Surgery — Text 1 of 2

Zemstvo hospital. In the absence of the doctor, who has gone away to get married, the patients are seen by the paramedic Kuryatin, a fat man of about forty, in a worn cheviot jacket and threadbare knitted trousers. His face wears an expression of duty and affability. Between the index and middle fingers of his left hand is a cigar, spreading a stench.

Into the reception room enters the sacristan Vonmiglasov, a tall, thickset old man in a brown cassock with a wide leather belt. His right eye has a cataract and is half-closed; on his nose is a wart that from a distance looks like a large fly. For a second the sacristan looks around for an icon and, not finding one, crosses himself before a bottle of carbolic solution, then takes a prosphora out of a red kerchief and, with a bow, lays it before the paramedic.

A-a-a... my respects to you! yawns the paramedic. What brings you here?

A happy Sunday to you, Sergey Kuzmich... To your kindness... Truly and truthfully it is said in the Psalter, forgive me: I have mingled my drink with weeping. I sat down the other day with the old woman to drink tea and, oh my God, not a drop, not a speck of powder, you might as well lie down and die... You take a tiny sip and I haven't the strength! And besides, it's not just in the tooth itself, but this whole side... It aches and aches! It shoots into my ear, forgive me, as if there were a little nail or some other object in it: it shoots and shoots! We have sinned and transgressed... For we have defiled our soul with shameful sins and spent my life in sloth... For our sins, Sergey Kuzmich, for our sins! Father priest reproaches me after the liturgy: You are tongue-tied, Yefim, and you've become lisping. You sing, and no one can make out a word. And what sort of singing is that, judge for yourself, when you can't open your mouth, it's all swollen, forgive me, and I haven't slept all night...

Mm, yes... Sit down... Open your mouth!

Vonmiglasov sits down and opens his mouth.

Kuryatin frowns, looks into the mouth and among the teeth yellowed by time and tobacco discerns one tooth adorned with a gaping cavity.

Father deacon told me to apply vodka with horseradish, it didn't help. Glikeria Anisimovna, God grant them health, gave me a thread to wear on my hand from

Mount Athos and told me to rinse the tooth with warm milk, but I, to tell the truth, put on the thread, but as for the milk, I didn't observe it: I fear God, it's a fast...

Superstition... (pause). It needs to be pulled out, Yefim Mikheich!

You know best, Sergey Kuzmich. That's what you're trained for, to understand this business as it is, what to pull out and what with drops or something else... That's what you, our benefactors, are placed here for, God grant you health, so that we for you day and night, our own fathers... till the grave...

Nonsense... says the paramedic modestly, going to the cupboard and rummaging among the instruments. Surgery is nonsense... It's all a matter of habit, a steady hand... Easy as spitting... The other day too, just like you, the landowner Aleksandr Ivanych Egipetsky comes to the hospital... Also with a tooth... An educated man, asks about everything, gets into everything, how and what. Shakes hands, calls me by my first name and patronymic... Lived in St. Petersburg for seven years, sniffed out all the professors... We were here a long time with him... He begs me by Christ the Lord: pull it out for me, Sergey Kuzmich! Why not pull it out? It can be pulled out. Only you have to understand, without understanding you can't... Teeth are different. One you pull with forceps, another with a goat's foot, a third with a key... It depends.

The paramedic takes a goat's foot, looks at it questioningly for a minute, then puts it down and takes the forceps.

Well then, open your mouth wider... he says, approaching the sacristan with the forceps. Now we'll... you know... Easy as spitting... Just need to cut the gum... make the traction along the vertical axis... and that's all... (cuts the gum) and that's all...

Our benefactors... We fools can't make it out, but the Lord has enlightened you...

Don't talk, if you have your mouth open...

This one is easy to pull, but sometimes there are only the roots... This one is easy as spitting... (applies the forceps). Wait, don't jerk... Sit still... In the twinkling of an eye... (makes the traction). The main thing is to grip it deeper (pulls)... so the crown doesn't break...

Our fathers... Mother most holy... V-v-v...

Not that... not that... what's the word? Don't grab with your hands! Let go of your hands! (pulls). Now... Here, here... It's not an easy business...

Fathers... our helpers... (shouts). Angels! O-ho-ho... Well, pull then, pull! What are you dragging it out for five years?

The business is... surgery... You can't do it at once... Here, here...

Vonmiglasov raises his knees to his elbows, wiggles his fingers, bulges his eyes, breathes in gasps... Sweat breaks out on his purple face, tears in his eyes. Kuryatin snorts, shuffles before the sacristan and pulls... The most agonizing half-minute passes and the forceps slip off the tooth. The sacristan jumps up and sticks his fingers in his mouth. In his mouth he feels the tooth in its old place.

You pulled! he says in a tearful and at the same time mocking voice. May you be pulled like that in the next world! Our humble thanks! If you don't know how to pull, then don't start! I can't see the light of day...

And why do you grab with your hands? the paramedic gets angry. I'm pulling, and you're pushing against my hand and saying all sorts of stupid words.... Fool!

You're the fool yourself!

You think, peasant, it's easy to pull a tooth? Try it yourself! It's not like climbing up the bell tower and banging on the bells! (teases). You don't know how, you don't know how! Look what an instructor has turned up! Look at you... I pulled it for Mr. Egipetsky, Aleksandr Ivanych, and he didn't say anything, no words... A man cleaner than you, and he didn't grab with his hands... Sit down! Sit down, I tell you!

I can't see the light... Let me catch my breath... Ooh! (sits down). Only don't pull for long, but jerk. Don't pull, but jerk... At once!

Teaching the learned! What, Lord, an uneducated people! Live with such as these... and you'll go mad! Open your mouth... (applies the forceps). Surgery, brother, is no joke... It's not like reading in the choir... (makes the traction). Don't jerk... The tooth, it turns out, is old, the roots have gone deep... (pulls). Don't move... So... so... Don't move... Now, now... (a crunching sound is heard). I knew it!

Vonmiglasov sits motionless for a minute, as if unconscious. He is stunned... His eyes stare dully into space, sweat on his pale face.

If only I'd used the goat's foot... mutters the paramedic. What a mishap!

Coming to, the sacristan sticks his fingers in his mouth and in place of the sore tooth finds two protruding stumps.

Lousy devil... he reproaches. They've planted you here, you Herods, for our ruin!

Don't you dare curse me here... mutters the paramedic, putting the forceps in the cupboard. Boor... They didn't thrash you enough with the birch rod in the seminary... Mr. Egipetsky, Aleksandr Ivanych, lived in St. Petersburg for seven years... education... one suit alone costs a hundred rubles... and even he didn't curse... And what sort of peacock are you? You'll be all right, you won't die!

The sacristan takes his prosphora from the table and, holding his cheek with his hand, goes his way...