The General's Will

Vera Jelihovsky

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I

It happened in winter, just before the holidays. Ivan Feodorovitch Lobnitchenko, the lawyer, whose office is in one of the main streets of St. Petersburg, was called hurriedly to witness the last will and testament of one at the point of death. The sick man was not strictly a client of Ivan Feodorovitch; under other circumstances, he might have refused to make this late call, after a day's heavy toil . . . but the dying man was an aristocrat and a millionaire, and such as he meet no refusals, whether in life, or, much more, at the moment of death.

Lobnitchenko, taking a secretary and everything necessary, with a sigh scratched himself behind the ear, and thrusting aside the thought of the delightful evening at cards that awaited him, set out to go to the sick man.

General Iuri Pavlovitch Nasimoff was far gone. Even the most compassionate doctors did not give him many days to live, when he finally decided to destroy the will which he had made long ago, not in St. Petersburg, but in the provincial city where he had played the Tsar for so many years. The general had come to the capital for a time, and had lain down—to rise no more.

This was the opinion of the physicians, and of most of those about him; the sick man himself was unwilling to admit it. He was a stalwart−hearted and until recently a stalwart−bodied old man, tall, striking, with an energetic face, and a piercing, masterful glance, hard to forget, even if you saw him only once.

He was lying on the sofa, in a richly furnished hotel suite, consisting of three of the best rooms. He received the lawyer gayly enough. He himself explained the circumstances to him, though every now and then compelled to stop by a paroxysm of pain, with difficulty repressing the groans which almost escaped him, in spite of all his efforts. During these heavy moments, Ivan Feodorovitch raised his eyes buried in fat to the sick man's face, and his plump little features were convulsed in sympathy with the sufferer's pain. As soon as the courageous old man, fighting hard with the paroxysms of pain, had got the better of them, taking his hands from his contorted face, and drawing a painful breath, he began anew to explain his will. Lobnitchenko dropped his eyes again and became all attention.

The general explained in detail to the lawyer. He had been married twice, and had three children, a son and a daughter from his first marriage, who had long ago reached adultship, and a nine−year−old daughter from his second marriage. His second wife and daughter he expected every day; they were abroad, but would soon return. His elder daughter would also probably come.

The lawyer was not acquainted with Nazimoff's family; indeed he had never before seen the general, though, like all Russia, he knew of him by repute. But judging from the tone of contempt or of pity with which he spoke of his second wife or her daughter, the lawyer guessed at once that the general's home life was not happy. The further explanations of the sick man convinced him of this. A new will was to be drawn up, directly contrary to the will signed six years before, which bequeathed to his second wife, Olga Vseslavovna, unlimited authority over their little daughter, and her husband's entire property. In the first will he had left nearly everything, with the exception of the family estate, which he did not feel justified in taking from his son, to his second wife and her daughter. Now he wished to restore to his elder children the rights which he had deprived them of, and especially to his eldest daughter, Anna Iurievna Borissova, who was not even mentioned in the first will. In the new will, with the exception of the seventh part, the widow's share, he divided the whole of his land and capital between his children equally; and he further appointed a strict guardianship over the property of his little daughter, Olga Iurievna.

The will was duly arranged, drawn up and witnessed, and after the three witnesses had signed it, it was left, by the general's wish, in his own keeping.

"I will send it to you to take care of," he said to the lawyer. "It will be safer in your hands than here, in my temporary quarters. But first I wish to read it to my wife, and . . . to my eldest daughter . . . if she arrives in time."

The lawyer and the priest, who was one of the witnesses, were already preparing to take leave of the general, when voices and steps were heard in the corridor; a footman's head appeared through the door, calling the doctor hurriedly forth. It appeared that the general's lady had arrived suddenly, without letting anyone know by telegram that she was coming.

The doctor hastily slipped out of the room; he feared the result of emotion on the sick man, and wished to warn the general's wife of his grave danger, but the sick man noticed the move, and it was impossible to guard him against disturbance.

"What is going on there?" he asked. "What are you mumbling about, Edouard Vicentevitch? Tell me what is the matter? Is it my daughter?"

"Your excellency, I beg of you to take care of yourself!" the doctor was beginning, evidently quite familiar with the general's family affairs, and therefore dreading the meeting of husband and wife. "It is not Anna Iurievna. . . ."

"Aha!" the sick man interrupted him; "she has come? Very well. Let her come in. Only the little one . . . I don't wish her to come . . . to−day."

Suffering was visible in his eyes, this time not bodily suffering.

The door opened, with the rustling of a silk dress. A tall, well− developed, and decidedly handsome woman appeared on the threshhold. She glanced at the pain−stricken face, which smiled contemptuously toward her. In a moment she was beside the general, kneeling beside him on the carpet, bending close to him, and pressing his hand, as she repeated in a despairing whisper:

"Oh, Georges! Georges! Is it really you, my poor friend?"

It would be hard to define the expression of rapidly changing emotions which passed over the sick man's face, which made his breast heave, and his great heart quiver and tremble painfully. Displeasure and pity, sympathy and contempt, anger and grief, all were expressed in the short, sharp, bitter laugh, and the few words which escaped his lips when he saw his little daughter timidly following her mother into his room.

"Do not teach her to lie!" and he nodded toward the child, and turned toward the wall, with an expression of pain and pity on his face. The lawyer and the priest hastened to take their leave and disappear.

"Ah! Sinners! sinners!" muttered the latter, as he descended the stairs.

"Things are not in good shape between them?" asked Lobnitchenko. "They don't get on well together?"

"How should they be in good shape, when he came here to get a divorce?" whispered the priest, shaping his fur cap. "But God decided otherwise. Even without a divorce, he will be separated forever from his wife!"

"I don't believe he is so very far gone. He is a stalwart old man. Perhaps he will pull through," went on the man of law.

"God's hand is over all," answered the priest, shrugging his shoulders. And so they went their different ways.

II

"OLGA!" cried the sick man, without turning round, and feeling near him the swift movement of his wife, he pushed her away with an impatient movement of his hand, and added, "Not you! my daughter Olga!"

"Olga! Go, my child, papa is calling you," cried the general's wife in a soft voice, in French, to the little girl, who was standing undecidedly in the center of the room.

"Can you not drop your foreign phrases?" angrily interrupted the general. "This is not a drawing−room! You might drop it, from a sense of decency."

His voice became shrill, and made the child shudder and begin to cry. She went to him timidly.

The general looked at her with an expression of pain. He drew her toward him with his left hand, raising the right to bless her.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!" he whispered, making the sign of the cross over her. "God guard you from evil, from every bad influence. . . . Be kind . . . honest . . . most of all, be honest! Never tell lies. God guard you from falsehood, from lying, even more than from sorrow!"

Tears filled the dying man's eyes. Little Olga shuddered from head to foot; she feared her father, and at the same time was so sorry for him. But pity got the upper hand. She clung to him, wetting him with her tears. Her father raised his hand, wishing to make the sign of the cross once more over the little head which lay on his breast, but could not complete the gesture. His hand fell heavily, his face was once more contorted, with pain; he turned to those who stood near him, evidently avoiding meeting his wife's eyes, and whispered:

"Take her away. It is enough. Christ be with her!" And for a moment he collected strength to place his hand on the child's head.

The doctor took the little girl by the hand, but her mother moved quickly toward her.

"Kiss him! Kiss papa's hand!" she whispered, "bid him good−by!"

The general's wife sobbed, and covered her face with her handkerchief, with the grand gesture of a stage queen. The sick man did not see this. At the sound of her voice he frowned and closed his eyes tight, evidently trying not

to listen. The doctor led the little girl away to another room and gave her to her governess.

When he came back to the sick man, the general, lying on the sofa, still in the same position, and without looking at his wife who stood beside his pillow, said to her:

"I expect my poor daughter Anna, who has suffered so much injustice through you. . . . I have asked her to forgive me. I shall pray her to be a mother to her little sister . . . . I have appointed her the child's guardian. She is good and honest . . . she will teach the child no evil. And this will be best for you also. You are provided for. You will find out from the new will. You could not have had any profit from being her guardian. If Anna does not consent to take little Olga to live with her, and to educate her with her own children, as I have asked her, Olga will be sent to a school. You will prefer liberty to your daughter; it will be pleasanter for you. Is it not so?"

Contempt and bitter irony were perceptible in his voice. His wife did not utter a syllable. She remained so quiet that it might have been thought she did not even hear him, but for the convulsive movement of her lips, and of the fingers of her tightly clasped hands.

The doctor once more made a movement to withdraw discreetly, but the general's voice stopped him.

"Edouard Vicentevitch? Is he here?"

"I am here, your excellency," answered the doctor, bending over the sick man. "Would not your excellency prefer to be carried to the bed? It will be more comfortable lying down."

"More comfortable to die?" sharply interrupted the general. "Why do you drivel? You know I detest beds and blankets. Drop it! Here, take this," and he gave him a sheet of crested paper folded in four, which was lying beside him. "Read it, please. Aloud! so that she may know."

He turned his eyes toward his wife. The doctor unwillingly began his unpleasant task. He was a man of fine feeling, and although he had no very high opinion of the general's wife, still she was a woman. And a beautiful woman. He would have preferred that she should learn from someone else how many of the pleasures of life were slipping away from her, in virtue of the new will. But there was nothing for it but to do as he was ordered. It was always hard to oppose Iuri Pavlovitch; now it was quite impossible.

Olga Vseslavovna listened to the reading of the will with complete composure. She sat motionless, leaning back in an armchair, with downcast eyes, and only showing her emotion when her husband was no longer able to stifle a groan. Then she turned toward him her pale, beautiful face, with evident signs of heartfelt sympathy, and was even rising to come to his assistance. The sick man impatiently refused her services, significantly turning his eyes toward the doctor, who was reading his last will and testament, as though he would say: "Listen! Listen! It concerns you."

It did concern her, without a doubt. General Nazimoff's wife learned that, instead of an income of a hundred thousand a year, which she had had a right to expect, she could count only on a sum sufficient to keep her from poverty; what in her opinion was a mere pittance.

The doctor finished reading, coughing to hide his confusion, and slowly folded the document.

"You have heard?" asked the general, in a faint, convulsive voice.

"I have heard, my friend," quietly answered his wife.

"You have nothing to say?"

"What can I say? You have a right to dispose of what belongs to you. . . . But . . . still I . . ."

"Still you what?" sharply asked her husband.

"Still, I hope, my friend, that this is not your last will. . . ."

General Nazimoff turned, and even made an effort to raise himself on his elbow.

"God willing, you will recover. Perhaps you will decide more than once to make other dispositions of your property," calmly continued his wife.

The sick man fell back on the pillows.

"You are mistaken. Even if I do not die, you will not be able to deceive me again. This is my last will!" he replied convulsively.

And with trembling hand he gave the doctor a bunch of keys.

"There is the dispatch box. Please open it, and put the will in."

The doctor obeyed his wish, without looking at Olga Vseslavovna. She, on her part, did not look at him. Shrugging her shoulders at her husband's last words, she remained motionless, noticing nothing except his sufferings. His sufferings, it seemed, tortured her.

Meanwhile the dying man followed the doctor with anxious eyes, and as soon as the latter closed the large traveling dispatch box he stretched out his hand to him for the keys.

"So long as I am alive, I will keep them!" he murmured, putting the bunch of keys away in his pocket. "And when I am dead, I intrust them to you, Edouard Vicentevitch. Take care of them, as a last service to me!" And he turned his face once more to the wall.

"And now, leave me alone! The pain is less. Perhaps I shall go to sleep. Leave me!"

"My friend! Permit me to remain near you," the general's wife began, bending tenderly over her husband.

"Go!" he cried sharply. "Leave me in peace, I tell you!"

She rose, trembling. The doctor hastily offered her his arm. She left the room, leaning heavily on him, and once more covering her face with her handkerchief, in tragic style.

"Be calm, your excellency!" whispered the doctor sympathetically, only half conscious of what he was saying. "These rooms have been prepared for you. You also need to rest, after such a long journey."

"Oh, I am not thinking about myself. I am so sorry for him. Poor, poor, senseless creature. How much I have suffered at his hands. He was always so suspicious, so hard to get on with. And whims and fantasies without end. You know, doctor, I have sometimes even thought he was not in full possession of his faculties."

"Hm!" murmured the doctor, coughing in confusion.

"Take this strange change of his will, for instance," the general's wife continued, not waiting for a clearer expression of sympathy. "Take his manner toward me. And for what reason?"

"Yes, it is very sad," murmured the doctor.

"Tell me, doctor, does he expect his son and daughter?"

"Only his daughter, Anna Iurievna. She promised to come, with her oldest children. A telegram came yesterday. We have been expecting her all day."

"What is the cause of this sudden tenderness? They have not seen each other for ten years. Does he expect her husband, too? His son−in−law, the pedagogue?" contemptuously asked the general's wife.

"No! How could he come? He could not leave his service. And his son, too, Peter Iurevitch, he cannot come at once. He is on duty, in Transcaspia. It is a long way."

"Yes, it is a long way!" assented the general's wife, evidently busy with other thoughts. "But tell me, Edouard Vicentevitch, this new will, has it been written long?"

"It was drawn up only to−day. The draft was prepared last week, but the general kept putting it off. But when his pains began this morning. . . ."

"Is it the end? Is it dangerous?" interrupted Olga Vseslavovna.

"Very—a very bad sign. When they began, Iuri Paylovitch sent at once for the lawyer. He was still here when you arrived."

"Yes. And the old will, which he made before, has been destroyed?"

"I do not know for certain. But I think not. Oh, no, I forgot. The general was going to send a telegram."

"Yes? to send a telegram?"

The general's wife shrugged her shoulders, sadly shook her head, and added:

"He is so changeable! so changeable! But I think it is all the same. According to law, only the last will is valid?"

"Yes, without doubt; the last."

The general's wife bowed her head.

"What hurts me most," she whispered, with a bitter smile, bending close to the young doctor, and leaning heavily on his arm, "what hurts me most, is not the money. I am not avaricious. But why should he take my child away from me? Why should he pass over her own mother, and intrust her to her half−sister? A woman whom I do not know, who has not distinguished herself by any services or good actions, so far as I know. I shall not submit. I shall contest the will. The law must support the right of the mother. What do you think, doctor?"

The doctor hastily assented, though, to tell the truth, he was not thinking of anything at the moment, except the strange manner in which the general's wife, while talking, pressed close to her companion.

At that moment a bell rang, and the general's loud voice was heard:

"Doctor! Edouard Vicentevitch!"

"Coming!" answered the doctor.

And leaving Olga Vseslavovna at the threshold of her room, he ran quickly to the sick man.

"A vigorous voice—for a dying man! He shouts as he used to at the manoeuvers!" thought the general's wife.

And her handsome face at once grew dark with the hate which stole over it. This was only a passing expression, however; it rapidly gave place to sorrow, when she saw the manservant coming from the sick man.

"What is the matter with your master, Yakov? Is he worse?"

"No, madam. God has been gracious. He told me to push the box nearer him, and ordered Edouard Vicentevitch to open it. He wants to send some telegram or other."

"Thank God, he is not worse. Yakov, I am going to send a telegram to the station myself, in a few minutes, by my coachman. You can give him the general's telegram, too."

"Very well, madam."

"And another thing. I shall not go to bed. If there is any change in your master's condition, Yakov, come and knock at my door at once. I beg of you, tell me the very moment anything happens. Here is something for you, Yakov;—you have grown thin, waiting upon your master!"

"I thank you most humbly, your excellency. We must not grudge our exertions," the man answered, putting a note of considerable value in his pocket.

III

Contrary to expectation, the night passed quietly enough. Emotion and weariness claimed their own; Olga Vseslavovna, in spite of all her efforts, fell into a sleep toward morning; and when she awoke, she started in dismay, noticing that the sun had already climbed high in the sky, and was pouring into her room.

Her maid, a deft Viennese, who had remained with this accommodating mistress for five years, quieted her by telling her that the master was better, that he was still asleep, not having slept for the greater part of the night.

"The doctor and Yakov were busy with him most of the night," she explained. "They were sorting all sorts of papers; some of them they tied up, writing something on them; others they tore up, or threw into the fire. The grate is full of ashes. Yakov told me."

"And there were no more telegrams?"

"No, madam, there were no more. Yakov and our Friedrich would have let me know at once; I was there in the anteroom; they both kept coming through on errands. But there were no more telegrams, except the two that were sent last night."

Olga Vseslavovna dressed, breakfasted, and went to her husband. But at the threshold of his room she was stopped by the direction of the sick man to admit no one without special permission except the doctor, or his eldest daughter, if she should come.

"Tell Edouard Vicentevitch to come out to me," ordered the general's wife. The doctor was called, and in great

confusion confirmed the general's orders.

"But perhaps he did not think that such an order could apply to me?" she said, astonished.

The doctor apologized, but had to admit that it was she who was intended, and that his excellency had sent word to her excellency that she should not give herself the trouble of visiting him.

"He is out of his mind," declared the general's wife quietly, but with conviction, shrugging her shoulders. "Why should he hate me so—for all my love to him, an old man, who might have been my father?"

And Olga Vseslavovna once more took refuge in her pocket handkerchief, this time, instead of tears, giving vent to sobs of vexation.

The doctor, always shy in the presence of women, stood with hanging head and downcast eyes, as though he were to blame.

"What is it they are saying about you burning papers all night?" Olga Vseslavovna asked, in a weak voice.

"Oh, not nearly all night. Iuri Pavlovitch remembered that he ought to destroy some old letters and papers. There were some to be put in order. There, in the box, there is a packet addressed to your excellency. I was told to write the address."

"Indeed! Could I not see it?"

"Oh no, on no account. They are all locked up in the box along with the last will. And the general has the keys."

A bitter smile of humiliation played about the young woman's lips.

"So the new will has not been burned yet?" she asked. And to the startled negative of the doctor, who repeated that "it was lying on the top of the papers in the box," she added:

"Well, it will be burned yet. Do not fear. Especially if God in His mercy prolongs my husband's life. You see, he has always had a mysterious passion for writing new documents, powers of attorney, deeds of gift, wills, whatever comes into his mind. He writes new ones, and burns the old ones. But what can you do? We must submit to each new fancy. We cannot contradict a sick man."

Olga Vseslavovna went back to her room. She only left her bedroom for a few minutes that day, to hear the final word of the lights of the medical profession, who had come together for a general consultation in the afternoon; all the rest of the day she shut herself up. The conclusions of the physicians, though they differed completely in detail, were similar in the main, and far from comforting; the life and continued suffering of the sick man could not last more than a few days.

In the evening a telegram came from Anna Iurievna; she informed her father that she would be with him on the following day, at five in the afternoon.

"Shall I be able to hold out? Shall I last so long?" sighed the sick man, all day long. And the more he was disturbed in mind, the more threatening were his attacks of pain. He passed a bad night. Toward morning a violent attack, much worse than any that had gone before, almost carried him away. He could hardly breathe, owing to the sharp suffering. Hot baths for his hands and steam inhalations no longer had any beneficial effect, though they had alleviated his pain hitherto.

The doctor, the Sister of Mercy, and the servant wore themselves out. But still, as before, his wife alone was not admitted to him. She raged with anger, trying, and not without success, to convince everyone that she was going mad with despair. Little Olga had been taken away on the previous day by a friend of the general's, to stay there "during this terrible time." That night Madame Nazimoff did not go to bed at all; and, as befitted a devoted wife, did not quit her husband's door. When the violent attack just before dawn quieted down, she made an attempt to go in to him; but no sooner did the sick man see her at the head of his couch, on which he had at last been persuaded to lie, than strong displeasure was expressed in his face, and, no longer able to speak, he made an angry motion of his hand toward her, and groaned heavily. The Sister of Mercy with great firmness asked the general's wife not to trouble the sick man with her presence.

"And I am to put up with this. I am to submit to all this?" thought Olga Vseslavovna, writhing with wrath. "To endure all this from him, and after his death to suffer beggary? No, a thousand times no! Better death than penury and such insults." And she fell into gloomy thought.

That gesture of displeasure at the sight of his wife was the last conscious act of Iuri Pavlovitch Nazimoff. At eight in the morning he lost consciousness, in the midst of violent suffering, which lasted until the end. By the early afternoon he was no more.

During the last hour of his agony his wife knelt beside his couch without let or hindrance, and wept inconsolably. The formidable aristocrat and millionaire was dead.

Everything went on along the usual lines. The customary stir and unceremonious bustle, instead of cautious whispering, rose around the dead body, in preparation for a fashionable funeral. No near relatives were present except his wife, and she was confined to her room, half−fainting, half−hysterical. All responsibility fell on the humble doctor, and he busied himself indefatigably, conscientiously, in the sweat of his brow, making every effort to omit nothing. But, as always happens, he omitted the most important thing of all. The early twilight was already descending on St. Petersburg, shrouded in chilly mist, when Edouard Vicentevitch Polesski struck his brow in despair; he had suddenly remembered the keys and the box, committed to his care by the dying man. At that moment, the body, dressed in full uniform, with all his regalia, was lying in the great, darkened room on a table, covered with brocade, awaiting the coffin and the customary wreaths. The doctor rushed into the empty bedroom. Everything in it was already in order; the bed stood there, without mattress or pillows. There was nothing on the dressing table, either.

Where were the keys? Where was the box? The box was standing as before, untouched, locked. His heart at once felt lighter. But the keys? No doubt the police would come in a few minutes. It was astonishing that they had not come already. They would seal everything. Everything must be in order. Where was Yakov? Probably he had taken them. Or . . . the general's wife?

Polesski rushed to look for the manservant, but could not find him. There was so much to do; he had gone to buy something, to order something. "Oh Lord! And the announcement?" he suddenly remembered. It must be written at once, and sent to the newspapers. He must ask the general's wife, however, what words he should use. However much he might wish to avoid her, still she was now the most important person. And he could ask at the same time whether she had seen the keys.

The doctor went to the rooms of the general's wife. She was lying down, suffering severely, but she came out to him. "What words was he to use? It was all the same to her. 'With deep regret,' 'with heartfelt sorrow,' what did she care? The keys? What keys? No! she had not seen any keys, and did not know where they were. But why should he be disturbed about them? The servants were trustworthy; nothing would go astray."

"Yes, but we must have them ready for the police. They will come in a few minutes, to seal up the dead man's papers!"

"To seal up the papers? Why?"

"That is the law. So that everything should be intact, until after the last will and testament of the deceased has been read, according to his wishes."

General Nazimoff's wife paled perceptibly. She knew nothing of such an obstacle, and had not expected it. The doctor was too busy to notice her pallor.

"Very well; I shall write the announcement at once, and send it to the newspapers. I suppose 'Novoe Vremya' and 'Novosti' will be enough?"

"Do as you think best. Write it here, in my room. Here is everything you require; pens, paper. Write, and then read it to me. I shall be back in a moment. I want to put a bandage round my head. It aches so. Wait for me here." And the general's wife went from the sitting−room to her bedroom.

"Rita!" she whispered to her faithful maid, who was hurriedly sewing a mourning gown of crape for her. "Do not let the doctor go till I return. Do you understand? Do what you please, but do not let him go." The general's wife slipped from the bedroom into the passage through a small side door, and disappeared.

The two rooms between hers and the chamber where the dead man lay were quite empty and nearly dark; there were no candles in them. From the chamber came the feeble glimmer of the tiny lamps burning before the icons.* The tapers were not lit yet, as the deacon had not yet arrived. He was to come at the same time as the priest and the coffin. For the moment there was no one near the dead man; in the anteroom sat the Sister of Mercy.

* Sacred images.

"You wish to pray?" she asked the general's wife.

"Yes, I shall pray there, in his room."

She slipped past the dead body without looking at it, to the room that had been the general's bedroom, and closed the door behind her. She was afraid to lock it, and after all, was it necessary? It would only take a moment. There it is, the box! She knows it of old! And she knows its key of old, too; it is not so long since her husband had no secrets from her.

The key was quickly slipped into the lock, and the lid rose quickly. The paper? That new, detestable paper, which might deprive her of everything. Ah! there it is!

To close the lid quickly, and turn the key in the lock; to hide the keys somewhere; here, between the seat and the back of the sofa, on which he lay. That's it!

A sigh of relief from fear escaped the beautiful lips of the handsome woman, lips which were pale through those terrible days. She could feel secure at last!

She must look at the document, the proof of his cruelty, his injustice, his stupidity! She must make sure that there was no mistake! Olga Vseslavovna went up to the window, and taking advantage of the last ray of the gray day, unfolded the will.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!" she read. Yes, that is it, the will.

"How he pronounced those same words, when he was blessing little Olga," she remembered. "Blessing her! And his hand did not tremble, when he signed this. To deprive her, to deprive them both, of everything, all on account of those hated people? But now—it should never be! On no account! Your down−at−the−heel pedagogue shall not strut about in peacock's feathers! Olga and I . . . require the money more!"

And the general's wife was tempted to snap her fingers in triumph in the direction of the dead man.

Suddenly, quite close to the door, the sound of steps was heard. Good heavens! And she held the big sheet of crested paper in her hand! Where could she put it? She had no time to think of folding it up. There! they are coming in already! Who can it be?

And the will lay on the floor, the general's wife kneeling on it, as on a prayer carpet, in an attitude of prayer, her clasped hands on the window sill, her wet eyes fixed on a faintly twinkling star, as though calling heaven to witness her inconsolable grief and bereavement.

It was only the Sister of Mercy.

"Madam, the people have come, bringing the coffin; and I think the police have also come."

"Yes, in a moment. Tell them I am coming immediately."

The Sister of Mercy went out.

"See how she loved her husband. And why was he so unjust to her at the last?" she involuntarily reproached the dead general.

Meanwhile the general's wife had risen hastily, folded the will as best she could, in four, in eight folds, and crushing it together in her hand, went quietly from the room, which now filled her with dread.

She was so confused that she did not even think of looking for her pocket; she simply held her packet tight, and let her hand hang down, hiding it in the folds of her wide dressing−gown. There seemed to be so many people in the room which a moment before was empty, that she felt cowed. Her heart beat pitilessly, and the blood throbbed so violently in her temples that she could not understand what was said to her. They were asking her if they might place the body in the coffin, which had already been placed beside it. Her silence was taken as consent. The skilful undertakers easily lifted the already rigid body.

Olga Vseslavovna stood at the head of the dead general. Among the crowd of undertakers and servants, she suddenly saw coming toward her, with outstretched hand, and with tears of compassion in her eyes, the Princess Ryadski, the same aristocratic kinswoman who had already taken little Olga to stay with her.

"I must shake hands with her! And that horrible packet is in my hand! Where shall I put it? How can I hide it?" Before her eyes gleamed the brilliantly lighted, ashen forehead of the dead man, helplessly bent backward and sideways, as the whole body was suspended in the hands of the undertakers, over its last abode.

A saving thought!

The general's wife bent gently over the dead body. She gently supported the head of the corpse, gently laid it on the satin cushion, straightened the frills which surrounded the hard pillow, and, unperceived, left under it the twisted roll of paper.

"It will be safer there!" The thought flashed through her mind. "He wanted to keep his will himself; well, keep it to eternity, now! What more can you ask?"

And it even seemed ludicrous to her. She could hardly restrain a smile of triumph, changing it into a sad smile of grief, in reply to her kinswoman's condolences. The coffin was already lying in state on the bier; it was covered with brocade and flowers. The princess, as kinswoman of the late general, bent low, and first laid on the dead body the wreath she had brought with her.

"The poor sufferer has entered into rest," she whispered, shaking her head. "Will the funeral service be soon? Where will it be? Where is Olga Vseslavovna?"

"She will be here in a moment," the Sister of Mercy whispered, deeply affected; "she has gone to fix herself. They will begin the funeral service in a few minutes, and she is all in disorder. She is in great grief. Will you not take a seat?"

"What? Sit down? Thank you," loftily replied the princess. And she went toward a dignified personage who was entering, adorned with many orders and an aristocratic beard.

The general's wife soon came to herself. "Rita! I must wash and dress as quickly as possible. Ah! pray forgive me, doctor! They called me away to my husband. They were placing him in the coffin." She sighed deeply. "What is this? Oh, yes, the announcement of his death. Very good. Send it, please. But I must dress at once. The funeral service will begin immediately."

"Doctor! Is the doctor here?" an anxious voice sounded in the corridor.

"I am coming! What is it?"

"Please come quick, Edouard Vicentevitch!" Yakov called him. "The lady is very ill downstairs; Anna Iurievna, the general's daughter! I was out to order the flowers; I come back, and see the lady lying in a faint in the entrance. She had just arrived, and asked; and they answered her that he was dead, without the slightest preparation! And she could not bear it, and fainted."

Yakov said all this as they went.

"Actress!" angrily thought Olga Vseslavovna. And immediately she added mentally, "Well, she may stand on her head now, it is all the same to me!"

IV

Whether it was all the same to her or not, the deep despair of the daughter, who had not been in time to bid her father farewell, had not been in time to receive his blessing, after many years of anger, which had borne heavily on the head of the blameless young woman, was so evidently sincere, and produced such a deep impression on everyone, that her stepmother also was moved.

Anna Iurievna resembled her father, as much as a young, graceful, pretty woman can resemble an elderly man with strongly−marked features and athletic frame, such as was General Nazimoff. But in spite of the delicacy of her form, and the gentleness of her eyes, her glance sometimes flashed fire in a manner very like the flashing eyes of her father, and in her strong will, firm character, and inflexible adherence to what she believed to be necessary and right, Anna was exactly like her father.

For nearly ten years his daughter had obediently borne his anger; from the day of her marriage to the man she loved, whom evil−minded people had succeeded in calumniating in the general's mind. Though writing incessantly to him, begging him to pardon her, to understand that he had made a mistake, that her husband was a man of honor, and that she would be fully and perfectly happy, but for the burden of her father's wrath, and of the separation from him, she had never until the last few weeks received a reply from him. But quite recently something mysterious had happened. Not only had her father written to her that he wished to see her and her children in St. Petersburg, whither he was just setting out, but a few days later he had written again, a long, tender letter, in which he had asked her forgiveness. Without giving any explanations, he said that he had received indubitable proofs of the innocence and chivalrous honor of her husband; that he felt himself deeply guilty toward him, and was miserable on account of the injustice he had committed. In the following letters, praying his daughter to hasten her coming, because he was dangerously ill, and the doctors thought could not last long, he filled her with astonishment by expressing his intention to make a new will, and his determination to separate his youngest daughter "from such a mother," and by his prayers to her and her husband not to refuse to take upon themselves little Olga's education.

"What had happened? How could that light−minded woman have so deeply wounded my father?" Anna asked in bewilderment.

"If she was merely light−minded!" her husband answered, shrugging his shoulders. "But she is so malicious, so crafty, and so daring that anything may be expected from her."

"But in that case there would be an open scandal. We would know something for certain. Nowadays they even relate such stories in the newspapers, and my father is so well known, so noteworthy!"

"That is just why they don't write about him!" answered Borisoff, her husband, smiling. He himself flatly refused to go to St. Petersburg. With horror he remembered the first year of his marriage, before he had succeeded in obtaining a transfer to another city, and was compelled to meet the woman he detested; compelled also to meet his father−in−law, a wise and honorable old man, who had fallen so completely into the toils of this crafty woman. Anna Iurievna knew that her husband despised her stepmother; that he detested her as the cause of all the grief which they had had to endure through her, and most of all, on account of the injustice she was guilty of toward her brother, the general's son.

For six years Borisoff had lived with young Peter Nazimoff, as his tutor and teacher, and loved him sincerely. The boy had already reached the highest class at school, when his sister, two years older than he, finished her schooling, and returned to her father's house, about the time of the general's second marriage. What the young tutor tried not to notice and to endure, for love of his pupil, in the first year of the general's second marriage, became intolerable when the general's daughter returned home, and to all the burden of his difficult position was added the knowledge of their mutual love. He proceeded frankly, and the whole matter was soon settled. But the young man had never uttered a syllable as to the cause of Madame Nazimoff's hatred for him. For the sake of his father−in−law's peace of mind, he sincerely hoped that he would never know. Anna was convinced that the whole cause of her stepmother's hostility was her prejudice against what was in her opinion a mesalliance. In part she was right, but the chief reason of this hostility remained forever a secret to her. Unfortunately, it was not equally a secret to her father.

Of late years he had gradually been losing faith in his second wife's character. It went so far that the general felt much more at ease when she was away. Before the last illness of Iuri Pavlovitch, which, to tell the truth, was almost his first, Olga Vseslavovna had gone abroad with her daughter, intending to travel for a year; but she had hardly been gone two months when the general unexpectedly determined to go to St. Petersburg to seek a divorce, to see his elder daughter, and change his will. Perhaps he would never have determined on such decisive measures had not something wholly unexpected taken place.

Borisoff was quite mistaken in thinking that he had so carefully destroyed all the letters which the general's young wife had written to him, before his marriage to Anna, that no material evidence of Olga Vseslavovna's early design of treachery remained. Even before she married the general, she had had a confidential servant, who carried out many commissions for the beautiful young woman, whose fame had gone abroad through the three districts along the Volga, the arena of her early triumphs. Later, the young lady found a new favorite in foreign lands—the same Rita who was still with her. Martha, the Russian confidential servant, heartily detested the German girl, and such strife arose between them that not only the general's wife, but even the general himself, was deprived of peace and tranquillity. Martha was no fool; Olga Vseslavovna had to be careful with her; she did take care, but she herself did not know to what an extent she was in the woman's power. Foreseeing a black day of ingratitude, Martha, with wonderful forethought, had put on one side one or two letters from each series of her mistress' secret correspondence, which always passed through her hands. Perhaps she would not have made such a bad use of them but for her mistress' last, intolerable insult. Prizing in her servants, next to swift obedience, a knowledge of languages, her mistress did not make use of her when traveling abroad; but hitherto she had taken both servants with her. But on her last journey she was so heartily tired of Martha, and her perpetual tears and quarrels, that she determined to get on without her, the more so that her daughter's governess was also traveling with her. Her company was growing too numerous.

There was no limit to Martha's wrath when she learned that she was going to be left behind. Her effrontery was so great that she advised her mistress "for her own sake" not to put such an affront upon her, since she would not submit to it without seeking revenge. But her mistress never dreamed of what Martha was planning, and what a risk she ran.

Hardly had the general's wife departed when Martha asked the general to let her leave, saying she would find work elsewhere. The general saw no way of keeping her; and he did not even wish to do so, thinking her only a quarrelsome, ill−tempered woman. The confidential servant left the house, and even the city. And immediately her revenge and torture of the general began, cutting straight at the root of his happiness, his health, even his life. He began to receive, almost daily, letters from different parts of Russia, for Martha had plenty of friends and chums. With measureless cruelty Martha began by sending the less important documents, still signed with her mistress' maiden name; then two or three letters from the series of the most recent times, and finally there came a whole packet of those sent by the general's wife to the tutor, in the first year of her marriage with the general, before Borisoff had met Anna.

The crafty Martha, knowing perfectly the whole state of affairs to which these letters referred, often copied out their contents, and kept the letters themselves concealed, saying to herself, "God knows what may turn up, some day!

"If they are no use, I can burn them. But they may be useful. It is always a good thing to keep our masters in our power," argued the sagacious woman, and she was not mistaken in her calculations, although these letters served not for her profit, but only for a sanguinary revenge.

These notes and letters, which finally opened his eyes to the true character of his wife, and his own crying injustice to his elder children, were now lying in the general's dispatch box, in a neatly tied packet, directed in the doctor's handwriting to "Her Excellency Olga Vseslavovna Nazimoff."

As soon as she received her father's first letter Anna began to get ready to go to St. Petersburg, but unfortunately she was kept back by the sickness, first of one child, then of another. But for his last telegrams, she would not have started even now, because she did not realize the dangerous character of his illness. But now, finding that she had come too late, the unhappy woman could not forgive herself.

Everyone was grieved to see her bitter sorrow, after the funeral service for her father. Princess Ryadski burst into tears, as she looked at her; and all the acquaintances and relations of the general were far more disturbed by her

despair than by the general's death. Olga Vseslavovna was secretly scandalized at such lack of self−control, but outwardly she seemed greatly touched and troubled by the situation of her poor stepdaughter. But she did not venture to express her sympathy too openly in the presence of others, remembering the words of "the crazy creature" when she had come to herself after her fainting fit, and her stepmother had hurried up to embrace her.

"Leave me!" Anna had cried, when she saw her. "I cannot bear to see you! You killed my father!"

It was well that there were only servants in the anteroom. But the general's wife did not wish to risk another such scene, now that so many people were present. And besides she was extremely disturbed; the friends who had come to the funeral service had brought flowers; and the half−crazy princess, with the aid of two other ladies, had taken a fancy to decorate the coffin, and especially the head, with them. It is impossible to describe what Olga Vseslavovna suffered, as she watched all those hands moving about among the folds of the muslin, the frills, the covering, almost under the satin cushion even; a little more and she would have fainted in earnest.

She had always boasted that she had strong nerves, and this was quite true; nevertheless, during these days, their strength was evidently giving way, as she could not get to sleep for a long time that night, and heaven only knows what fancies passed through her mind. It was almost morning before Olga Vseslavovna got to sleep, and even then it was not for long.

She dreamed that she was descending endless stairs and dark corridors, with a heavy, shapeless burden on her shoulders. A bright, constantly−changing flame flickered before her; now red, now yellow, now green, it flitted before her from side to side. She knew that if she could reach it, the burden would fall from her. But the light seemed to be taunting her, now appearing, now disappearing, and suddenly going out altogether. And she found herself in the darkness, in a damp cellar, seemingly empty, but filled with something's invisible presence. What was it? She did not know. But this pervading something frightened her terribly, smothered her, pressing on her from all sides, depriving her of air. She was choking! Terror seized her at the thought that it . . . was Death! Must she die? Was it possible? But that brightly shining light had just promised her life, gayety, brilliance! She must hurry to overtake it. And she tried to run. But her feet would not obey her; she could not move.

"Heaven! Heaven!" she cried, "but what is it? Whence has such a disaster come? What is holding me? Let me go, or I shall be smothered in this stench, under this intolerable burden!"

Suddenly Iuri Pavlovitch walked past her. She immediately recognized him, and joyfully caught at his cloak. "Iuri! Forgive me! Help me!" she cried.

Her husband stopped, looked sadly at her, and answered: "I would gladly help you, but you yourself hinder me. Let me go; I must fulfill your directions."

At that moment she awoke. She was bathed in a cold perspiration, and clutched wildly at the coverlet with both hands. There was no one near her, but she clearly felt someone's presence, and was convinced that she had really seen her husband a moment before. In her ears resounded his words: "I must fulfill your directions!" Directions? What directions?

She sprang up, and began to feel about over the carpet with her bare feet, looking for her slippers. A terrible thought had come into her mind. She felt that she must settle it at once. She must take the will, take it away from there! burn it! destroy it! She feverishly drew on her dressing gown, and threw a shawl over her shoulders.

"Rita! Get up quick! Quick! Come!"

The frightened maid rose, still half asleep, and rubbed her eyes, understanding nothing. Her mistress' ice−cold hands clutched her, and dragged her somewhere.

"Ach lieber Gott . . . Gott in Himmel!" she muttered. "What has happened? What do you want?"

"Hush! Come quick!" And Olga Vseslavovna, with a candle in her trembling hand, went forward, dragging the trembling Rita with her. She opened the door of her bedroom, and went out. All the doors were open en suite, and straight in front of her, in the center of the fourth, shone the coffin of her husband, covered with cloth of gold and lit up by the tall tapers standing round the bier.

"What does it mean?" whispered the general's wife. "Why have they opened all the doors?"

"I do not know . . . they were all closed last night," murmured the maid in reply, her teeth chattering with fear. She longed to ask her mistress whither they were going, and what for? She wanted to stop, and not enter the funeral chamber; but she was afraid to speak.

They passed quickly through the rooms; at the door of the last the general's wife set her candle down on a chair, and halted for a moment. The loud snoring of the reader startled them both.

"It is the deacon!" whispered the general's wife reassuringly. Rita had hardly strength to nod assent. All the same, the healthy snoring of a living man comforted her. Without moving from where she stood, the maid tremblingly drew her woolen shawl closer about her, trying to see the sofa on which the deacon lay.

Knitting her brows, and biting her lips till they were sore, Olga Vseslavovna went forward determinedly to the bier. She thrust both hands under the flowers on the pillow. The frill was untouched. The satin of the cushion was there, but where was . . . ? Her heart, that had been beating like a hammer, suddenly stopped and stood still. There was not a trace of the will!

"Perhaps I have forgotten. Perhaps it was on the other side," thought Olga Vseslavovna, and went round to the left side of the coffin.

No! It was not there, either! Where was it? Who could have taken it? Suddenly her heart failed her utterly, and she clutched at the edge of the coffin to keep herself from falling. It seemed to her that under the stiff, pallid, rigidly clasped hands of the dead general something gleamed white through the transparent muslin of the covering, something like a piece of paper.

"Nonsense! Self−suggestion! It is impossible! Hallucination!" The thought flashed through her tortured brain. She forced herself to be calm, and to look again.

Yes! She had not been mistaken. The white corner of a folded paper appeared clearly against the general's dark uniform. At the same moment a cold draught coming from somewhere set the tapers flickering. Shadows danced around the room, over the bier, across the dead man's face; and in the quick change of light and shadow it seemed to her that the rigid features became more living, that a mournful smile formed itself on the closed lips, that the tightly− shut eyelids quivered. A wild cry rang through the whole room. With a desperate shriek: "His eyes! He is looking at me!" the general's wife staggered forward and fell fainting to the floor, beside her husband's bier.

V

The deacon sprang from his sofa with a cry, and an answering cry came from the lips of the shivering Rita, as she fled from the room. Servants rushed in, rubbing their eyes, still half−asleep, questioning each other, running this way and that. The deacon, spurred by a feeling of guilt, was determined to conceal the fact that he was sleeping. "It was the lady!" he said. "She came in to pray; she told me to stop reading while she prayed. She knelt down. Then she prayed for a long time, and suddenly . . . suddenly she cried out, and fainted. Grief, brothers! It is

terrible! To lose such a husband!" and he set them to work with restoratives, himself rubbing the fallen woman's chilly hands.

The general's wife opened her eyes after a few minutes. Looking wildly round in bewilderment, she seemed to be wondering where she was and how she had come there. Suddenly she remembered.

"The will! In his hands! Take it!" she cried, and fainted again. By this time the whole household was awake. Anna Iurievna had come in, full of astonishment at the sudden disturbance, but with the same feeling of deep quiet and peace still filling her heart and giving her features an expression of joy and calm. She heard the cry of the general's wife, and the words were recorded in her mind, though she did not at first give them any meaning.

She set herself, with all the tenderness of a good woman, to minister to the other's need, sending her own maid for sal volatile, chafing the fainting woman's hands, and giving orders that a bed should be prepared for her in another room, further away from the bier. As she spoke, quietly, gravely, with authority, the turmoil gradually subsided. The frightened servants recovered themselves, and moved about with the orderly obedience they ordinarily showed; and the deacon, above all anxious to cover his negligence, began intoning the liturgy, lending an atmosphere of solemnity to the whole room.

The servants, returning to announce that the bedroom was ready, were ordered by Anna Iurievna to lift the fainting woman with all care and gentleness, and she herself went with them to see the general's wife safely bestowed in her room, and waited while the doctor did all in his power to make her more comfortable. Olga Vseslavovna did not at once recover consciousness. She seemed to pass from a faint into an uneasy slumber, which, however, gradually became more quiet.

Only then, as she was leaving the room, did Anna Iurievna bethink her of the strange words that had fallen on her ears: "The will! In his hands! Take it!" And repeating them questioningly to herself, she walked slowly back toward the room in which lay her father's body.

But she was even more occupied with her own thoughts. She no longer felt in her heart the bitter resentment toward Olga Vseslavovna that had filled it yesterday. She was conscious of a feeling of sorrow for the helpless woman, of compassion for her empty, shallow life, the fruit of an empty, shallow heart. And she was wondering why such empty, joyless lives should exist in a world where there was such deep happiness and joy.

She came over to her father's coffin, close to which the deacon was still droning out his liturgy, and stood beside the dead body, looking down at the strong, quiet face, and vividly recalling her dream of the night before. Her eyes rested on the many stars and medals on his breast, and on his hands, quietly clasped in death. Then suddenly, and quite mechanically, Olga Vseslavovna's cry, as she returned to consciousness, came back into her mind:

"The will! In his hands! Take it!" And bending down, she noted for the first time something white beneath the muslin canopy. As she scrutinized it wonderingly, she was conscious of an humble, apologetic voice murmuring something at her elbow:

"Forgive me, Anna Iurievna. I humbly beg you, forgive me! It was I . . . in the night . . . the flowers fell . . . I was putting them back . . . fixing the head of your sainted papa. . . . It was under his head, the paper . . . I thought he wanted to keep it. . . . I put it in his hands, to be safe! . . . Forgive me, Anna Iurievna, if I have done any harm."

It was the deacon, still oppressed by a feeling of guilt. Anna Iurievna turned to him, and then turned back again, to her father's body, to the white object shining under the muslin canopy. And once more Olga Vseslavovna's words came into her mind:

"The will! In his hands! Take it!"

Gently raising the canopy, she softly drew the paper from beneath the general's clasped hands, and unfolded it. She read no more than the opening words, but she had read enough to realize that it was, indeed, her father's will.