to my children? How can I bring up children — a murderer? He burst into weeping, and in his despair he knew no peace.

There was a knock at the door.

Behind it stood a priest in a black mantle, with a cross.

“Father Vlasy said that you live here,” said a kind and humble voice.

Andrey knew that voice and that curly-haired face — with a deep scar now upon the head. But the eyes had changed altogether.

“Come in,” said Andrey with gladness.

It was none other than Morzeyev...