

THE EYES OF ST. LJUBOV:
DE LA RATIBOISIÈRE'S ACCOUNT OF THE
TYPHLOSOPHISTS OF SOUTH RUSSIA

BY

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I

“TELL it us! O tell us it!”

Elphénor Pistouillat de la Ratiboisière, the Master Magician, hearkened unto his disciples, who sat cross-legged around his incense-bowl. His lips parted in that unapeable grin of his, and he stopped his nostrils awhile with his two forefingers. Then he blew on the charcoal and began.

“Yes, I will tell it to you, intellectual infants, I will. Listen. Two hundred and one years ago—when I was thin and thirty—I chanced upon a couple, living in South Russia. Boy and girl they were still; but, as it were, they unwittingly founded a strange sect of self-mutilated followers, and, being the only man alive who witnessed the beginnings thereof, I will undertake to keep you interested for more than sixteen minutes with their history.”

The room was now darkened, and three large globes of crystal, set under the rays of a lamp, stood alone, attracting the eyes. The first globe was limpid and colourless, the second was of the palest amethyst, the third of a rich yellow. Worlds were revolving within. Then Elphénor broke the silence again.

“She was a little girl and he was a little boy . . .”

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“She looked like a penny toy,” murmured the Neptunian of the party.

None of the others smiled, for the Ancient was already beginning:

“Per illud nomen per quod Solomo constringebat daemones, et conclusit . . .”

He stopped short, however, seeing that the irrelevant interruption had found no echo; and he went on with his narrative, moving his arms to the rhythm of his voice, and with his fingers kneading unseen shapes in the air.

II

“THE boy comes in later. I want you to realize how beautiful was the little girl. Like a thick thread of scarlet were her lips, comely was her countenance, most pleasing to the sight was her earthly body, a temptation to the Angels her soul. Her eyes expressed the Infinite Sweetness, the Love Merciful; the Pure Innocence of the Eternal Equi-balanced. They were like crystalline drops of dew falling on a perfect rock of Carrara marble; eyes that looked upon you and created you holy; eyes clearer than the clearest rivulet, more beautiful than the most royal amethyst; eyes that illuminated the darkest corner of Hell; eyes that set the fashion to the stars of the Celestial Vault of Heaven; eyes that were but the imperfect mirror of the soul behind. Such was the ten-years-old Ljubov of the goodly countenance.

When, later on, the usual legend grew around her, it was said that wolves had once entered the village, in the midst of

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winter, starved to madness, and had begun eating two cows in their shed, when little Ljubov chanced upon them and was discovered half an hour later, surrounded by two hundred of these wolves, which were pushing and kicking one another to lick her hands.

On another occasion, extraordinary miracle, one glance from her eyes had stopped the tongue of a drunken pope who was swearing at a peasant in the foulest of language.

She was, of course, a favourite with all in the village: the simpler and nearer Nature their souls, the more they gave the child her proper place. But it must not be inferred that little Ljubov was either worshipped or freed from such menial works as children of her age are called upon to perform. Nor did her playmates realize her superiority. The alleged miracles and the reported cases of healing were heard of some ten years after her death, when eye-witnesses had all departed from this world. Yet, of course, they were possible, quite possible, quite.

III

“ALL of you, suckling babes, have read the Russian tale of the Man who bought souls—or heard of it. Men of a similar turn of mind exist in Russia, and I want you to concentrate your mind upon such a man, albeit his bargains cost him even less, and were of a more physical reality.

From town to village he went, in search of treasures in the shape of eyes. The tools of his trade were a few walnut shells, enamelled within, and a certain magical liquid preparation, which he used to preserve the qualities, freshness and beauty of his acquisitions.

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On the second day after his arrival in the village where Ljubov lived, he noticed the child and her marvellous beauty. For hours, having retired to the house belonging to a rich lady whose guest he was, he drivelled, with before him the enrapturing vision of Ljubov's priceless jewels. He proceeded carefully; made friends with all the children; and, the seventh day having come, he met her outside the village, by chance—so she thought—and made her a present of a few trifling ornaments. Then he placed over his own eyes two empty shells of walnut, and pretended to play some childish game of hide-and-seek.

After a few minutes, it was her turn to don the blinding apparel. But they were different from his, the empty shells he fixed under her eyebrows!

Ljubov felt no pain, rather an exquisite sensation of physical *bien-être*, of wondrous languor. Ay, but a few minutes later, the sun and moon and stars had lost their beauty for her. There were two large cavities under her eyelids. The force within the nutshells had drawn the eyes out of them.

The Man ran away, carrying a treasured little box, and no more was ever heard of him in those parts.

IV

“What boots it to tell of the long, awful days of darkness through which poor little Ljubov lived before she grew accustomed to her blindness? I am not a medical philosopher; I like home and comfort far too much. If I journey, I must needs travel in state, and my staff includes both a medical

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man and a philosopher. Therefore, what need is there for me to think, to fathom the depths of childish or human sorrow, to send my brains into a tiring process of elucidation? far more pleasant it is to remain a contemplative individual. Therefore, O Mexican Gaucho, pass me thy pellote pouch and let me take a helping of the leaves and root of thy wonderful mescal plant. And without thought and without fatigue, I can then *SEE*.

Where was I, my little brethren, fathers of larvæ, sons of the she-goat? Ah, I know. Well, poor little Ljubov was saved by her magnificent soul from despairing thoughts. She lived, very miserable at first, more resigned later on.

And there was a boy, too. He was the blind-born son of an ex-soldier, and because of his father's queer and unsocial manner, few people in the village would condescend to take interest in him. But he was no mean child, nevertheless, and his heart was big.

Ljubov had denied herself the pitiful satisfaction of explaining her accident. No one ever heard from her lips the tale of her lost eyes. And, as the months passed by, all remembrance of her, as she had been, died away. Men, women and children passed her by, and took no notice of her. Her parents were kind, but over-worked. Only Piotr, the blind-born child, realized Ljubov's beauty. For if he had no eyes to see with, his other perceptions were sharpened for that very reason. He could not very well understand at first how, and why, it had come to pass that he, alone in the world—for he was but an ignorant peasant child—had not received the use of the five operations of the Lord. But the village deacon, who had been in trouble for some cause or another,

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and was almost a genius in disgrace—"terribly clever" the old men said—once told the little Piotr what it was to be blind. Fortunately for the child's mental equilibrium, he also spoke of the compensation.

"What they mean, boy, when they call you blind, is that you cannot see," he said; "that is, your eyes have been given unto you by the devil, and not by God. Your father must have been rather a bad fellow, you know. When you hear the women singing at the dance, it is that God has given you your ears; if you didn't enjoy the sounds it would mean that the devil has given you your ears, as the Book says, which God wrote in Russian for our people: "*They have ears and they hear not.*" However, you hear well, and smell well, and your two other senses are all right. What you miss, it's the colour of things. I cannot explain it to you, and it would do you no good if I did. Your compensation is that you do not see that which is ugly, ugly like old Ivan Semenovitch, and also that you hear and feel and smell with more accuracy than we do. Of course, it is nice to see as well, and I will pray Christ for you, especially if you can give me a few coppers with which to buy tapers. You must have plenty of them; people seem to give you very freely."

Thus the tiresome brute, who had but a few chances of getting drunk in the place.

Happily, Piotr and little Ljubov taught one another a simpler and more natural theory. She was now twelve, and the boy fourteen years old. And I chanced to be staying in the neighbourhood. I met them, as hand in hand they cautiously crossed a lane, close to the spot where I was meditating. The girl I had seen before the accident, and only

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by her golden voice did I recognize her. I listened to their childish talk, and joined in it, and heard it all from her lips. Then, a few days later, something happened. A lady entered.

There Elphénor became silent, for the door was violently shaken from the outside.

“Come in,” he said.

The door was pushed open, then shut again, but no one had entered. The disciples exchanged a glance of amusement; one of them said:

“Has a lady entered?”

They were all made merry by that exhibition of Neptunian spirit of apropos. But Elphénor Pistouillat, like the French Southerner he was, missed the courteous element in life, and began to curse the twelve young men. He was a bad-tempered man, and a very theatrical one.

He rose and walked to him who had caused them all to laugh.

“I know you, sir,” Elphénor said, purple in the face, “I know you, unwholesome monkey. Your father was a dealer in pork sausages and cooked ham, a trader in swine. Nothing better could be expected from you than your pig-like groans.”

His blood was boiling already, and these few words he uttered were but a preliminary letting out of steam. He walked in the dark to a large cupboard at the far end of his room and took from a shelf twelve little wax figures which he stood on a small table. Rapidly he mumbled an invocation, an incantation, and a deprecation. Then he walked to the fireplace, took the red-hot poker which he kept ever ready for the purpose of lighting his charcoal, and returned with it to the table.

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The twelve disciples felt that something was going to happen, but knew not what. An awful feeling overcame their will; they dared not move. Then, suddenly, the twelve of them jumped up and fell on the floor, curling themselves, howling with intense pain and agony, all in a sweat, their bodies aching with all the torments of Fire. They could hear the old man, by his table, cursing them and hitting the wax figures with the hot poker, haphazard, careless of the spot where he struck; but he struck them all equally. The contortions of the men on the yellow painted floor were terrible. He took no heed of them, and went on, cursing them each by name and each time hitting one figure, corresponding to the name he was cursing.

Finally, the red-hot iron had turned black again; and Elphéonor's arm was becoming tired. He gathered all the wax figures and went and threw them all into a large pail of water, pushing them down again and again as they came to the surface.

His victims were gradually coming back to their senses. Once more he gathered their waxen images and replaced them on the shelf. Then he turned to his disciples and shouted:

“Sit down, ye workers of Iniquity. Did you feel the draught—or not? Do not interrupt me again. And if anyone knocks again at the door, clear ye out of my visual path.”

They were all trembling with excitement and a mixed feeling of anger and desire for a power equal to his. Elphéonor blew on the charcoal and incense, turned out the lamp over the three crystal globes, so that they were now almost in utter darkness, and took up the thread of his narrative.

“The Lady who now comes before the footlights fell short

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of being a great hysterical Countess Tarnowska; she had many lovers who went mad over her body, and whom she *could* drive to drink—or to murder, but she had not done so; she had only driven some of them to suicide, and some even to the loss of their self-respect. The Man who stole Eyes was one of these.

Without going into their respective or joint history let it be simply recorded that the proud collector of ocular jewels made present to the Lady of a pair of magnificent ear-rings—which were none other than the eyes of little Ljubov set in gold. When the Lady came to stay at the country house on the outskirts of the village, she wore her jewels. The simple peasants fell to gossip. The eyes they took for two weird precious stones resembling lapis lazuli. One of them spoke of his meeting with the Lady before poor blind little Piotr, who listened intently.

I will now, my friends, give you—nay, lend you—a piece of information of the utmost importance. It's a fine bit of psychology, too. *A man is not a wee bit interesting when he speaks of others, but let the beggar ride his own horse, expound his own experiences, and (you can bet your shirt upon it) he will be worth listening to.*

Thus the peasant-who-had-met-the-lady. He was usually very dull. But the poor fellow had not had any interesting experience in his life, until he met Her. She was walking in the garden, cutting flowers for the table, and, seeing a moujick digging the soil, summoned him.

“When thou hast done digging this hole, cut me some flowers,” she said.

And he fell to work with all his might, his body seeming

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young and beautiful in the precision of its mechanical actions. She let her eye fall upon him and wondered. . . . Presently he had done digging and set to cut her some flowers, looking at her all the while, already feeling strange and new sensations, sweating in an uncontrolled Sukshma-Pranayama.

Alack-a-day, fellows! That was a fine lady for a poor ignorant moujick to behold. She stood, to the end of his days, for a divine apparition. Had he known of OUR LADY HECATE, (blessed be he who murmurs her name with awe! may she gleefully look upon us!) he would have considered his vision to be a visit of the great Goddess (her name be rapidly uttered in the Vault of our beloved Brethren the Ka D Sh Knights of ∇ P.A. . . P.P. ∇).

To cut our tale short, for the time is approaching for our libations, the peasant heard the voice of the Lady. She thanked him, him, a poor peasant, her slave, and left him to his work. Her image, however, remained clear before his eyes and he did not fail in his description of her.

Well, little Piotr heard it all. As there was but one woman in the whole world whom he loved, the description of another woman did not in the least attract his attention. Only when mention was made of her magnificent jewels did his ears stand up.

“What are ear-rings?” he asked of Ljubov, when he felt her tiny hand in his, a little later.

“They are beautiful things, Piotr,” she answered. “They are beautiful to the eye.”

“Hah!” he sighed—for that was the one thing he could not well realize.

“They are stones with fire or water in them.”

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“What, do they burn? do they feel cool to the hand?”

“Only to the eye, dear. *I* remember. One sets them in gold and wears them hanging from the ear, or round one’s neck.”

“Would you like to *feel* some, Ljubov?”

“Oh yes! . . . But, it’s no use, dear, I couldn’t *see* them.”

“Perhaps you would like just to pass your fingers over them, and try to imagine what they . . . er . . . look like?”

“I think I would. Then I could explain better to you what I mean.”

Piotr sighed again and soon left her. In the evening he wandered around the house where the Lady was staying. She was walking in the garden and he listened to her voice while she sang softly to herself. Presently she sat down.

Piotr was well used to directing his steps without the use of eyes, and he managed to creep behind her. A fixed idea had taken possession of his childish brain. He would take the jewels everyone thought so beautiful, and take them to Ljubov.

Suddenly, he sprang forward and his hands searched in the darkness for the ears. A tiny little sound, made by the Lady, as she turned round, helped him to find the place. His fingers closed on each side over the ears and he pulled out with a violent movement. The Lady fell unconscious without having uttered a sound, so acute and sudden had been the pain.

Piotr went away slowly, his hands grasping two ear-rings with a little piece of human flesh attached to them.

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V

He sought Ljubov. She, who was like a shoot out of the stem of Jesse, who did not judge after the sight of her eyes, who could stretch out her hand on the den of the basilisk and play on the hole of the asp, without ever coming to grief, fell a-trembling with an unconscious knowledge of that which was going to happen. It dawned upon her that she had come to a point where the road was to become broad under her feet and of an easier walk than the dark path upon which she had of late journeyed. I was hiding behind a tree when Piotr approached her, and so I witnessed their meeting.

He, also, was quaking with excitement. Brandishing his two hands, somewhat red with the blood of his victim, he spoke pantingly.

“Ljubov, my little sister,” he said, “I have two fine jewels for thee. Feel them.”

But as she put her hand forward he withdrew his; and, instinctively, rubbed the two ear-rings with a corner of his blouse. The particles of flesh fell down during the process.

Then he took a step nearer to her and seized her shoulder, endeavouring to place one pendant where he knew it ought to be worn. But his hand trembled much; neither was her own body steady. They both laboured under great nervous excitement.”

“I could not,” Elphénor went on, “tell you how the thing happened, unless I used my imagination—and the whole pack of you are unworthy of that exertion—nor will I take the trouble to search the bottom drawers of my reason for any explanation of what I take to be a very scarce phenomenon.”

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Briefly—for the time is approaching which we must better utilize—Piotr's hand shook so that he missed touching the lobe of little Ljubov's ear. The jewel he held up to her face touched, instead, one of the empty orbits of his little friend.

Our villain, the Man who bought and stole Eyes, must have done his job very properly indeed, for Ljubov, who, in a vain attempt to see that which was shewn her, had opened wide the dark cavities under her eyebrows. Well, I suppose the eye touched a still sensitive nerve. No sooner had it done so than she uttered an exclamation.

“I see! Piotr, I SEE! I SEE!”

And helping herself now, she rapidly unset the eyes from their golden crown and thrust them where they ought to have been all that time. Miracle of Miracles! She saw as you and I do. She saw poor little Piotr who stood before her, almost out of his mind, sharing her excitement.

She took his hand, drew him to her and kissed his forehead. Then she wept for a long time. Finally, she sat down by him and told him of her new sensations.

VI

But they were unsatisfactory. The sky she saw was, in spite of the Stars, inferior to the beauty she had endowed it with. The sweet face of her little friend even was less sweet to behold than it had been to her childish fancy. And, gently, with an extraordinary delicacy, she spoke of her disappointment.

“Oh! it was more beautiful as we thought it, Piotroushka!” she exclaimed.

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And, acting upon an impulse, she dropped her eyes in her hand and threw them behind her without a sigh.

I picked them up, my friends, while the two children stood, their arms linked together, a sad but resigned expression gradually coming over their faces.

Ay, I picked them up, but I won't shew them to you, unworthy foxes.

And now, Lights please . . . let us take to the ritual. Brother H., fill the Holy Cups . . . Holy be the Lamps of Joy! Holy be the Lamps of Sorrow! Let us enter the Ark of Increased Knowledge!"

VII

A little later one of the Disciples inquired of the Master:

"You spoke of a strange sect of self-mutilated followers, O Master, what of them?"

"What of them?" Elphénor repeated. "Well, they were those who listened to Ljubov, and took her word for it—that one sees a better world if one has no human eyes. They put it into practice and their ranks were soon filled. They blinded themselves; they blinded their children almost in their cradles. Oh yes, there were soon hundreds of them who worshipped the Lord our God in that manner; and Ljubov and Piotr were their ministers. Is that all you want to know?"

"Master, what of the Lady?"

"The Lady? Faugh! She went away; the Spirits of the Earth prevented her from lodging a complaint; she hid her

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wounded ears under a thick ornament of pearls and gold. It was not bad with her! Besides, what is she to you, anyhow, billy-goat?

“And now, all of ye, clear out, and walk ye all to your rooms with the mantra.”

FINIS

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THE EQUINOX

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