The Black Monk

Anton Chekhov

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Andrei Vasilyevitch Kovrin, Magister, had worn himself out, and unsettled his nerves. He made no effort to undergo regular treatment; but only incidentally, over a bottle of wine, spoke to his friend the doctor; and his friend the doctor advised him to spend all the spring and summer in the country. And in the nick of time came a long letter from Tánya Pesótsky, asking him to come and stay with her father at Borisovka. He decided to go.

But first (it was in April) he travelled to his own estate, to his native Kovrinka, and spent three weeks in solitude; and only when the fine weather came drove across the country to his former guardian and second parent, Pesótsky, the celebrated Russian horti-culturist. From Kovrinka to Borisovka, the home of the Pesótskys, was a distance of some seventy versts, and in the easy, springed calêche the drive along the roads, soft in springtime, promised real enjoyment.

The house at Borisovka was, large, faced with a colonnade, and adorned with figures of lions with the plaster falling off. At the door stood a servant in livery. The old park, gloomy and severe, laid out in English fashion, stretched for nearly a verst from the house down to the river, and ended there in a steep clay bank covered with pines whose bare roots resembled shaggy paws. Below sparkled a deserted stream; overhead the snipe circled about with melancholy cries—all, in short, seemed to invite a visitor to sit down and write a ballad. But the gardens and orchards, which together with the seed-plots occupied some eighty acres, inspired very different feelings. Even in the worst of weather they were bright and joy-inspiring. Such wonderful roses, lilies, camelias, such tulips, such a host of flowering plants of every possible kind and colour, from staring white to sooty black,—such a wealth of blossoms Kovrin had never seen before. The spring was only beginning, and the greatest rareties were hidden under glass; but already enough bloomed in the alleys and beds to make up an empire of delicate shades. And most charming of all was it in the early hours of morning, when dewdrops glistened on every petal and leaf.

In childhood the decorative part of the garden, called contemptuously by Pesótsky "the rubbish," had produced on Kovrin a fabulous impression. What miracles of art, what studied monstrosities, what monkeries of nature! Espaliers of fruit trees, a pear tree shaped like a pyramidal poplar, globular oaks and lindens, apple-tree houses, arches, monograms, candelabra—even the date 1862 in plum trees, to commemorate the year in which Pesótsky first engaged in the art of gardening. There were stately, symmetrical trees, with trunks erect as those of palms, which after examination proved to be gooseberry or currant trees. But what most of all enlivened the garden and gave it its joyous tone was the constant movement of Pesótsky's gardeners. From early morning to late at night, by the trees, by the bushes, in the alleys, and on the beds swarmed men as busy as ants, with barrows, spades, and watering-pots.

Kovrin arrived at Borisovka at nine o'clock. He found Tánya and her father in great alarm. The clear starlight night foretold frost, and the head gardener, Ivan Karlitch, had gone to town, so that there was no one who could be relied upon. At supper they spoke only of the impending frost; and it was decided that Tánya should not go to bed at all, but should inspect the gardens at one o'clock and see if all were in order, while Yegor Semiónovitch should rise at three o'clock, or even earlier.

Kovrin sat with Tánya all the evening, and after midnight accompanied her to the garden. The air already smelt strongly of burning. In the great orchard, called "the commercial," which every year brought Yegor Semiónovitch thousands of roubles profit, there already crept along the ground the thick, black, sour smoke which was to clothe the young leaves and save the plants. The trees were marshalled like chessmen in straight rows—like ranks of soldiers; and this pedantic regularity, together with the uniformity of height, made the garden seem monotonous and even tiresome. Kovrin and Tánya walked up and down the alleys, and watched the fires of dung, straw, and litter; but seldom met the workmen, who wandered in the smoke like shadows. Only the cherry and plum trees and a few apple trees were in blossom, but the whole garden was shrouded in smoke, and it was only when they reached the seed-plots that Kovrin was able to breathe.

"I remember when I was a child sneezing from the smoke," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "but to this day I cannot understand how smoke saves plants from the frost."

"Smoke is a good substitute when there are no clouds," answered Tánya.

"But what do you want the clouds for?"

"In dull and cloudy weather we have no morning frosts."

"Is that so?" said Kovrin.

He laughed and took Tánya by the hand. Her broad, very serious, chilled face; her thick, black eyebrows; the stiff collar on her jacket which prevented her from moving her head freely; her dress tucked up out of the dew; and her whole figure, erect and slight, pleased him.

"Heavens! how she has grown!" he said to himself. "When I was here last time, five years ago, you were quite a child. You were thin, long-legged, and untidy, and wore a short dress, and I used to tease you. What a change in five years!"

"Yes, five years!" sighed Tánya. "A lot of things have happened since then. Tell me, Andrei, honestly," she said, looking merrily into his face, "do you feel that you have got out of touch with us? But why do I ask? You are a man, you live your own interesting life, you.... Some estrangement is natural. But whether that is so or not, Andrusha, I want you now to look on us as your own. We have a right to that."

"I do, already, Tánya."

"Your word of honour?"

"My word of honour."

"You were surprised that we had so many of your photographs. But surely you know how my father adores you, worships you. You are a scholar, and not an ordinary man; you have built up a brilliant career, and he is firmly convinced that you turned out a success because he educated you. I do not interfere with his delusion. Let him believe it!"

Already dawn. The sky paled, and the foliage and clouds of smoke began to show themselves more clearly. The nightingale sang, and from the fields came the cry of quails.

"It is time for bed!" said Tánya. "It is cold too." She took Kovrin by the hand. "Thanks, Andrusha, for coming. We are cursed with most uninteresting acquaintances, and not many even of them. With us it is always garden, garden, garden, and nothing else. Trunks, timbers," she laughed, "pippins, rennets, budding, pruning, grafting.... All our life goes into the garden, we never even dream of anything but apples and pears. Of course this is all very good and useful, but sometimes I cannot help wishing for change. I remember when you used to come

and pay us visits, and when you came home for the holidays, how the whole house grew fresher and brighter, as if someone had taken the covers off the furniture; I was then a very little girl, but I understood...."

Tánya spoke for a time, and spoke with feeling. Then suddenly it came into Kovrin's head that during the summer he might become attached to this little, weak, talkative being, that he might get carried away, fall in love—in their position what was more probable and natural? The thought pleased him, amused him, and as he bent down to the kind, troubled face, he hummed to himself Pushkin's couplet:

"Oniégin; I will not conceal
That I love Tatyana madly."

By the time they reached the house Yegor Semiónovitch had risen. Kovrin felt no desire to sleep; he entered into conversation with the old man, and returned with him to the garden. Yegor Semiónovitch was tall, broad-shouldered, and fat. He suffered from shortness of breath, yet walked so quickly that it was difficult to keep up with him. His expression was always troubled and hurried, and he seemed to be thinking that if he were a single second late everything would be destroyed.

"There, brother, is a mystery for you!" he began, stopping to recover breath. "On the surface of the ground, as you see, there is frost, but raise the thermometer a couple of yards on your stick, and it is quite warm.... Why is that?"

"I confess I don't know," said Kovrin, laughing.

"No!... You can't know everything.... The biggest brain cannot comprehend everything. You are still engaged with your philosophy?"

"Yes, ... I am studying psychology, and philosophy generally."

"And it doesn't bore you?"

"On the contrary, I couldn't live without it."

"Well, God grant ..." began Yegor Semiónovitch, smoothing his big whiskers thoughtfully. "Well, God grant ... I am very glad for your sake, brother, very glad...."

Suddenly he began to listen, and making a terrible face, ran off the path and soon vanished among the trees in a cloud of smoke.

"Who tethered this horse to the tree?" rang out a despairing voice. "Which of you thieves and murderers dared to tether this horse to the apple tree? My God, my God!

Ruined, ruined, spoiled, destroyed! The garden is ruined, the garden is destroyed! My God!"

When he returned to Kovrin his face bore an expression of injury and impotence.

"What on earth can you do with these accursed people?" he asked in a whining voice, wringing his hands. "Stepka brought a manure cart here last night and tethered the horse to an apple tree ... tied the reins, the idiot, so tight, that the bark is rubbed off in three places. What can you do with men like this? I speak to him and he blinks his eyes and looks stupid. He ought to be hanged!"

When at last he calmed down, he embraced Kovrin and kissed him on the cheek.

"Well, God grant ... God grant!..." he stammered. "I am very, very glad that you have come. I cannot say how glad. Thanks!"

Then, with the same anxious face, and walking with the same quick step, he went round the whole garden, showing his former ward the orangery, the hothouses, the sheds, and two beehives which he described as the miracle of the century.

As they walked about, the sun rose, lighting up the garden. It grew hot. When he thought of the long, bright day before him, Kovrin remembered that it was but the beginning of May, and that he had before him a whole summer of long, bright, and happy days; and suddenly through him pulsed the joyous, youthful feeling which he had felt when as a child he played in this same garden. And in turn, he embraced the old man and kissed him tenderly. Touched by remembrances, the pair went into the house and drank tea out of the old china cups, with cream and rich biscuits; and these trifles again reminded Kovrin of his childhood and youth. The splendid present and the awakening memories of the past mingled, and a feeling of intense happiness filled his heart.

He waited until Tánya awoke, and having drunk coffee with her, walked through the garden, and then went to his room and began to work. He read attentively, making notes; and only lifted his eyes from his books when he felt that he must look out of the window or at the fresh roses, still wet with dew, which stood in vases on his table. It seemed to hint that every little vein in his body trembled and pulsated with joy.

II

But in the country Kovrin continued to live the same nervous and untranquil life as he had lived in town. He read much, wrote much, studied Italian; and when he went for walks, thought all the time of returning to work. He slept so little that he astonished the household; if by chance he slept in the daytime for half an hour, he could not sleep all the following night. Yet after these sleepless nights he felt active and gay.

He talked much, drank wine, and smoked expensive cigars. Often, nearly every day, young girls from the neighbouring country-houses drove over to Borisovka, played the piano with Tánya, and sang. Sometimes the visitor was a young man, also a neighbour, who played the violin well. Kovrin listened eagerly to their music and singing, but was exhausted by it, so exhausted sometimes that his eyes closed involuntarily, and his head drooped on his shoulder.

One evening after tea he sat upon the balcony, reading. In the drawing-room Tánya—a soprano, one of her friends—a contralto, and the young violinist studied the well-known serenade of Braga. Kovrin listened to the words, but though they were Russian, could not understand their meaning. At last, laying down his book and listening attentively, he understood. A girl with a disordered imagination heard by night in a garden some mysterious sounds, sounds so beautiful and strange that she was forced to recognise their harmony and holiness, which to us mortals are incomprehensible, and therefore flew back to heaven. Kovrin's eyelids drooped. He rose, and in exhaustion walked up and down the drawing-room, and then up and down the hall. When the music ceased, he took Tánya by the hand and went out with her to the balcony.

"All day—since early morning," he began, "my head has been taken up with a strange legend. I cannot remember whether I read it, or where I heard it, but the legend is very remarkable and not very coherent. I may begin by saying that it is not very clear. A thousand years ago a monk, robed in black, wandered in the wilderness—somewhere in Syria or Arabia ... Some miles away the fishermen saw another black monk moving slowly over the surface of the lake. The second monk was a mirage. Now put out of your mind all the laws of optics, which legend, of course, does not recognise, and listen. From the first mirage was produced another mirage, from the second a third, so that the image of the Black Monk is eternally reflected from one stratum of the atmosphere to another. At one time it was seen in Africa, then in Spain, then in India, then in the Far North. At last it issued from the limits of the earth's atmosphere, but never came across conditions which would

cause it to disappear. Maybe it is seen to-day in Mars or in the constellation of the Southern Cross. Now the whole point, the very essence of the legend, lies in the prediction that exactly a thousand years after the monk went into the wilderness, the mirage will again be cast into the atmosphere of the earth and show itself to the world of men. This term of a thousand years, it appears, is now expiring.... According to the legend we must expect the Black Monk to-day or to-morrow."

"It is a strange story," said Tánya, whom the legend did not please.

"But the most astonishing thing," laughed Kovrin, "is that I cannot remember how this legend came into my head. Did I read it? Did I hear it? Or can it be that I dreamed of the Black Monk? I cannot remember. But the legend interests me. All day long I thought of nothing else."

Releasing Tánya, who returned to her visitors, he went out of the house, and walked lost in thought beside the flower-beds. Already the sun was setting. The freshly watered flowers exhaled a damp, irritating smell. In the house the music had again begun, and from the distance the violin produced the effect of a human voice. Straining his memory in an attempt to recall where he had heard the legend, Kovrin walked slowly across the park, and then, not noticing where he went, to the river-bank.

By the path which ran down among the uncovered roots to the water's edge Kovrin descended, frightening the snipe, and disturbing two ducks. On the dark pine trees glowed the rays of the setting sun, but on the surface of the river darkness had already fallen. Kovrin crossed the stream. Before him now lay a broad field covered with young rye. Neither human dwelling nor human soul was visible in the distance; and it seemed that the path must lead to the unexplored, enigmatical region in the west where the sun had already set—where still, vast and majestic, flamed the afterglow.

"How open it is—how peaceful and free!" thought Kovrin, walking along the path. "It seems as if all the world is looking at me from a hiding-place and waiting for me to comprehend it."

A wave passed over the rye, and the light evening breeze blew softly on his uncovered head. Yet a minute more and the breeze blew again, this time more strongly, the rye rustled, and from behind came the dull murmur of the pines. Kovrin stopped in amazement On the horizon, like a cyclone or waterspout, a great, black pillar rose up from earth to heaven. Its outlines were undefined; but from the first it might be seen that it was not standing still, but moving with inconceivable speed

towards Kovrin; and the nearer it came the smaller and smaller it grew. Involuntarily Kovrin rushed aside and made a path for it. A monk in black clothing, with grey hair and black eyebrows, crossing his hands upon his chest, was borne past. His bare feet were above the ground. Having swept some twenty yards past Kovrin, he looked at him, nodded his head, and smiled kindly and at the same time slyly. His face was pale and thin. When he had passed by Kovrin he again began to grow, flew across the river, struck inaudibly against the clay bank and pine trees, and, passing through them, vanished like smoke.

"You see," stammered Kovrin, "after all, the legend was true!"

Making no attempt to explain this strange phenomenon; satisfied with the fact that he had so closely and so plainly seen not only the black clothing but even the face and eyes of the monk; agitated agreeably, he returned home.

In the park and in the garden visitors were walking quietly; in the house the music continued. So he alone had seen the Black Monk. He felt a strong desire to tell what he had seen to Tánya and Yegor Semiónovitch, but feared that they would regard it as a hallucination, and decided to keep his counsel. He laughed loudly, sang, danced a mazurka, and felt in the best of spirits; and the guests and Tánya noticed upon his face a peculiar expression of ecstasy and inspiration, and found him very interesting.

III

When supper was over and the visitors had gone, he went to his own room, and lay on the sofa. He wished to think of the monk. But in a few minutes Tánya entered.

"There, Andrusha, you can read father's articles ..." she said. "They are splendid articles. He writes very well."

"Magnificent!" said Yegor Semiónovitch, coming in after her, with a forced smile. "Don't listen to her, please!... Or read them only if you want to go to sleep—they are a splendid soporific."

"In my opinion they are magnificent," said Tánya, deeply convinced. "Read them, Andrusha, and persuade father to write more often. He could write a whole treatise on gardening."

Yegor Semiónovitch laughed, blushed, and stammered out the conventional phrases used by abashed authors. At last he gave in.

"If you must read them, read first these papers of Gauche's, and the Russian articles," he stammered, picking out the papers with trembling hands. "Otherwise you won't understand them. Before you read my replies you must know what I am replying to. But it won't interest you ... stupid. And it's time for bed."

Tánya went out. Yegor Semiónovitch sat on the end of the sofa and sighed loudly.

"Akh, brother mine ..." he began after a long silence. As you see, my dear Magister, I write articles, and exhibit at shows, and get medals sometimes. ... Pesótsky, they say, has apples as big as your head.... Pesótsky has made a fortune out of his gardens.... In one word:

"'Rich and glorious is Kotchubéi.'"

"But I should like to ask you what is going to be the end of all this? The gardens—there is no question of that—are splendid, they are models.... Not gardens at all, in short, but a whole institution of high political importance, and a step towards a new era in Russian agriculture and Russian industry.... But for what purpose? What ultimate object?"

"That question is easily answered."

"I do not mean in that sense. What I want to know is what will happen with the garden when I die? As things are, it would not last without me a single month. The secret does not lie in the fact that the garden is big and the workers many, but in the fact that I love the work—you understand? I love it, perhaps, more than I love myself. Just look at me! I work from morning to night. I do everything with my own hands. All grafting, all pruning, all planting—everything is done by me. When I am helped I feel jealous, and get irritated to the point of rudeness. The whole secret is in love, in a sharp master's eye, in a master's hands, and in the feeling when I drive over to a friend and sit down for half an hour, that I have left my heart behind me and am not myself—all the time I am in dread that something has happened to the garden. Now suppose I die to-morrow, who will replace all this? Who will do the work? The head gardeners? The workmen? Why the whole burden of my present worries is that my greatest enemy is not the hare or the beetle or the frost, but the hands of the stranger."

"But Tánya?" said Kovrin, laughing. "Surely she is not more dangerous than a hare?... She loves and understands the work."

"Yes, Tánya loves it and understands it. If after my death the garden should fall to her as mistress, then I could wish for nothing better. But suppose—which God forbid—she should marry!" Yegor Semiónovitch whispered and look at Kovrin with frightened eyes. "That's the whole crux. She might marry, there would be children, and there would be no time to attend to the garden. That is bad enough. But what I fear most of all is that she may marry some spendthrift who is always in want of money, who will lease the garden to tradesmen, and the whole thing will go to the devil in the first year. In a business like this a woman, is the scourge of God."

Yegor Semiónovitch sighed and was silent for a few minutes.

"Perhaps you may call it egoism. But I do not want Tánya to marry. I am afraid! You've seen that fop who comes along with a fiddle and makes a noise. I know Tánya would never marry him, yet I cannot bear the sight of him.... In short, brother, I am a character ... and I know it."

Yegor Semiónovitch rose and walked excitedly up and down the room. It was plain that he had something very serious to say, but could not bring himself to the point.

"I love you too sincerely not to talk to you frankly," he said, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "In all delicate questions I say what I think, and dislike mystification. I tell you plainly, therefore, that you are the only man whom I should not be afraid of Tánya marrying. You are a clever man, you have a heart, and you would not see my life's work ruined. And what is more, I love you as my own son ... and am proud of you. So if you and Tánya were to end ... in a sort of romance ... I should be very glad and very happy. I tell you this straight to your face, without shame, as becomes an honest man."

Kovrin smiled. Yegor Semiónovitch opened the door, and was leaving the room, but stopped suddenly on the threshold.

"And if you and Tánya had a son, I could make a horti-culturist out of him," he added. "But that is an idle fancy. Good night!"

Left alone, Kovrin settled himself comfortably, and took up his host's articles. The first was entitled "Intermediate Culture," the second "A Few Words in Reply to the Remarks of Mr. Z. about the Treatment of the Soil of a New Garden," the third "More about Grafting." The others were similar in scope. But all breathed restlessness and sickly irritation. Even a paper with the peaceful title of "Russian Apple Trees" exhaled irritability. Yegor Semiónovitch began with the words "Audi alteram partem," and ended it with "Sapienti sat"; and between these learned quotations

flowed a whole torrent of acid words directed against "the learned ignorance of our patent horticulturists who observe nature from their academic chairs," and against M. Gauche, "whose fame is founded on the admiration of the profane and dilletanti" And finally Kovrin came across an uncalled-for and quite insincere expression of regret that it is no longer legal to flog peasants who are caught stealing fruit and injuring trees.

"His is good work, wholesome and fascinating," thought Kovrin, "yet in these pamphlets we have nothing but bad temper and war to the knife. I suppose it is the same everywhere; in all careers men of ideas are nervous, and victims of this kind of exalted sensitiveness. I suppose it must be so."

He thought of Tánya, so delighted with her father's articles, and then of Yegor Semiónovitch. Tánya, small, pale, and slight, with her collar-bone showing, with her widely-opened, her dark and clever eyes, which it seemed were always searching for something. And Yegor Semiónovitch with his little, hurried steps. He thought again of Tánya, fond of talking, fond of argument, and always accompanying even the most insignificant phrases with mimicry and gesticulation. Nervous—she must be nervous in the highest degree. Again Kovrin began to read, but he understood nothing, and threw down his books. The agreeable emotion with which he had danced the mazurka and listened to the music still held possession of him, and aroused a multitude of thoughts. It flashed upon him that if this strange, unnatural monk had been seen by him alone, he must be ill, ill to the point of suffering from hallucinations. The thought frightened him, but not for long.

He sat on the sofa, and held his head in his hands, curbing the inexplicable joy which filled his whole being; and then walked up and down the room for a minute, and returned to his work. But the thoughts which he read in books no longer satisfied him. He longed for something vast, infinite, astonishing. Towards morning he undressed and went unwillingly to bed; he felt that he had better rest. When at last he heard Yegor Semiónovitch going to his work in the garden, he rang, and ordered the servant to bring him some wine. He drank several glasses; his consciousness became dim, and he slept.

IV

Yegor Semiónovitch and Tánya often quarrelled and said disagreeable things to one another. This morning they had both been irritated, and Tánya burst out crying and

went to her room, coming down neither to dinner nor to tea At first Yegor Semiónovitch marched about, solemn and dignified, as if wishing to give everyone to understand that for him justice and order were the supreme interests of life. But he was unable to keep this up for long; his spirits fell, and he wandered about the park and sighed, "Akh, my God!" At dinner he ate nothing, and at last, tortured by his conscience, he knocked softly at the closed door, and called timidly:

"Tánya! Tánya!"

Through the door came a Weak voice, tearful but determined:

"Leave me alone!... I implore you."

The misery of father and daughter reacted on the whole household, even on the labourers in the garden. Kovrin, as usual, was immersed in his own interesting work, but at last even he felt tired and uncomfortable. He determined to interfere, and disperse the cloud before evening. He knocked at Tánya's door, and was admitted.

"Come, come! What a shame!" he began jokingly; and then looked with surprise at her tear-stained and afflicted face covered with red spots. "Is it so serious, then? Well, well!"

"But if you knew how he tortured me!" she said, and a flood of tears gushed out of her big eyes. "He tormented me!" she continued, wringing her hands. "I never said a word to him.... I only said there was no need to keep unnecessary labourers, if ... if we can get day workmen.... You know the men have done nothing for the whole week. I ... I only said this, and he roared at me, and said a lot of things ... most offensive ... deeply insulting. And all for nothing."

"Never mind!" said Kovrin, straightening her hair. "You have had your scoldings and your cryings, and that is surely enough. You can't keep up this for ever ... it is not right ... all the more since you know he loves you infinitely."

"He has ruined my whole life," sobbed Tánya. "I never hear anything but insults and affronts. He regards me as superfluous in his own house. Let him! He will have cause! I shall leave here to-morrow, and study for a position as telegraphist.... Let him!"

"Come, come. Stop crying, Tánya. It does you no good.... You are both irritable and impulsive, and both in the wrong. Come, and I will make peace!"

Kovrin spoke gently and persuasively, but Tánya continued to cry, twitching her shoulders and wringing her hands as if she had been overtaken by a real misfortune. Kovrin felt all the sorrier owing to the smallness of the cause of her sorrow. What a trifle it took to make this little creature unhappy for a whole day, or, as she had expressed it, for a whole life! And as he consoled Tánya, it occurred to him that except this girl and her father there was not one in the world who loved him as a kinsman; and had it not been for them, he, left fatherless and motherless in early childhood, must have lived his whole life without feeling one sincere caress, or tasting ever that simple, unreasoning love which we feel only for those akin to us by blood. And he felt that his tired, strained nerves, like magnets, responded to the nerves of this crying, shuddering girl. He felt, too, that he could never love a healthy, rosy-cheeked woman; but pale, weak, unhappy Tánya appealed to him.

He felt pleasure in looking at her hair and her shoulders; and he pressed her hand, and wiped away her tears.... At last she ceased crying. But she still continued to complain of her father, and of her insufferable life at home, imploring Kovrin to try to realise her position. Then by degrees she began to smile, and to sigh that God had cursed her with such a wicked temper; and in the end laughed aloud, called herself a fool, and ran out of the room. A little later Kovrin went into the garden. Yegor Semiónovitch and Tánya, as if nothing had happened, We were walking side by side up the alley, eating rye-bread and salt, we both were very hungry.

V

Pleased with his success as peacemaker, Kovrin went into the park. As he sat on a bench and mused, he heal'd the rattle of a carnage and a woman's laugh—visitors evidently again. Shadows fell in the garden, the sound of a violin, the music of a woman's voice reached him almost inaudibly; and this reminded him of the Black Monk. Whither, to what country, to what planet, had that optical absurdity flown? Hardly had he called to mind the legend and painted in imagination the black apparition in the rye-field when from behind the pine trees opposite to him, walked inaudibly—without the faintest rustling—a man of middle height. His grey head was uncovered, he was dressed in black, and barefooted like a beggar. On his pallid, corpse-like face stood out sharply a number of black spots. Nodding his head politely the stranger or beggar walked noiselessly to the bench and sat down, and Kovrin recognised the Black Monk. For a minute they looked at one another, Kovrin with astonishment, but the monk kindly and, as before, with a sly expression on his face.

"But you are a mirage," said Kovrin. "Why are you here, and why do you sit in one place? That is not in accordance with the legend."

"It is all the same," replied the monk softly, turning his face towards Kovrin. "The legend, the mirage, I—all are products of your own excited imagination. I am a phantom."

"That is to say you don't exist?" asked Kovrin. "Think as you like," replied the monk, smiling faintly. "I exist in your imagination, and as your imagination is a part of Nature, I must exist also in Nature."

"You have a clever, a distinguished face—it seems to me as if in reality you had lived more than a thousand years," said Kovrin. "I did not know that my imagination was capable of creating such a phenomenon. Why do you look at me with such rapture? Are you pleased with me?"

"Yes. For you are one of the few who can justly be named the elected of God. You serve eternal truth. Your thoughts, your intentions, your astonishing science, all your life bear the stamp of divinity, a heavenly impress; they are dedicated to the rational and the beautiful, and that is, to the Eternal."

"You say, to eternal truth. Then can eternal truth be accessible and necessary to men if there is no eternal life?"

"There is eternal life," said the monk.

"You believe in the immortality of men."

"Of course. For you, men, there awaits a great and a beautiful future. And the more the world has of men like you the nearer will this future be brought. Without you, ministers to the highest principles, living freely and consciously, humanity would be nothing; developing in the natural order it must wait the end of its earthly history. But you, by some thousands of years, hasten it into the kingdom of eternal truth—and in this is your high service. You embody in yourself the blessing of God which rested upon the people."

"And what is the object of eternal life?" asked Kovrin.

"The same as all life—enjoyment. True enjoyment is in knowledge, and eternal life presents innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge; it is in this sense it was said: 'In My Father's house are many mansions....'"

"You cannot conceive what a joy it is to me to listen to you," said Kovrin, rubbing his hands with delight.

"I am glad."

"Yet I know that when you leave me I shall be tormented by doubt as to your reality. You are a phantom, a hallucination. But that means that I am psychically diseased, that I am not in a normal state?" "What if you are? That need not worry you. You are ill because you have overstrained your powers, because you have borne your health in sacrifice to one idea, and the time is near when you will sacrifice not merely it but your life also. What more could you desire? It is what all gifted and noble natures aspire to."

"But if I am psychically diseased, how can I trust myself?"

"And how do you know that the men of genius whom all the world trusts have not also seen visions? Genius, they tell you now, is akin to insanity. Believe me, the healthy and the normal are but ordinary men—the herd. Fears as to a nervous age, over-exhaustion and degeneration can trouble seriously only those whose aims in life lie in the present—that is the herd."

"The Romans had as their ideal: *mens sana in corpore sano.*"

"All that the Greeks and Romans said is not true. Exaltations, aspirations, excitements, ecstacies—all those things which distinguish poets, prophets, martyrs to ideas from ordinary men are incompatible with the animal life, that is, with physical health. I repeat, if you wish to be healthy and normal go with the herd."

"How strange that you should repeat what I myself have so often thought!" said Kovrin. "It seems as if you had watched me and listened to my secret thoughts. But do not talk about me. What do you imply by the words: eternal truth?"

The monk made no answer. Kovrin looked at him, but could not make out his face. His features clouded and melted away; his head and arms disappeared; his body faded into the bench and into the twilight, and vanished utterly.

"The hallucination has gone," said Kovrin, laughing. "It is a pity."

He returned to the house lively and happy. What the Black Monk had said to him flattered, not his self-love, but his soul, his whole being. To be the elected, to minister to eternal truth, to stand in the ranks of those who hasten by thousands of years the making mankind worthy of the kingdom of Christ, to deliver humanity from

thousands of years of struggle, sin, and suffering, to give to one idea everything, youth, strength, health, to die for the general welfare—what an exalted, what a glorious ideal! And when through his memory flowed his past life, a life pure and chaste and full of labour, when he remembered what he had learnt and what he had taught, he concluded that in the words of the monk there was no exaggeration. Through the park, to meet him, came Tánya. She was wearing a different dress from that in which he had last seen her.

"You here?" she cried. "We were looking for you, looking.... But what has happened?" she asked in surprise, looking into his glowing, enraptured face, and into his eyes, now full of tears. "How strange you are, Andrusha!"

"I am satisfied, Tánya," said Kovrin, laying his hand upon her shoulder. "I am more than satisfied; I am happy! Tánya, dear Tánya, you are inexpressibly dear to me. Tánya, I am so glad!"

He kissed both her hands warmly, and continued: "I have just lived through the brightest, most wonderful, most unearthly moments.... But I cannot tell you all, for you would call me mad, or refuse to believe me.... Let me speak of you! Tánya, I love you, and have long loved you. To have you near me, to meet you ten times a day, has become a necessity for me. I do not know how I shall live without you when I go home."

"No!" laughed Tánya. "You will forget us all in two days. We are little people, and you are a great man."

"Let us talk seriously," said he. "I will take you with me, Tánya! Yes? You will come? You will be mine?"

Tánya cried "What?" and tried to laugh again. But the laugh did not come, and, instead, red spots stood out on her cheeks. She breathed quickly, and walked on rapidly into the park.

"I did not think ... I never thought of this ... never thought," she said, pressing her hands together as if in despair.

But Kovrin hastened after her, and, with the same glowing, enraptured face, continued to speak.

"I wish for a love which will take possession of me altogether, and this love only you, Tánya, can give me. I am happy! How happy!"

She was overcome, bent, withered up, and seemed suddenly to have aged ten years. But Kovrin found her beautiful, and loudly expressed his ecstacy: "How lovely she is!"

VI

When he learned from Kovrin that not only had a romance resulted, but that a wedding was to follow, Yegor Semiónovitch walked from corner to corner, and tried to conceal his agitation. His hands shook, his neck seemed swollen and purple; he ordered the horses to be put into his racing droschky, and drove away. Tánya, seeing how he whipped the horses and how he pushed his cap down over his ears, understood his mood, locked herself into her room, and cried all day.

In the orangery the peaches and plums were already ripe. The packing and despatch to Moscow of such a delicate load required much attention, trouble, and bustle. Owing to the heat of the summer every tree had to be watered; the process was costly in time and working-power; and many caterpillars appeared, which the workmen, and even Yegor Semiónovitch and Tánya, crushed with their fingers, to the great disgust of Kovrin. The autumn orders for fruit and trees had to be attended to, and a vast correspondence carried on. And at the very busiest time, when it seemed no one had a free moment, work began in the fields and deprived the garden of half its workers. Yegor Semiónovitch, very sunburnt, very irritated, and very worried, galloped about, now to the garden, now to the fields; and all the time shouted that they were tearing him to bits, and that he would put a bullet through his brain.

On top of all came the bustle over Tánya's trousseau, to which the Pesótskys attributed infinite significance. With the eternal snipping of scissors, rattle of sewing-machines, smell of flat-irons, and the caprices of the nervous and touchy dressmaker, the whole house seemed to spin round. And, to make matters worse, visitors arrived every day, and these visitors had to be amused, fed, and lodged for the night. Yet work and worry passed unnoticed in a mist of joy. Tánya felt as if love and happiness had suddenly burst upon her, although ever since her fourteenth year she had been certain that Kovrin would marry nobody but herself. She was eternally in a state of astonishment, doubt, and disbelief in herself. At one moment she was seized by such great joy that she felt she must fly away to the clouds and pray to God; but a moment later she remembered that when August came she would have to leave the home of her childhood and forsake her father; and she was frightened by the thought—God knows whence it came—that she was trivial, insignificant, and

unworthy of a great man like Kovrin. When such thoughts came she would run up to her room, lock herself in, and cry bitterly for hours. But when visitors were present, it broke in upon her that Kovrin was a singularly handsome man, that all the women loved him and envied her; and in these moments her heart was as full of rapture and pride as if she had conquered the whole world. When he dared to smile on any other woman she trembled with jealousy, went to her room, and again—tears. These new feelings possessed her altogether; she helped her father mechanically, noticing neither pears nor caterpillars, nor workmen, nor how swiftly time was passing by.

Yegor Semiónovitch was in much the same state of mind. He still worked from morning to night, Hew about the gardens, and lost his temper; but all the while he was wrapped in a magic reverie. In his sturdy body contended two men, one the real Yegor Semiónovitch, who, when he listened to the gardener, Ivan Karlovitch's report of some mistake or disorder, went mad with excitement, and tore his hair; and the other the unreal Yegor Semiónovitch—a half-intoxicated old man, who broke off an important conversation in the middle of a word, seized the gardener by the shoulder, and stammered:

"You may say what you like, but blood is thicker than water. His mother was an astonishing, a most noble, a most brilliant woman. It was a pleasure to see her good, pure, open, angel face. She painted beautifully, wrote poetry, spoke five foreign languages, and sang.... Poor thing, Heaven rest her soul, she died of consumption!"

The unreal Yegor Semiónovitch sighed, and after a moment's silence continued:

"When he was a boy growing up to manhood in my house he had just such an angel face, open and good. His looks, his movements, his words were as gentle and graceful as his mother's. And his intellect It is not for nothing he has the degree of Magister. But you just wait, Ivan Karlovitch; you'll see what he'll be in ten years' time. Why, he'll be out of sight!" But here the real Yegor Semiónovitch remembered himself, seized his head and roared:

"Devils! Frost-bitten! Ruined, destroyed! The garden is ruined; the garden is destroyed!" Kovrin worked with all his former ardour, and hardly noticed the bustle about him. Love only poured oil on the flames. After every meeting with Tánya, he returned to his rooms in rapture and happiness, and set to work with his books and manuscripts with the same passion with which he had kissed her and sworn his love. What the Black Monk had told him of his election by God, of eternal truth, and of the glorious future of humanity, gave to all his work a peculiar, unusual significance.

Once or twice every week, either in the park or in the house, he met the monk, and talked with him for hours; but this did not frighten, but on the contrary delighted him, for he was now assured that such apparitions visit only the elect and exceptional who dedicate themselves to the ministry of ideas.

Assumption passed unobserved. Then came the wedding, celebrated by the determined wish of Yegor Semiónovitch with what was called *éclat*, that is, with meaningless festivities which lasted for two days. Three thousand roubles were consumed in food and drink; but what with the vile music, the noisy toasts, the fussing servants, the clamour, and the closeness of the atmosphere, no one appreciated the expensive wines or the astonishing *hors d'oeuvres* specially ordered from Moscow.

VII

One of the long winter nights. Kovrin lay in bed, reading a French novel. Poor Tánya, whose head every evening ached as the result of the unaccustomed life in town, had long been sleeping, muttering incoherent phrases in her dreams.

The dock struck three. Kovrin put out the candle and lay down, lay for a long time with dosed eyes unable to sleep owing to the heat of the room and Tánya's continued muttering. At half-past four he again lighted the candle. The Black Monk was sitting in a chair beside his bed.

"Good night!" said the monk, and then, after a moment's silence, asked, "What are you thinking of now?"

"Of glory," answered Kovrin. "In a French novel which I have just been reading, the hero is a young man who does foolish things, and dies from a passion for glory. To me this passion is inconceivable."

"Because you are too clever. You look indifferently on fame as a toy which cannot interest you."

"That is true."

"Celebrity has no attractions for you. What flattery, joy, or instruction can a man draw from the knowledge that his name will be graven on a monument, when time will efface the inscription sooner or later? Yes, happily there are too many of you for brief human memory to remember all your names."

"Of course," said Kovrin. "And why remember them?... But let us talk of something else. Of happiness, for instance. What is this happiness?"

When the clock struck five he was sitting on the bed with his feet trailing on the carpet and his head turned to the monk, and saying:

"In ancient times a man became frightened at his happiness, so great it was, and to placate the gods laid before them in sacrifice his beloved ring. You have heard? Now I, like Polycrates, am a little frightened at my own happiness. From morning to night I experience only joy—joy absorbs me and stifles all other feelings. I do not know the meaning of grief affliction, or weariness. I speak seriously, I am beginning to doubt."

"Why?" asked the monk in an astonished tone. "Then you think joy is a supernatural feeling? You think it is not the normal condition of things? No! The higher a man has climbed in mental and moral development the freer he is, the greater satisfaction he draws from life. Socrates, Diogenes, Marcus Aurelius knew joy and not sorrow. And the apostle said, 'rejoice exceedingly.' Rejoice and be happy!"

"And suddenly the gods will be angered," said Kovrin jokingly. "But it would hardly be to my taste if they were to steal my happiness and force me to shiver and starve."

Tánya awoke, and looked at her husband with amazement and terror. He spoke, he turned to the chair, he gesticulated, and laughed; his eyes glittered and his laughter sounded strange.

"Andrusha, whom are you speaking to?" she asked, seizing the hand which he had stretched out to the monk. "Andrusha, who is it?"

"Who?" answered Kovrin. "Why, the monk!... He is sitting there." He pointed to the Black Monk.

"There is no one there, ... no one, Andrusha; you are ill."

Tánya embraced her husband, and, pressing against him as if to defend him against the apparition, covered his eyes with her hand.

"You are ill," she sobbed, trembling all over. "Forgive me, darling, but for a long time I have fancied you were unnerved in some way.... You are ill, ... psychically, Andrusha."

The shudder communicated itself to him. He looked once more at the chair, now empty, and suddenly felt weakness in his arms and legs. He began to dress. "It is

nothing, Tánya, nothing, ..." he stammered, and still shuddered. "But I am a little unwell.... It is time to recognise it."

"I have noticed it for a long time, and father noticed it," she said, trying to restrain her sobs. "You have been speaking so funnily to yourself, and smiling so strangely, ... and you do not sleep. O, my God, my God, save us!" she cried in terror. "But do not be afraid, Andrusha, do not fear, ... for God's sake do not be afraid...."

She also dressed.... It was only as he looked at her that Kovrin understood the danger of his position, and realised the meaning of the Black Monk and of their conversations. It became plain to him that he was mad.

Both, themselves not knowing why, dressed and went into the hall; she first, he after her. There they found Yegor Semiónovitch in his dressing-gown. He was staying with them, and had been awakened by Tánya's sobs.

"Do not be afraid, Andrusha," said Tánya, trembling as if in fever. "Do not be afraid ... father, this will pass off ... it will pass off."

Kovrin was so agitated that he could hardly speak. But he tried to treat the matter as a joke. He turned to his father-in-law and attempted to say: "Congratulate me ... it seems I have gone out of my mind." But his lips only moved, and he smiled bitterly.

At nine o'clock they put on his overcoat and a fur cloak, wrapped him up in a shawl, and drove him to the doctor's. He began a course of treatment.

VIII

Again summer. By the doctor's orders Kovrin returned to the country. He had recovered his health, and no longer saw the Black Monk. It only remained for him to recruit his physical strength. He lived with his father-in-law, drank much milk, worked only two hours a day, never touched wine, and gave up smoking.

On the evening of the 19th June, before Elijah's day, a vesper service was held in the house. When the priest took the censor from the sexton, and the vast hall began to smell like a church, Kovrin felt tired. He went into the garden. Taking no notice of the gorgeous blossoms around him he walked up and down, sat for a while on a bench, and then walked through the park. He descended the sloping bank to the margin of the river, and stood still, looking questioningly at the water. The great pines, with their shaggy roots, which a year before had seen him so young, so joyous,

so active, no longer whispered, but stood silent and motionless, as if not recognising him.... And, indeed, with his short-dipped hair, his feeble walk, and his changed face, so heavy and pale and changed since last year, he would hardly have been recognised anywhere.

He crossed the stream. In the field, last year covered with rye, lay rows of reaped oats. The sun had set, and on the horizon flamed a broad, red afterglow, fore-telling stormy weather. All was quiet; and, gazing towards the point at which a year before he had first seen the Black Monk, Kovrin stood twenty minutes watching the crimson fade. When he returned to the house, tired and unsatisfied, Yegor Semiónovitch and Tánya were sitting on the steps of the terrace, drinking tea. They were talking together, and, seeing Kovrin, stopped. But Kovrin knew by their faces that they had been speaking of him.

"It is time for you to have your milk," said Tánya to her husband.

"No, not yet," he answered, sitting down on the lowest step. "You drink it. I do not want it." Tánya timidly exchanged glances with her father, and said in a guilty voice:

"You know very well that the milk does you good."

"Yes, any amount of good," laughed Kovrin. "I congratulate you, I have gained a pound in weight since last Friday." He pressed his hands to his head and said in a pained voice: "Why ... why have you cured me? Bromide mixtures, idleness, warm baths, watching in trivial terror over every mouthful, every step ... all this in the end will drive me to idiocy. I had gone out of my mind ... I had the mania of greatness. ... But for all that I was bright, active, and even happy.... I was interesting and original. Now I have become rational and solid, just like the rest of the world. I am a mediocrity, and it is tiresome for me to live.... Oh, how cruelly... how cruelly you have treated me! I had hallucinations ... but what harm did that cause to anyone? I ask you what harm?"

"God only knows what you mean!" sighed Yegor Semiónovitch. "It is stupid even to listen to you."

"Then you need not listen."

The presence of others, especially of Yegor Semiónovitch, now irritated Kovrin; he answered his father-in-law drily, coldly, even rudely, and could not look on him without contempt and hatred. And Yegor Semiónovitch felt confused, and coughed guiltily, although he could not see how he was in the wrong. Unable to understand

the cause of such a sudden reversal of their former hearty relations, Tánya leaned against her father, and looked with alarm into his eyes. It was becoming plain to her that their relations every day grew worse and worse, that her father had aged greatly, and that her husband had become irritable, capricious, excitable, and uninteresting. She no longer laughed and sang, she ate nothing, and whole nights never slept, but lived under the weight of some impending terror, torturing herself so much that she lay insensible from dinner-time till evening. When the service was being held, it had seemed to her that her father was crying; and now as she sat on the terrace she made an effort not to think of it.

"How happy were Buddha and Mahomet and Shakespeare that their kind-hearted kinsmen and doctors did not cure them of ecstacy and inspiration!" said Kovrin. "If Mahomet had taken potassium bromide for his nerves, worked only two hours a day, and drunk milk, that astonishing man would have left as little behind him as his dog. Doctors and kind-hearted relatives only do their best to make humanity stupid, and the time will come when mediocrity will be considered genius, and humanity will perish. If you only had some idea," concluded Kovrin peevishly, "if you only had some idea how grateful I am!" He felt strong irritation, and to prevent himself saying too much, rose and went into the house. It was a windless night, and into the window was borne the smell of tobacco plants and jalap. Through the windows of the great dark hall, on the floor and on the piano, fell the moonrays. Kovrin recalled the raptures of the summer before, when the air, as now, was full of the smell of jalap and the moonrays poured through the window.... To awaken the mood of last year he went to his room, lighted a strong cigar, and ordered the servant to bring him wine. But now the cigar was bitter and distasteful, and the wine had lost its flavour of the year before. How much it means to get out of practice! From a single cigar, and two sips of wine, his head went round, and he was obliged to take bromide of potassium.

Before going to bed Tánya said to him:

"Listen. Father worships you, but you are annoyed with him about something, and that is killing him. Look at his face; he is growing old, not by days but by hours! I implore you, Andrusha, for the love of Christ, for the sake of your own dead father, for the sake of my peace of mind—be kind to him again!"

"I cannot, and I do not want to."

"But why?" Tánya trembled all over. "Explain to me why!"

"Because I do not like him; that is all," answered Kovrin carelessly, shrugging his shoulders. "But better not talk of that; he is your father."

"I cannot, cannot understand," said Tánya. She pressed her hands to her forehead and fixed her eyes on one point. "Something terrible, something incomprehensible is going on in this house. You, Ahdrusha, have changed; you are no longer yourself.... You—a clever, an exceptional man—get irritated over trifles. ... You are annoyed by such little things that at any other time you yourself would have refused to believe it. No ... do not be angry, do not be angry," she continued, kissing his hands, and frightened by her own words. "You are clever, good, and noble. You will be just to father. He is so good."

"He is not good, but merely good-humoured. These vaudeville uncles—of your father's type—with well-fed, easy-going faces, are characters in their way, and once used to amuse me, whether in novels, in comedies, or in life. But they are now hateful to me. They are egoists to the marrow of their bones.... Most disgusting of all is their satiety, and this stomachic, purely bovine—or swinish—optimism."

Tánya sat on the bed, and laid her head on a pillow. "This is torture!" she said; and from her voice it was plain that she was utterly weary and found it hard to speak. "Since last winter not a moment of rest. ... It is terrible, my God! I suffer ..."

"Yes, of course! I am Herod, and you and your papa the massacred infants. Of course!"

His face seemed to Tánya ugly and disagreeable. The expression of hatred and contempt did not suit it. She even observed that something was lacking in his face; ever since his hair had been cut off, it seemed changed. She felt an almost irresistible desire to say something insulting, but restrained herself in time, and overcome with terror, went out of the bedroom.

IX

Kovrin received an independent chair. His inaugural address was fixed for the 2nd of December, and a notice to that effect was posted in the corridors of the University. But when the day came a telegram was received by the University authorities that he could not fulfil the engagement, owing to illness.

Blood came from his throat. He spat it up, and twice in one month it flowed in streams. He felt terribly weak, and fell into a somnolent condition. But this illness

did not frighten him, for he knew that his dead mother had lived with the same complaint more than ten years. His doctors, too, declared that there was no danger, and advised him merely not to worry, to lead a regular life, and to talk less.

In January the lecture was postponed for the same reason, and in February it was too late to begin the course. It was postponed till the following year.

He no longer lived with Tánya, but with another woman, older than himself, who looked after him as if he were a child. His temper was calm and obedient; he submitted willingly, and when Varvara Nikolaievna—that was her name—made arrangements for taking him to the Crimea, he consented to go, although he felt that from the change no good would come.

They reached Sevastopol late one evening, and stopped there to rest, intending to drive to Yalta on the following day. Both were tired by the journey. Varvara Nikolaievna drank tea, and went to bed. But Kovrin remained up. An hour before leaving home for the railway station he had received a letter from Tánya, which he had not read; and the thought of this letter caused him unpleasant agitation. In the depths of his heart he knew that his marriage with Tánya had been a mistake. He was glad that he was finally parted from her; but the remembrance of this woman, who towards the last had seemed to turn into a walking, living mummy, in which all had died except the great, clever eyes, awakened in him only pity and vexation against himself. The writing on the envelope reminded him that two years before he had been guilty of cruelty and injustice, and that he had avenged on people in no way guilty his spiritual vacuity, his solitude, his disenchantment with life.... He remembered how he had once torn into fragments his dissertation and all the articles written by him since the time of his illness, and thrown them out of the window, how the fragments flew in the wind and rested on the trees and flowers; in every page he had seen strange and baseless pretensions, frivolous irritation, and a mania for greatness. And all this had produced upon him an impression that he had written a description of his own faults. Yet when the last copybook had been tom up and thrown out of the window, he felt bitterness and vexation, and went to his wife and spoke to her cruelly. Heavens, how he had ruined her life! He remembered how once, wishing to cause her pain, he had told her that her father had played in their romance an unusual role, and had even asked him to marry her; and Yegor Semiónovitch, happening to overhear him, had rushed into the room, so dumb with consternation that he could not utter a word, but only stamped his feet on one spot and bellowed

strangely as if his tongue had been cut out. And Tánya, looking at her father, cried out in a heartrending voice, and fell insensible on the floor. It was hideous.

The memory of all this returned to him at the sight of the well-known handwriting. He went out on to the balcony. It was warm and calm, and a salt smell came to him from the sea. The moonlight, and the lights around, were imaged on the surface of the wonderful bay—a surface of a hue impossible to name. It was a tender and soft combination of dark blue and green; in parts the water resembled copperas, and in parts, instead of water, liquid moonlight filled the bay. And all these combined in a harmony of hues which exhaled tranquillity and exaltation.

In the lower story of the inn, underneath the balcony, the windows were evidently open, for women's voices and laughter could plainly be heard. There must be an entertainment.

Kovrin made an effort over himself, unsealed the letter, and, returning to his room, began to read:

"My father has just died. For this I am indebted to you, for it was you who killed him. Our garden is being ruined; it is managed by strangers; what my poor father so dreaded is taking place. For this also I am indebted to you. I hate you with all my soul, and wish that you may perish soon! Oh, how I suffer I My heart bums with an intolerable pain!... May you be accursed! I took you for an exceptional man, for a genius; I loved you, and you proved a madman...."

Kovrin could read no more; he tore up the letter and threw the pieces away.... He was overtaken by restlessness—almost by terror.... On the other side of the screen, slept Varvara Nikolaievna; he could hear her breathing. From the story beneath came the women's voices and laughter, but he felt that in the whole hotel there was not one living soul except himself. The fact that wretched, overwhelmed Tánya had cursed him in her letter, and wished him ill, caused him pain; and he looked fearfully at the door as if fearing to see again that unknown power which in two years had brought about so much ruin in his own life and in the lives of all who were dearest to him.

By experience he knew that when the nerves give way the best refuge lies in work. He used to sit at the table and concentrate his mind upon some definite thought. He took from his red portfolio a copybook containing the conspect of a small work of compilation which he intended to carry out during his stay in the Crimea, if he became tired of inactivity.... He sat at the table, and worked on this conspect, and it seemed to him that he was regaining his former peaceful, resigned, impersonal

mood. His conspect led him to speculation on the vanity of the world. He thought of the great price which life demands for the most trivial and ordinary benefits which it gives to men. To reach a chair of philosophy under forty years of age; to be an ordinary professor; to expound commonplace thoughts—and those thoughts the thoughts of others—in feeble, tiresome, heavy language; in one word, to attain the position of a learned mediocrity, he had studied fifteen years, worked day and night, passed through a severe psychical disease, survived an unsuccessful marriage—been guilty of many follies and injustices which it was torture to remember. Kovrin now clearly realised that he was a mediocrity, and he was willingly reconciled to it, for he knew that every man must be satisfied with what he is.

The conspect calmed him, but the tom letter lay upon the floor and hindered the concentration of his thoughts. He rose, picked up the fragments, and threw them out of the window. But a light wind blew from the sea, and the papers fluttered back on to the window sill. Again he was overtaken by restlessness akin to terror, and it seemed to him that in the whole hotel except himself there was not one living soul.... He went on to the balcony. The bay, as if alive, stared up at him from its multitude of light-and dark-blue eyes, its eyes of turquoise and fire, and beckoned him. It was warm and stifling; how delightful, he thought, to bathe!

Suddenly beneath the balcony a violin was played, and two women's voices sang. All this was known to him. The song which they sang told of a young girl, diseased in imagination, who heard by night in a garden mysterious sounds, and found in them a harmony and a holiness incomprehensible to us mortals. ... Kovrin held his breath, his heart ceased to beat, and the magical, ecstatic rapture which he had long forgotten trembled in his heart again.

A high, black pillar, like a cyclone or waterspout, appeared on the opposite coast. It swept with incredible swiftness across the bay towards the hotel; it became smaller and smaller, and Kovrin stepped aside to make room for it.... The monk, with uncovered grey head, with black eyebrows, barefooted, folding his arms upon his chest, swept past him, and stopped in the middle of the room.

"Why did you not believe me?" he asked in a tone of reproach, looking caressingly at Kovrin. "If you had believed me when I said you were a genius, these last two years would not have been passed so sadly and so barrenly."

Kovrin again believed that he was the elected of God and a genius; he vividly remembered all his former conversation with the Black Monk, and wished to reply. But the blood flowed from his throat on to his chest, and he, not knowing what to

do, moved his hands about his chest till his cuffs were red with the blood. He wished to call Varvara Nikolaievna, who slept behind the screen, and making an effort to do so, cried: "Tánya!"

He fell on the floor, and raising his hands, again cried:

"Tánya!"

He cried to Tánya, cried to the great garden with the miraculous flowers, cried to the park, to the pines with their shaggy roots, to the rye-field, cried to his marvellous science, to his youth, his daring, his joy, cried to the life which had been so beautiful. He saw on the floor before him a great pool of blood, and from weakness could not utter a single word. But an inexpressible, infinite joy filled his whole being. Beneath the balcony the serenade was being played, and the Black Monk whispered to him that he was a genius, and died only because his feeble, mortal body had lost its balance, and could no longer serve as the covering of genius.

When Varvara Nikolaievna awoke, and came from behind her screen, Kovrin was dead. But on his face was frozen an immovable smile of happiness.

Story Notes:

"The Black Monk" immediately establishes a compelling atmosphere and introduces the core thematic tension of the work: the fraught relationship between genius and mental stability, nature and artifice, and the inner life versus the outer world.

Setting and Atmosphere: Nature vs. Artifice

Chekhov masterfully uses the setting to establish an immediate conflict. The estate, Borisovka, is described with a keen eye for detail, separating the "old park, gloomy and severe" (representing a wilder, melancholy nature) from the gardens and orchards, which are a testament to meticulous, almost obsessive human control.

The Gardens as Obsession: Yegor Semiónovitch Pesótsky's gardens are a "studied monstrosities"—a world of "pyramidal poplar[s], globular oaks... apple-tree houses, arches, monograms, candelabra." This exaggerated, pedantic regularity ("marshalled like chessmen") highlights Pesótsky's intense, neurotic dedication. It's a magnificent achievement, but one rooted in anxiety (the fear of frost, the anger at the tethered horse) and a desire to impose absolute order, symbolizing the often-strained control the human mind attempts to exert over nature and life itself.

The Park and the Field: In contrast, the wilder areas—the old park, the river bank, and the vast field of rye—are where the mysterious and the inexplicable begin to emerge, culminating in the appearance of the Black Monk.

Character and Themes: The Seeds of Delusion

The protagonist, Andrei Vasilyevitch Kovrin, is introduced as a Magister whose "nerves" are "worn himself out." This initial state is the fertile ground for the novella's central conflict:

Kovrin's Restlessness: Despite the country's beauty, Kovrin remains "nervous and untranquil." He works excessively, sleeps little, and seeks "something vast, infinite, astonishing." This intellectual ambition, combined with his nervous exhaustion, makes him psychologically susceptible to the extraordinary.

The Black Monk as Symptom: The legend of the Black Monk and its actual, vivid appearance to Kovrin are the primary indications of his developing hallucination. Chekhov presents this not as a mere descent into madness, but as a potential byproduct of genius and heightened sensitivity ("I did not know that my imagination was capable of creating such a phenomenon"). The Monk's physical description—a cyclone that becomes a man, a "phantom"—blurs the line between the external world and Kovrin's mental state.

Tanya and Pesótsky: The Pesótskys serve as an anchor to a practical, *earthly* existence. Yegor Semiónovitch's almost paranoid love for his gardens (his fear that Tanya will marry a "spendthrift who will lease the garden") and Tanya's passionate, nervous involvement (her crying fit over the laborers) underscore their own form of neurotic obsession. They are grounded in the real, tangible world of horticulture, but their lives are still dominated by the same nervous intensity that affects Kovrin, making his illness feel less like an aberration and more like an *extreme version* of the family's shared temperament.

Literary Style

Chekhov's signature style shines through:

Economy and Precision: The language is clear and detailed, establishing setting and mood quickly.

Subtle Psychological Realism: The shift in Kovrin's mood—from enjoying the simple pleasures of the country to feeling a desire for "something vast, infinite, astonishing" after a sleepless night—is a highly realistic portrayal of a mind under stress.

Foreshadowing and Irony: The thought that Kovrin "might get carried away, fall in love" with the nervous Tanya is immediately followed by Pesótsky's overt encouragement of the match, setting up a predictable but possibly doomed romance rooted in the older man's obsession with his legacy. The irony lies in the fact that Pesótsky sees Kovrin's academic standing as a guarantee of stability, completely missing the psychological instability that is already manifesting.

In summary, this opening segment immediately sets up a deeply psychological drama. It positions Kovrin's intellectual brilliance on a collision course with his fragile mental health, using the hyper-real, yet obsessively controlled, world of the garden as a mirror to his own intensifying inner turmoil.