“So you think,” Dr. Polnitzski said, smiling rather satirically, “that you are really tasting the bitterness of life?”

“I did n’t say anything of the sort,” I retorted impatiently. “I was n’t making anything so serious of it; but you’ll own that to be thrown over your horse’s head on a stake that rips a gash six inches long in your thigh is n’t precisely amusing.”

“Oh, quite the contrary,” he answered. “I’m prepared to admit so much.”

“In the very middle of the hunting season, too,” I went on, “and at the house of a friend. More than that, a man never gets over the feeling that everybody secretly thinks an accident must be his own fault and he a duffer. Even Lord Eldon, who’s good nature itself and no end of a jolly host, must think—”

“Nonsense,” my physician interrupted brusquely, “Lord Eldon is not a fool, and he realizes that this was n’t your fault as well as you do yourself. You take the whole thing so hard because you’ve evidently never come in contact with the realities of life.”

He was so magnificent a man as he stood there that the brusqueness of his words was easily forgiven; he had been so unremitting in his care ever since, in the illness of Lord Eldon’s family physician, he had been called in on the occasion of my accident, that I had become genuinely attached to him. Our acquaintance had ripened into something almost like intimacy, since my host and his family had been unexpectedly called from home by the illness of a married daughter, and it had come to be the usual thing for Dr. Polnitzski to pass with me the evenings of my slow convalescence, which would otherwise have been so intolerably tedious.

“I dare say I’ve been too much babied most of my life,” I returned; “but a month of this sort of thing is pretty serious for anybody.”

He smiled, then his face grew grave.

“I dare say you may think me tediously moral,” he said, “but I can’t help thinking of what I see every day. For some years I’ve been trying to do something for the poor people about here, and especially for the operatives over at Friezeton. If you had any idea of the things I’ve seen— But, after all, you would n’t understand if I were to tell you.”

“I know,” I returned, “that you have devoted yourself to the most generous work among those poor wretches.”

“I beg your pardon,” responded he, stiffening at once, “but we will, if you please, waive compliments.”

“But,” I persisted, “Lord Eldon and others have more than once expressed their wonder that you, with talents and acquirements so unusual, should bury yourself—”

“I was not speaking of myself,” he interrupted, somewhat impatiently, “but of my poor patients. If you knew what they suffer uncomplainingly, it might make you a little more content.”

We were both silent for a little time. I looked across the chamber at the strong figure of the Russian, as he stood by the fire, and wondered what his past had been. I knew that he was a mystery to all the neighborhood where he had lived for the better part of a dozen years. He was evidently a gentleman, and he seemed to be wealthy. I had myself found him to be of unusual culture and refinement, and he had unobtrusively won recognition as a physician of marked skill and attainments. The wonder was why he should be living in England as an exile, and why he so persistently resisted all efforts to draw him from his retirement. He devoted himself to philanthropic work in a perfectly quiet fashion, declining to be enrolled as part of any organized charity. He was more and more, however, coming to be appreciated as a skillful physician, and to be called in for consultation. He impressed me on the whole as a man who had a past, and I could not but wonder what that past had been.

“I dare say you are right,” I answered, somewhat absently, “but has it never occurred to you that it is easy to make the mistake of judging the suffering of others by our own standards instead of by their real feelings? It seems to be assumed nowadays that all men are born with the same sensibilities, yet nothing could be farther from the truth.”

Dr. Polnitzski did not reply for a moment. He seemed this evening to be unusually restless. He walked about the room, getting up as soon as he sat down, and made impulsive movements which apparently betrayed some inward disturbance.

“Of course you are right,” he said at length, in an absent manner. “The classes not bred to sensitiveness cannot have the real sensibility—”

He broke off abruptly and came across to my couch.

“We were talking,” he began, with a sudden, bitter vehemence which startled me, “of real suffering. See! I have lived here silent in an alien land for long years; but to-day—to-day is an anniversary, and I have somehow lost the power to be silent any longer. If you care to listen, I will tell you what I mean by suffering; I will tell you what

life has been to me."

"If you will," I responded, "I will try to understand."

He seemed hardly to hear or to heed my words, but, walking up and down the chamber, he began at once, speaking with the outbursting eagerness of a man who has restrained himself long.

"My father," he said, "was one of the small nobles in the neighborhood of Moscow. I was his only son, and when he died, in my seventeenth year, I had been his companion so much that I was as mature as most lads half a dozen years older. My mother was a gentle, good woman. I loved my mother, but she made little difference in my life. She was kind to me and she prayed for me a good deal. She thought her prayers answered when I grew up without debauchery. She may have been right; but I have lived to think that there are worse things than debauchery."

He paused a moment, and then went on, looking downward.

"Once the little mother was frightened," he went on again, with a strange mingling of bitterness and tenderness in his tone. "There was a girl, the daughter of the steward; her name was Alexandrina."

His voice as he pronounced the stately name was full of feeling. He seemed to have forgotten me, and to be telling his story to an unseen hearer.

"Shurochka!" he said, dwelling on the diminutive with a fond, lingering cadence most pathetic to hear. "Shurochka! I loved her; I was mad for her; my blood was full of longing by day and of fire by night. It was the complete, mad passion of a boy grown into a man, and pure in spite of an ardent temperament. I used to stand under her window at night, and if it were stinging with cold or storm I was glad. I seemed to be doing something for her; you know the madness, perhaps, in spite of the cold temperament of your race. I did not for a moment really hope for her. Her family had betrothed her to her cousin, and it would have broken my mother's heart for me to marry the descendant of serfs. I could n't even show her that I loved her. My father out of his grave said to me what he had said again and again while he was alive: 'Do not hurt those under you; and especially do not soil the purity of a maiden.' I did not try to conceal from the little mother that I loved Shurochka, and maybe the servants gossiped, as they always do; but Shurochka herself I avoided. I was not sure that I could trust myself to see her. It was a happiness to the little mother when the girl was married and taken away to the home of her cousin in Moscow. She felt safe for me then, and she was very tender. Time, she said, would take this madness out of my heart."

He looked into the glowing fire with a strange expression and mused a little.

“My good mother!” he said again. “She was too near a saint to understand. That has been a madness time could n’t take out of my heart! I’ve gone out here on the moors and flung myself down on the ground and bitten the turf in agony because it seemed to me that I had borne this as long as human endurance was possible! No; if the spirit of the little mother sees me, she knows that time has not taken the madness out of me!”

His face had grown white with feeling, and he seemed to struggle to control himself.

“I can’t tell you whether it was wholly from the loss of her and the death of my mother which came soon after, or whether it was the current of the time, the unrest in the air, that drew me toward the men who were striving to free Russia from political slavery. I went to St. Petersburg to continue my studies, and there I was thrown with men aflame with the ardor of patriotism. Constantly the cause of Holy Russia secretly took more and more absolute possession of me. I confided it to nobody. I did not even suspect that anybody had the smallest hint of my state of mind, and yet, when the time came, when I had made my decision to throw in my lot with the patriots, I found them not only ready, but expecting me. They had felt my secret comradeship by that sixth sense which we develop in Russia in our zeal for country, and the imperative need of such an intelligence in the work we have to do.

“I did n’t take the step from simple patriotism, perhaps. Motives are generally mixed in this world. There was a last touch, a final reason in my case, as in others, that had a good deal of the personal. I was ripe for the cause, but there was a gust to shake the fruit down. There came bitter news from Moscow.”

Again he paused, but only for a second; then threw back his head and went on with a new hardness in his tone more moving than open fierceness.

“Shurochka was gone. It was whispered that a noble high in the army had carried her off, but no one dared to speak openly. We must be careful how we complain in Holy Russia! When her husband tried to find her, when he tormented the police to right him, he was arrested as a political offender—the charge always serves. The man, as I afterward learned authoritatively, was no more a conspirator than you are. He was sent to the mines of Siberia simply because he complained that his wife had been stolen, and so made himself obnoxious to a man in power. It was fortunate for me that I did not learn the officer’s name, or I should have gone to Siberia too.”

Dr. Polnitzski threw himself into a chair by the fire and remained staring into the coals as if he had forgotten me, and as if he again were back in the dreadful days of which he had spoken. I waited some time before I spoke, and then, without daring to offer sympathy, I asked if he were willing to go on with his story. He looked at me as if he saw me through a dream; then he came to sit down beside my couch.

“Pardon me,” he said. “I was a fool to allow myself to speak, but now you may have the whole of it. It is n’t worth while for me to tell you my experiences as a patriot—a Nihilist, you would say. I was full of zeal; I was young and hot-headed; I thought that all the strength of my feeling was turned to my country. I know now that a good deal of it was consumed in the desire for revenge upon that unknown officer. Russia, our Holy Russia, I said to myself, must be to me both wife and child. Stepniak said to me once that Russia was the only country in the world where it was a man’s duty not to obey the laws. You cannot understand it here in England, where it never occurs to you to fear, as you lie down at night, that for no fault whatever you may in the morning find yourself on the way to lifelong exile and some horrible, living death. I could tell you things that I can hardly think of without going mad; they are the events of every day in our unhappy land. The heroism, the devotion, of those striving to free Russia can be believed only by the few that know they are true. They are beyond human; they are divine. Why, the things I have known done by women so pure and delicate that they were almost angels already—”

He broke off and wiped his forehead.

“I beg your pardon,” said he, in a tone he evidently tried to make more natural. “I will not talk of this. I have not spoken so for years and I cannot command myself. It is enough for you to know that I saw it all, and that, to the best of my ability, I did my part. As time went on, I established myself as a physician at St. Petersburg. My family connection, although I had no near relatives, was of use to me, and in the end I had an excellent position. I was fortunate in the curing of wounds, and I had the luck to attract attention by saving the life of a near relative of the Czar. All this I looked at as so much work done for the cause. Every advance I made in influence, in wealth, in power, put me in a position to be so much the more serviceable to the great purpose of my life. Personal ambition was so swallowed up in the tremendousness of that issue that self was lost sight of. The patriot cannot remember himself in a land like Russia.

“When the execution”— He paused and turned to me with a singular smile. “You would say the assassination—when the death of General Kakonzoff was determined in our Section, no part was assigned to me, but I was high enough in the counsels of the patriots to know all that was done. He had possession of information which it was necessary to suppress. He came to St. Petersburg to present it in person. He told me frankly enough afterward that he could not trust any one because he counted upon a reward for giving the evidence himself. We were minutely informed of his plans and his movements. We had taken the precaution to replace his body-servant by one of our own men as soon as he began to make inquiries about two patriots who were suspected by the government. He had proofs which would have been fatal to them, and it was necessary to intercept these. If he had been put out of the way, our agent would easily have got possession of the papers, and without the testimony of the general our two friends were safe. The plot failed through one of those chances that make men believe in the supernatural. He was shot as he stepped out of the train at the St.

Petersburg station, but the very instant our man fired, Kakonzoff stumbled. The bullet, which should have gone through his heart, passed through his lungs without killing him."

The perfectly cool manner in which Dr. Polnitzski spoke of this incident affected me like a vertigo. To have a man who is one's daily companion, and of whom one has become fond, speak of an assassination as if it were an ordinary occurrence, is almost like seeing him concerned himself in a murder. I lay there listening to the doctor with a fascination not unmixed with horror, despite the fact that my sympathies, as he knew beforehand, were strongly with the Nihilists. To be in sympathy with their cause and to come so near as to smell the reek of blood, so to speak, were, however, very different things.

"By a strange chance," the doctor went on, "I was summoned to attend the wounded man, and although it was a desperate fight, I was after some days satisfied that I could save his life."

"But," I interrupted, "I don't see why you should try to save his life if you were of those who doomed him to death in the first place."

He looked at me piercingly.

"You forget," he answered, "that I was called to him as a physician. It is the duty of a physician to save life, as it may be the duty of a patriot to take it. I was trying to do my best in both capacities. I had given the best counsel I could in the Section and, when he was on his feet, I would have shot him myself if it had seemed to my superiors that I was the best person to do it. Does it seem to you that I could have taken advantage of his helplessness, of his confidence, of my skill as a physician, to deprive him of the life which it is the aim of a physician's existence to preserve?"

He waited for me to reply, but I had no answer to give him. The situation was one so far outside of my experience, so fantastically unreal as measured by my own life, that I could not even judge of it.

"See," he went on, leaning forward with shining eyes and with increasing excitement of manner, "the patient puts himself into the hands of his physician, body and soul. To betray that trust is to strike at the very heart of the whole sacred art of healing. If I, as a physician, took advantage of this sick man, I not only betrayed the personal trust he put in me, but I was false to the whole principle on which the relation of doctor and patient rests. Don't you see what a tremendous question is involved? That to harm Kakonzoff was to go beyond the limits of human possibility?"

"Yes," was my answer; "I can understand how a doctor might feel that; but I don't know how far the feeling of a patriot might overbalance this; how far the idea of

serving his country would overcome every other feeling."

Polnitzski gave me a glance which made me quiver.

"It is a question which I found I did not readily answer," he said, "when I received from the chief of our Section an order not to let Kakonzoff recover."

He sprang up from his chair and began to pace the floor.

"What could I do?" he said, pouring out his words with a rapidity which increased his slight foreign accent so that when his face was turned away I could hardly follow them. "There was my country bleeding her very heart's blood. Every day the most infamous cruelties were done before my eyes. And if this man Kakonzoff lived to tell his story, it meant the torture, the death, of men whose only crime was that they had given up everything that makes life tolerable to save their fellows from political slavery. It lay in my power to let Kakonzoff die. A very slight neglect would accomplish that. To the cause of my country I had sworn the most solemn oaths, and sworn them with my whole heart. I had never before even questioned any order from the Section. I had obeyed with the blind fidelity of a man that loved the cause too well to think of his own will at all. But now—now, I simply found what I was asked to do was impossible! I could not do it. I fought it out with myself day and night, and all the time the patient was slowly getting better. The gain was slow, but it was steady, and I could not fail to see that his giving his wicked testimony against the patriots was simply a matter of time.

"But one day, through no fault of mine—indeed, because my express orders had been disobeyed—he became worse. I can't tell you the relief I felt in thinking the man might die and I be spared the awful necessity of deciding. If he would only die without fault of mine—but I still did my best. I gave minute directions, and when I left him I promised to return in a few hours. As I went through the antechamber on my way out of the hotel, some one came behind me quickly and laid a hand on my arm. I thought it was the nurse, following to ask some question. I turned round to be face to face with Shurochka! My God! It was like a crazy farce or a bad dream!"

It is impossible that Dr. Polnitzski should not have known what an effect his story was producing on me, and it is hardly doubtful that his responsive Slav nature was more or less moved by my excitement. He seemed, however, scarcely to be conscious of me at all. His face was white with suffering, and he spoke with the vehemence of one who tries to be rid of intolerable pain by pouring it out in words.

"In a flash," he went on, "it came over me what her presence meant, and I said to myself, 'I will kill him!' I had always hoped that in striking against the creatures of the Czar's tyranny I might unknowingly reach the man that had harmed her; but I had wished not to know, for I could not bear that personal feeling should come into the

work I did for my country. That work was the one sacred thing. Now what I had feared had been thrust on me. Shurochka was changed; there were marks of suffering in her face, and she showed, too, the effects of training which could never have come honestly into the life of a woman of her station. She was dressed like a lady. At first she did not know me. She spoke to me as a stranger, and implored me to save Kakonzoff. She caught me by the arm in her excitement; and then she recognized me. Then—oh, my God, what creatures women are!—then she cried out that I had loved her once, and that in memory of that time I must help her. Think of it! She flung my broken heart in my face to induce me to save the scoundrel she loved!

“It was Alexandrina, my old-time Shurochka, clinging to me as if she had risen from the grave where her shame should have been hidden, and I loved her then and always. I could hardly control myself to speak to her. All I could do was stupidly to ask if he was kind to her, and she shrank as if I had lashed her with the knout. She cried out that it was no matter, so long as she loved him, and that I must save him: that she could not live without him. I—could n’t endure it! I shook off her hands and rushed away more wild than sane, with her voice in my ears all agony and despair.”

His face was dreadful in its pain, and I felt that I had no right to see it. I closed my eyes, and tried to turn away a little, but in my clumsiness I knocked from the couch a book. The crash of its fall aroused him. He mechanically picked up the volume, and the act seemed somewhat to restore him to himself.

“You may judge,” he began again, “the hell that I was in. I could have torn the man to bits, and yet—and yet now I said to myself that to obey the Section and let Kakonzoff die would be doing a murder to gratify personal hate. Yet all the sides of the question tortured me. I asked the valet in the afternoon about the woman that had spoken to me. He shrugged his shoulders, and said she was only a peasant that the general was tired of, but that she would not leave him, although he beat her. He beat her!”

There were tears in my eyes at the intensity with which he spoke, but Dr. Polnitzski’s were dry. He clenched his strong hands as if he were crushing something. Then he shook himself as if he were awaking, and threw back his head with a bitter attempt at a laugh.

“Bah!” he exclaimed, with a shrug. “I have never talked like this in my life, but it is so many years since I talked at all that I have lost control of myself. I beg your pardon.”

He crossed the room, sat down by the fire, and began to fill his pipe.

“But, Dr. Polnitzski,” I protested eagerly, “I do not want to force your confidence, but you cannot stop such a story there.”

He looked at me a moment as if he would not go on. Then his face darkened.

“What could the end of such a story be?” he demanded. “Any end must be ruin and agony. Should I be moved by personal feelings to be false to everything I held sacred? Should I take my revenge at the price of professional honor? I said to myself that in time she might come to care for me, if this man were out of her life. Kindness could do so much with some women. But could I make such a choice?”

“No,” I said slowly, “you could not do that.”

“Could I restore him to life, then, and have him go on beating that poor girl and flinging her into the ditch at last?”

I had no answer.

“Could I let him live to destroy the patriots whose sworn fellow I was? Do you think I could ever sleep again without dreaming of their fate? Could I kill him there in his bed—I, the physician he trusted? Could I do that?”

“In God’s name,” I cried, “what did you do?”

He regarded me with a look that challenged my very deepest thought.

“The patriots were spared,” he answered. “That was my fee for saving the life of General Kakonzoff. A year later I paid for having asked that favor by being exiled myself.”

“And—and—the other?” I asked.

“She, thank God, is dead.”

For a moment or two we remained motionless and unspeaking. Then I silently held out my hand to him. I had no words.