The Red Flower (In Memory of Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev)

— In the name of His Imperial Majesty, the Sovereign Emperor Peter the First, I declare an inspection of this madhouse!

These words were spoken in a loud, sharp, ringing voice. The hospital clerk, who was registering the patient in a large worn-out book on an ink-stained table, could not help smiling. But the two young men accompanying the patient did not laugh: they could hardly keep on their feet after two days spent without sleep, alone with the madman whom they had just brought by railway. At the penultimate station the fit of rage intensified; somewhere they got a straitjacket and, calling the conductors and a gendarme, put it on the patient. Thus they brought him to the city, thus they delivered him to the hospital.

He was terrible. Over the gray dress torn to shreds during the fit, a jacket of coarse canvas with a wide neckline clung to his figure; the long sleeves pressed his arms across his chest and were tied behind his back. His inflamed, wide-open eyes (he had not slept for ten days) burned with a fixed hot gleam; a nervous twitch jerked the edge of his lower lip; his tangled curly hair fell like a mane on his forehead; he paced from corner to corner of the office with quick heavy steps, peering intently at the old cabinets with papers and the oilcloth chairs and occasionally glancing at his companions.

— Take him to the ward. To the right.

— I know, I know. I was already here with you last year. We inspected the hospital. I know everything, and it will be hard to deceive me, — said the patient.

He turned to the door. The attendant opened it before him; with the same quick, heavy and resolute gait, holding his mad head high, he left the office and almost ran to the right, into the ward for the mentally ill. Those accompanying him could hardly keep up with him.

— Ring. I can't. You've tied my hands.

The porter opened the doors, and the travelers entered the hospital.

It was a large stone building of old state construction. Two large halls, one — the dining room, the other — the common room for quiet patients, a wide corridor with a glass door opening into a garden with a flowerbed, and a dozen or so separate

rooms where the patients lived, occupied the ground floor; here were also arranged two dark rooms, one lined with mattresses, the other with boards, into which the violent were put, and a huge gloomy vaulted room — the bathroom. The upper floor was occupied by women. Discordant noise, interrupted by howling and screams, came from there. The hospital was designed for eighty people, but since it alone served several neighboring provinces, it held up to three hundred. In the small cells there were four and five beds each; in winter, when patients were not let out into the garden and all the windows behind iron bars were tightly locked, the hospital became unbearably stuffy.

The new patient was taken to the room where the baths were. Even on a healthy person it could make a heavy impression, and on a disturbed, excited imagination it acted all the more heavily. It was a large vaulted room with a sticky stone floor, lit by a single window made in the corner; the walls and vaults were painted dark red oil paint; in the floor blackened with dirt, level with it, were embedded two stone baths, like two oval water-filled pits. A huge copper stove with a cylindrical boiler for heating water and a whole system of copper pipes and taps occupied the corner opposite the window; everything bore an extraordinarily gloomy and fantastic character for a disturbed mind, and the attendant in charge of the baths, a fat, eternally silent Little Russian, with his gloomy physiognomy increased the impression.

And when the patient was brought into this terrible room to give him a bath and, according to the treatment system of the hospital's chief doctor, to apply a large blistering plaster to the back of his head, he was seized with horror and rage. Absurd thoughts, each more monstrous than the other, whirled in his head. What was this? The Inquisition? A place of secret execution where his enemies had decided to do away with him? Perhaps hell itself? It finally occurred to him that this was some kind of trial. They undressed him despite his desperate resistance. With strength doubled by illness he easily tore himself from the hands of several attendants, so that they fell to the floor; finally four of them overpowered him and, seizing him by the arms and legs, lowered him into the warm water. It seemed to him boiling water, and in his mad head flashed a disconnected fragmentary thought of trial by boiling water and red-hot iron. Choking on the water and convulsively flailing with his arms and legs, which the attendants held firmly, he, gasping, shouted incoherent speech of which it is impossible to have an idea without hearing it in reality. There were both prayers and curses. He screamed until he was exhausted, and finally quietly, with hot tears, uttered a phrase completely inconsistent with the previous speech:

— Holy Great Martyr George! Into thy hands I commend my body. But the spirit — no, oh no!..

The attendants still held him, although he had calmed down. The warm bath and the ice bag placed on his head had their effect. But when he, almost unconscious, was taken out of the water and seated on a stool to apply the blister, the remnant of his strength and his mad thoughts seemed to explode again.

— For what? For what? — he screamed. — I wished no evil to anyone. For what kill me? O-o-o! O Lord! O you who were tortured before me! I beg you, save me...

The burning touch to the back of his head made him struggle desperately. The servants could not cope with him and did not know what to do.

— Nothing can be done, — said the soldier performing the operation. — It must be rubbed off.

These simple words made the patient shudder. "Rub off!.. What to rub off? Whom to rub off? Me!" — he thought and in mortal terror closed his eyes. The soldier took a coarse towel by both ends and, pressing hard, quickly ran it over the back of his head, tearing off both the plaster and the top layer of skin and leaving an exposed red abrasion. The pain from this operation, unbearable even for a calm and healthy person, seemed to the patient the end of everything. He desperately jerked his whole body, broke free from the attendants' hands, and his naked body rolled over the stone slabs. He thought they had cut off his head. He wanted to scream and could not. They carried him to the bed unconscious, and the unconsciousness passed into a deep, dead and long sleep.