

At a Child's Grave

Sorrow settled in the house; all hearts were filled with grief. The youngest child, a four-year-old boy, the only son, the joy and hope of his parents, had died. True, they still had two daughters—the elder was to be confirmed that year—fine, kind girls, but the child who has died always seems the dearest, and this one was moreover the youngest, and a son besides. Yes, a heavy trial had fallen upon the parents. The sisters mourned, as young hearts generally do, chiefly looking at their parents' sorrow; the father grieved, but the mother was utterly overwhelmed by grief. Day and night she had cared for the sick child, cherished him, lifted him and carried him in her arms; for it was her own flesh and blood that suffered, a part of herself! She could not even imagine that her child would die, that he would be laid in a coffin and buried in the earth! The Lord could not take her child from her, she thought, and yet when it nevertheless happened, in a burst of painful despair she cried out:

"The Lord does not know of this! He has heartless servants here on earth. They do as they please, heedless of a mother's pleas!"

In her despair she turned away from God, and dark thoughts took hold of her, thoughts of eternal death, suggesting to her that man becomes dust to dust and that with this all ends. Seized by such thoughts, she lost every foothold and sank deeper and deeper into the dark abyss of despair.

In those heavy hours she had no tears. She no longer thought of her young daughters; her husband's tears fell upon her brow, but she did not notice them. All her thoughts were occupied with the dead child; she lived only in memories of him, striving to revive in her mind each of his innocent childish words.

The day of the funeral arrived; for several nights before, the mother had not slept, and by morning weariness overcame her—she fell into a slumber. At that time the coffin was carried into a distant room, so that the mother might not hear the blows of the hammer when they began to nail down the lid.

Upon waking, the mother wished to see the child again, but her husband said to her with tears:

"We have nailed down the lid: it was time."

"If God is so cruel to me," she murmured, "then what may one expect from people!" And she burst into tears.

The coffin was lowered into the grave; the inconsolable mother sat with her daughters and looked at them without seeing them; her thoughts turned away from family, from home; she surrendered herself to grief and became its plaything, just as a ship without rudder or sails becomes the plaything of the waves. Thus passed the day of the funeral, and after it flowed monotonous, heavy, sorrowful days. With tears in their eyes, the household looked sadly upon the mother; she did not listen to their consolations, and what consolations could they offer her—they themselves were in such grief.

Sleep seemed to have abandoned her altogether, though it alone could have rendered her the best service by strengthening her body and calming her soul. The household urged her to lie down in bed; she obeyed and lay quietly, as though asleep. But one night her husband listened to her breathing, and it seemed to him that she had at last found rest and relief in sleep. He devoutly folded his hands, prayed, and soon fell himself into a healthy, sound slumber. He did not hear how she rose, threw a dress over herself, and quietly left the house to go where her thoughts drew her day and night—to the grave of her child. She passed through the garden adjoining the house, out into the field, and turned onto a path that led beyond the town, to the cemetery. No one saw her, and she saw no one.

It was a wonderful, clear, starry night. The air was still so soft; September had only just begun. The mother entered the cemetery and stopped beside the little grave, which resembled rather a large bouquet of fragrant flowers. Kneeling down, she pressed her face to the grave, as though hoping to see through the thick earthen covering her little boy. How vividly she remembered his smile, the loving expression of his eyes! They had remained the same even on his sickbed! Never could she forget them! How much his gaze had spoken when she bent over him and took his hand, which he himself no longer had strength to lift!... And just as before she used to sit beside his little bed, so now she sat by his little grave! But now she could give full rein to her tears, and they streamed like a river onto the grave.

"Do you wish to go there, to your child?" a voice sounded beside her. It rang out so clearly and resonated so deeply in her heart. She looked around; beside her stood a human figure wrapped in a long black cloak, with a hood upon its head. She gazed into its face: it was stern, yet inspired trust; the eyes burned with a pure youthful fire.

"To my child!" repeated the mother with desperate entreaty.

"Dare you follow me?" asked the apparition. "I am Death!"

The mother nodded affirmatively. In that same instant it seemed to her that every star above her flared up like a full moon and illuminated the multicolored floral carpet upon the grave; then the earthen covering softly sank beneath her, like a veil waving in the air, and she began to sink into the earth. The apparition covered her with its black cloak, and sepulchral darkness reigned around her. The mother descended deeper than any graveyard spade can penetrate; the cemetery lay like a roof over her head.

The cloak drew aside. The mother found herself in a vast, welcoming chamber. A certain half-light reigned here, yet in that very moment she felt that she was pressing her child to her heart. He smiled at her, radiant with a new beauty unknown to her; she cried out, but her cry was not heard: beside her, now receding, now approaching, sounded wonderful music. Never in her life had she heard such marvelous sounds; they issued from behind a black, dense curtain that separated this chamber from the great country of eternity.

"Mama! My dear mama!" she heard her child's voice. It was his sweet, familiar voice! Kisses rained upon kisses; the mother was beside herself with joy, but the child pointed to the black curtain.

"How wonderful it is there! Not as on earth! Do you see, Mama? Do you see them all, the blessed ones?"

And the mother looked where the child pointed, but saw nothing except black gloom; for she looked with bodily eyes, not as the child did, who had been called by God to Himself. The mother heard the sounds, but could not comprehend the words that might have restored her faith.

"Now I know how to fly, Mama!" said the child. "I can fly away together with other good children straight to God! I very much wish to fly to Him, but if you keep weeping so, I shall not be able to leave you! And I so very much wish to! May I? You yourself will soon come to me, Mama!"

"Oh, stay, stay with me!" she pleaded. "Just another minute! Let me look at you once more, kiss you, press you to my heart!"

And she pressed him tightly to herself, showering him with kisses. Suddenly someone called her by name from above; the call sounded plaintive. Who could be calling her?

"Do you hear?" said the child. "It is Papa calling you!"

A few seconds later deep sighs were heard, as though children were sobbing.

"It is the sisters weeping!" said the child. "Mama, you have not forgotten them, have you?"

She remembered those she had left behind on earth, and horror seized her; she began to peer intently at the shadows flying past her, and it seemed to her that she recognized some of them. They flew through the chamber of death and vanished behind the black curtain. What if she were to see here her husband and her daughters as well? No, their calls and sighs still sounded up there, above. She had nearly forgotten them altogether for the sake of the dead!...

"Mama, the heavenly bells are ringing! Mama, the sun is rising!" said the child.

A blinding torrent of light rushed toward her; the child vanished, and she rose upward... Cold seized her; she lifted her head and saw that she was lying in the cemetery, upon the grave of her child: God in sleep had sent her comfort and support, enlightened her mind. She fell upon her knees and said:

"Forgive me, Lord, that I wished to halt the flight of an immortal soul, that I forgot my duty to the living, the duty which You have laid upon me!"

Prayer eased her soul. And just then the sun rose, a little bird began to sing overhead, the bells rang for morning prayer... How wonderful everything became around her! And holy peace settled in her soul. She came to know God and her duty and hastened home. There she bent over her husband, woke him with a fervent kiss, and from her lips flowed warm, heartfelt words, full of courage and consolation. She, as befits a courageous and strong-spirited wife, opened for him in her

The heart is a source of comfort.

"God's will directs everything for the best!"

And her husband asked her:

— Where did you draw this strength of comfort from?

She kissed him, kissed her daughters, and answered:

— God sent it to me at my child's grave!