

On the Day of Death

The most solemn, great day in a person's life is the day of their death, the sacred day of great rebirth. But have you ever seriously, properly, considered this most important, inevitable, final day of our life? There lived on earth a strictly believing man, "a fighter for the letter of the law," as they called him, a zealous servant of a stern God. And then Death approached his bedside; he beheld before him the stern heavenly features of the Angel of Death.

"Your hour has come, follow me!" said the angel, touching the man's feet with a hand cold as ice—the feet grew stiff; then he touched his forehead, and finally his heart—it ceased to beat, and the soul of the deceased followed the Angel of Death.

But in those few seconds that passed while the mortal chill rose from the feet to the heart of the dying man, everything he had experienced and felt during his earthly life flashed before his eyes like huge ocean waves. Thus does a man measure with one glance the bottomless, dizzying depth, embrace with one lightning movement of thought the immeasurable, infinite path, encompass with one look the entire aggregate of countless starry worlds, luminaries, and planets scattered throughout cosmic space.

In such moments, an invincible tremor seizes the sinner; he has nothing to lean upon, he seems to plunge headlong into some endless void. The righteous man, however, calmly, like a child, surrenders his spirit into God's hands with the words: "Thy will be done!"

But this dying man did not possess the soul of a child; he felt himself a man. He did not tremble like a wretched sinner, knowing that he had been a true believer, firmly holding all commandments, strictly performing all religious rites; meanwhile, how many people—as he knew—walked the broad road of sin, which leads straight to hell! And he himself would have been ready to destroy their bodies here on earth with fire and sword, just as their souls were and would be destroyed there. His own path led straight to heaven; heavenly mercy ought to have opened the gates of paradise before him, as promised to all believers.

And the soul followed the Angel of Death, casting one last farewell glance at the bed where, under a white shroud, lay its fragile shell, now alien to it, the embodiment of its former "self."

And so they flew, then walked, through what seemed either a vast chamber or a forest, where nature appeared, however, trimmed, tightened, tied up, artificial, like in old French gardens. A masquerade was taking place there.

"Here is human life!" said the Angel of Death.

All figures were more or less masked, so that neither those draped in velvet and gold were truly the noblest or most powerful, nor those clothed in the rags of paupers the lowest and most insignificant. A strange masquerade indeed! Yet strangest of all was each one's effort to hide something beneath the folds of their own garment while simultaneously tearing open another's garment to reveal what they concealed! Upon success, beneath the garment always emerged the head of some beast: here a grimacing monkey, there an ugly goat, a slippery snake, or a half-asleep fish!

In short, beneath every person's garment peeked out the beast they carried within their soul. And this beast jumped, thrashed, and struggled to break free, while the person tried to cover it tightly with their clothing, but other people tore the clothing away and cried:

"See what he is like, see what she is like, look, good people!" Everyone strove to expose their neighbor's sore spot.

"What beast dwelt within me?" asked the wandering soul, and the Angel of Death pointed to a proud figure ahead of them; its head was surrounded by a rainbow halo, but at the very heart peacock legs were visible; the rainbow halo was nothing other than its tail!

Further along their path, they saw ugly birds in the tree branches; they cried out in human voices: "Wanderer, do you remember us?" These were all the evil earthly thoughts and deeds of the soul; and now they cried to her: "Do you remember us?"

And tremor seized the soul—she recognized by their voices all her evil thoughts and deeds, which now testified against her.

"Human flesh is weak, nature is sinful!" said the soul. "But my evil thoughts never turned into deeds, and the world did not see evil fruits!"

And she hurried with all her might, trying to escape quickly from these ugly black birds, but they circled around her anyway, crying louder and louder, as if wishing to proclaim her shame to the whole world. The soul rushed like a hunted deer, yet stumbled on nearly every step over sharp stones, cutting her feet until they bled.

"Where do these sharp stones come from? The whole earth is strewn with them, as if with dry leaves!"

"These are your careless, thoughtless words, uttered during your life! They wounded the hearts of your neighbors far deeper, far more painfully, than these stones now wound your feet."

"This never even crossed my mind!" said the soul.

"Judge not, and you shall not be judged!" sounded in the air.

"We are all sinners!" said the soul, and again sped through the air. "I strictly kept the law and the Gospel, did everything that was required. I am not like others!"

And so they arrived at the gates of paradise. The angel standing guard there asked:

"Who are you? Tell me what faith you hold, and testify to it by your deeds!"

"I strictly fulfilled all God's commandments! I humbled myself before the eyes of the world, hated and persecuted evil and the wicked who walk the broad path toward eternal condemnation, and I am ready to pursue them now with fire and sword, as far as lies within my power."

"So you are among the followers of Muhammad?" asked the angel.

"I? Never!"

"'Those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword,' says the Son of God; you are not of His faith. Perhaps you are a son of Israel, repeating after Moses: 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'? Are you a son of Israel, and is your stern God merely the God of your fathers?"

"I am a Christian!"

"I recognize you neither by your faith nor by your deeds! Christ preached forgiveness, love, and mercy!"

"Mercy!" sounded throughout infinite cosmic space, the gates of paradise swung open, and the soul rushed into the heavenly halls.

But from within streamed such a dazzling, all-penetrating light that the soul recoiled as before a sword suddenly flashing in the air. Wonderful, tender, soul-stirring sounds were heard... No human tongue has the power to describe them, and the entire soul trembled, her head bowed lower and lower, her knees gave way! Heavenly light illuminated her, and she felt, realized what she had never

before felt or realized—the full weight of her sins: arrogance and hard-heartedness. She became entirely enlightened and exclaimed:

"All the good I have done, I did not do by myself, but because I could not do otherwise; evil, however... originated from myself!"

And the soul felt herself growing pale beneath the rays of heavenly light, fell powerless to her knees, and somehow shriveled entirely, withdrew, hid deep within herself. She felt so overwhelmed, so insignificant, so unworthy to enter the kingdom of heaven, and at the thought of God's strict justice, she dared not even appeal to His mercy.

And mercy was shown to her where she least expected it.

God's kingdom occupies infinite space, but God's love fills it all with unspeakable fullness!

"Holy, blessed, and beloved forever be you, human soul!" sounded in the air.

And we all, all of us, will tremble on the day of our earthly death before the brilliance and splendor of heaven, bow our heads low, humbly bend our knees, but raised anew by God's love and mercy, we shall walk new paths, becoming better, purer, brighter, perfecting ourselves more and more, until finally we approach the heavenly hall, and He Himself will lead us into the bright dwelling of eternal bliss!