

Cruelty in the Birch Grove



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I WAS SITTING IN A BIRCH GROVE IN AUTUMN, near the middle of September. It had been drizzling ever since morning; occasionally the sun shone warmly; — the weather was changeable. Now the sky was overcast with watery white clouds, now it suddenly cleared up for an instant, and then the bright, soft azure, like a beautiful eye, appeared from beyond the dispersed clouds. I was sitting looking about me and listening. The leaves were slightly rustling over my head; and by their very rustle one could tell what season of the year it was. It was not the gay, laughing palpitation of spring; not a soft whispering, nor the lingering chatter of summer, nor the timid and cold lispings of late autumn, but a barely audible, drowsy prattle. A faint breeze was whisking over the tree-tops. The interior of the grove, moist from the rain, was forever changing, as the sun shone or hid beyond the clouds; now the grove was all illuminated as if everything in it had burst into a smile; the trunks of the birch trees suddenly assumed the soft reflection of white silk; the small leaves which lay scattered on the ground all at once became variegated and flashed up like red gold; and the pretty stalks of the tall, branchy ferns, already tinted in their autumn hue, resembling the colour of overripe grapes, appeared here and there tangling and crossing one another. Now again everything suddenly turned blue; the bright colours died out instantaneously, the birch trees stood all white, lustreless, like snow which had not yet been touched by the coldly playing rays of the winter sun — and stealthily, slyly, a drizzling rain began to sprinkle and whisper over the forest. The leaves on the birches were almost all green yet, though they had turned somewhat pale; only here and there stood a solitary young little birch, all red or all golden, and one should have seen how brightly these birches flushed in the sun when its rays suddenly appeared gliding and flashing through the dense net of the thin branches which had just been washed around by the sparkling rain. Not a single bird was heard; all had found shelter, and were silent; only rarely the mocking voice of the bluebird sang out like a little steel bell.

Before stopping in this birch forest I passed with my dog through a poplar grove. I confess I am not very fond of the poplar tree with its pale lilac-coloured trunk and its greyish-green, metallic leaves, which it lifts high and spreads in the air like a trembling fan — I do not like the constant shaking of its round, untidy leaves, which are so awkwardly attached to long stems. The poplar is pretty only on certain summer evenings when, rising high amid the low shrubbery, it stands against the red rays of the setting sun, shining and trembling, bathed from root to top in uniform yellowish purple — or when, on a clear windy day, it rocks noisily, lipping against the blue sky, and each leaf seems as if eager to tear itself away, to fly and hurry off into the distance. But in general I do not like this tree, and, therefore, not stopping to rest in the poplar grove, I made my way to the birch forest, and seated myself under a tree whose branches started near the ground, and thus could protect me from the rain. Having admired the surrounding view, I fell asleep — I slept that tranquil, sweet sleep which is familiar to hunters only.

I cannot say how long I slept, but when I opened my eyes the entire interior of the forest was filled with sunshine, and everywhere the bright blue sky was flashing through the cheerfully droning leaves; the clouds disappeared, driven asunder by the wind which had begun to play; the weather was clear now, and one felt in the air that peculiar, dry freshness which, filling the heart with a certain vigorous sensation, almost always predicts a quiet, clear night after a rainy day. I was about to rise and try my luck at hunting again, when my eyes suddenly fell on a motionless human figure. I gazed at it fixedly; it was a young peasant girl. She was sitting some twenty feet away from me, her head bowed pensively and her hands dropped on her knees; in one hand, which was half open, lay a heavy bunch of field flowers, and every time she breathed the flowers were softly gliding over her chequered skirt. A clear white shirt, buttoned at the neck and the wrists, fell in short, soft folds about her waist; large yellow beads were hanging down from her neck on her bosom in two rows. She was not at all bad-looking. Her heavy fair hair, of a beautiful ash colour, parted in two neatly combed half-circles from under a narrow, dark-red head-band, which was pulled down almost to her ivory-white forehead; the rest of her face was slightly tanned with the golden sunburn peculiar to a tender skin. I could not see her eyes — she did not lift them; but I saw her thin, high eyebrows, her long lashes; these were moist, and on her cheek gleamed a dried-up teardrop, which had stopped near her somewhat pale lips. Her entire small head was very charming; even her somewhat thick and round nose did not spoil it. I liked especially the expression of her face; it was so simple and gentle, so sad and so full of childish perplexity before her own sadness. She was apparently waiting for someone. Something cracked faintly in the forest. Immediately she raised her head and looked around; her eyes flashed quickly before me in the transparent shade — they were large, bright, and shy like a deer's. She listened for a few seconds, not moving her wide-open eyes from the spot whence the faint sound had come; she heaved a sigh, turned her head slowly, bent down still lower and began to examine the flowers. Her eyelids turned red, her lips quivered bitterly and a new teardrop rolled down from under her heavy eyelashes, stopping and sparkling on her cheek. Thus quite a long while passed; the poor girl did not stir — only occasionally she moved her hands and listened — listened all the time. Something cracked once more in the forest — she started. This time the noise did not stop,

it was becoming more distinct, it was nearing — at last firm footsteps were heard. She straightened herself, and it seemed as if she lost her courage, for her eyes began to quiver. The figure of a man appeared through the jungle. She looked fixedly, suddenly flushed, and, smiling joyously and happily, seemed about to rise, but she immediately cast down her head again, turned pale, confused — only then she lifted her quivering, almost prayerful, eyes to the man as he paused beside her.

“Well?” he began, continuing to look aside, shaking his foot and yawning. “Have you waited long?”

The girl could not answer him at once.

“Long, Victor Alexandrich,” she said at last, in a scarcely audible voice.

“Ah!” He removed his cap, majestically passed his hand over his thick, curly hair whose roots started almost at his eyebrows, and, looking around with dignity, covered his precious head again cautiously. “And I almost forgot all about it. Besides, you see, it’s raining.” He yawned again. “I have a lot of work to do; you can’t look after everything, and he is yet scolding. We are leaving tomorrow — ”

“Tomorrow?” uttered the girl, and fixed a frightened look upon him.

“Tomorrow — Come, come, come, please,” he replied quickly, vexed, noticing that she quivered, and bowed her head in silence. “Please, Akulina, don’t cry. You know I can’t bear it” (and he twitched his flat nose). “If you don’t stop, I’ll leave you right away. What nonsense — to whimper!”

“Well, I shan’t, I shan’t,” said Akulina hastily, swallowing the tears with an effort. “So you’re going away tomorrow?” she added, after a brief silence. “When will it please God to have me meet you again, Victor Alexandrich?”

“We’ll meet, we’ll meet again. If it isn’t next year, it’ll be later. My master, it seems, wants to enter the service in St. Petersburg,” he went on, pronouncing the words carelessly and somewhat indistinctly. “And it may be that we’ll go abroad.”

“You will forget me, Victor Alexandrich,” said Akulina sadly.

“No — why should I? I’ll not forget you, but you must be reasonable; don’t make a fool of yourself; obey your father — And I’ll not forget you — Oh, no; oh, no.” And he stretched himself calmly and yawned again.

“Do not forget me, Victor Alexandrich,” she resumed in a beseeching voice. “I have loved you so much, it seems — all, it seems, for you — You tell me to obey father, Victor Alexandrich — How am I to obey my father — ?”

“How’s that?” He pronounced these words as if from the stomach, lying on his back and holding his hands under his head.

“Why, Victor Alexandrich — you know it yourself — ”

She fell silent. Victor fingered his steel watch-chain.

“Akulina, you are not a foolish girl,” he said at last, “therefore don’t talk nonsense. It’s for your own good, do you understand me? Of course, you are not foolish, you’re

not altogether a peasant, so to say, and your mother wasn't always a peasant either. Still, you are without education — therefore you must obey when you are told to."

"But it's terrible, Victor Alexandrich."

"Oh, what nonsense, my dear — what is she afraid of! What is that you have there," he added, moving close to her, "flowers?"

"Flowers," replied Akulina sadly. "I have picked some field tansies," she went on, with some animation. "They're good for the calves, And here I have some marigolds — for scrofula. Here, look, what a pretty flower! I haven't seen such a pretty flower in all my life. Here are forget-me-nots, and — and these I have picked for you," she added, taking from under the tansies a small bunch of cornflowers, tied around with a thin blade of grass; "do you want them?"

Victor held out his hand lazily, took the flowers, smelt them carelessly, and began to turn them around in his fingers, looking up with thoughtful importance. Akulina gazed at him. There was so much tender devotion, reverent obedience, and love in her pensive eyes. She at once feared him, and yet she dared not cry, and inwardly she bade him farewell, and admired him for the last time; and he lay there, stretched out like a sultan, and endured her admiration with magnanimous patience and condescension. I confess I was filled with indignation as I looked at his red face, which betrayed satisfied selfishness through his feigned contempt and indifference. Akulina was so beautiful at this moment. All her soul opened before him trustingly and passionately; — it reached out to him, caressed him, and he — He dropped the cornflowers on the grass, took out from the side-pocket of his coat a round glass in a bronze frame and began to force it into his eye; but no matter how hard he tried to hold it with his knitted brow, his raised cheek, and even with his nose, the glass dropped out and fell into his hands.

"What's this?" asked Akulina at last, with surprise.

"A lorgnette," he replied importantly.

"What is it for?"

"To see better."

"Let me see it."

Victor frowned, but gave her the glass.

"Look out; don't break it."

"Don't be afraid, I'll not break it." She lifted it timidly to her eye.

"I can't see anything," she said naively.

"Shut your eye," he retorted in the tone of a dissatisfied teacher. She closed the eye before which she held the glass.

"Not that eye, not that one, you fool! The other one!" exclaimed Victor, and, not allowing her to correct her mistake, he took the lorgnette away from her.

Akulina blushed, laughed slightly, and turned away.

"It seems it's not for us."

“Of course not!”

The poor girl maintained silence, and heaved a deep sigh.

“Oh, Victor Alexandrich, how will I get along without you?” she said suddenly.

Victor wiped the lorgnette and put it back into his pocket.

“Yes, yes,” he said at last. “At first it will really be hard for you.” He tapped her on the shoulder condescendingly; she quietly took his hand from her shoulder and kissed it. “Well, yes, yes, you are indeed a good girl,” he went on, with a self-satisfied smile; “but it can’t be helped! Consider it yourself! My master and I can’t stay here, can we? Winter is near, and to pass the winter in the country is simply nasty — you know it yourself. It’s a different thing in St. Petersburg! There are such wonders over there that you could not imagine even in your dreams, you silly — What houses, what streets, and society, education — it’s something wonderful! — ”

Akulina listened to him with close attention, slightly opening her lips like a child.

“However,” he added, wriggling on the ground, “why do I say all this to you? You can’t understand it anyway!”

“Why not, Victor Alexandrich? I understood, I understood everything.”

“Indeed, it that so?”

Akulina cast down her eyes.

“You did not speak to me like this before, Victor Alexandrich,” she said, without lifting her eyes.

“Before? — Before! Just think of her! — Before!” he remarked, indignantly.

Both grew silent.

“However, it’s time for me to go,” said Victor, and leaned on his elbow, about to rise.

“Wait a little,” said Akulina in an imploring voice.

“What for? I have already said to you, Good-by!”

“Wait,” repeated Akulina.

Victor again stretched himself on the ground and began to whistle. Akulina kept looking at him steadfastly. I could see that she was growing agitated by degrees — her lips twitched, her pale cheeks were reddening.

“Victor Alexandrich,” she said at last in a broken voice, “it’s a sin for you, it’s a sin, Victor Alexandrich, by God!”

“What’s a sin?” he asked, knitting his brows. He raised his head and turned to her.

“It’s a sin, Victor Alexandrich. If you would only say a good word to me before leaving — if you would only say one word to me, miserable little orphan that I am — ”

“But what shall I say to you?”

“I don’t know. You know better than I do, Victor Alexandrich. Here you are going away — if you would only say one word — What have I done to deserve this?”

“How strange you are! What can I say?”

“If only one word — ”

“There she’s firing away one and the same thing,” he muttered with vexation, and got up.

“Don’t be angry, Victor Alexandrich,” she added hastily, unable to repress her tears.

“I’m not angry — only you are foolish — What do you want? I can’t marry you! I can’t, can I? Well, then, what do you want? What?” He stared at her, as if awaiting an answer, and opened his fingers wide.

“I want nothing — nothing,” she replied, stammering, not daring to outstretch her trembling hands to him, “but simply so, at least one word, at parting — ”

And the tears began to stream from her eyes.

“Well, there you are, she’s started crying,” said Victor indifferently, pulling the cap over his eyes.

“I don’t want anything,” she went on, sobbing and covering her face with her hands; “but how will I feel now at home, how will I feel? And what will become of me, what will become of me, wretched one that I am? They’ll marry the poor little orphan off to a man she does not like. My poor little head!”

“Keep on singing, keep on singing,” muttered Victor in a low voice, stirring restlessly.

“If you only said one word, just one: ‘Akulina — I — ’ ”

Sudden heartrending sobs interrupted her. She fell with her face upon the grass and cried bitterly, bitterly — All her body shook convulsively, the back of her neck seemed to rise — The long-suppressed sorrow at last burst forth in a stream of tears. Victor stood a while near her, then he shrugged his shoulders, turned around and walked off with large steps.

A few moments went by. She grew silent, lifted her head, looked around and clasped her hands; she was about to run after him, but her feet failed her — she fell down on her knees. I could not endure it any longer and rushed over to her; but before she had time to look at me, she suddenly seemed to have regained her strength — and with a faint cry she rose and disappeared behind the trees, leaving the scattered flowers on the ground.

I stood a while, picked up the bunch of cornflowers, and walked out of the grove to the field. The sun was low in the pale, clear sky; its rays seemed to have faded and turned cold; they did not shine now, they spread in an even, almost watery, light. There was only a half-hour left until evening, and twilight was setting in. A violent wind was blowing fast toward me across the yellow, dried-up stubble-field; the small withered leaves were carried quickly past me across the road; the side of the grove which stood like a wall by the field trembled and flashed clearly, but not brightly; everywhere on the reddish grass, on the blades, and the straw, innumerable autumn cobwebs flashed and trembled. I stopped. I began to feel sad; it seemed a dismal fear of approaching winter was stealing through the gay, though fresh, smile of fading nature. High above me, a cautious raven flew by, heavily and sharply cutting the air

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with his wings; then he turned his head, looked at me sidewise, and, croaking abruptly, disappeared beyond the forest; a large flock of pigeons rushed past me from a barn, and, suddenly whirling about in a column, they came down and stationed themselves bustlingly upon the field — a sign of spring autumn! Somebody rode by beyond the bare hillock, making much noise with an empty wagon.

I returned home, but the image of poor Akulina did not leave my mind for a long time, and the cornflowers, long withered, are in my possession to this day.

