

# From Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*,

Chapter 10 from Part 2

*Oleg Kostoglotov and Aleksei Filippovich Shulubin are both patients in the same cancer ward in a small town of South Russia (or Tachkent, Uzbekistan?). Kostoglotov has been imprisoned as a young man for being part of a group of young people in their late teens who enjoyed life, playing, talking, drinking and eating. They were yet considered as a dangerous group fomenting against the State and were arrested and sent to prison. After the camps he had been exiled ad perpetuum to Kazakhstan. He is in his middle thirties. The other person, Shulubin, was a professor whose situation degraded slowly. He is much older. Both are seriously threaten now by their illness. They have the following discussion:*

## 10. Idols of the market-place

[...]

His movements were sluggish nowadays, not as they once were. He no longer strode firmly along a straight line that he had marked out for himself, turning sharply whenever it came to an end. His steps were weak and cautious. Every now and then he stopped and sat down on a bench, and if no one else was there he stretched himself cut along it.

This was how it was today. He dragged himself along, his dressing-gown unbuttoned and hanging open, his back sagging. Often he would stop, throw back his head and look up at the trees. Some of them were already half in leaf, others a quarter of the way out, while the oak-trees hadn't broken into foliage at all. It was all so ... good!

Unheard and unnoticed, a mass of bright, green grass had pushed its way up. In places it was so tall that it might have been taken for last year's if only it hadn't been, so green.

On one of the pathways open to the sun's glare Oleg spotted Shulubin. He was sitting on a wretched-looking, backless, narrow-plank bench. Perched on his thighs, he was so twisted that he seemed to be bent backwards and forwards at the same time, his arms stretched out and his interlocked fingers clasped between his knees. Sitting there, head bowed, on the lonely bench in the sharp lights and shadows, he looked like a monument to uncertainty.

Oleg wouldn't have minded joining Shulubin on the bench. He hadn't yet managed to have a proper talk with him, but he wanted to because the camps had taught him that people who say nothing carry something within, themselves. Besides, Oleg's sympathy and interest were aroused by the way Shulubin had supported him in the argument.

However, he decided to walk past him. The camps had also taught him that each man has a sacred right to be left on his own. He recognized this right and would not violate it.

He was walking past, but slowly, raking his boots through the gravel. Stopping him would be no problem. Shulubin saw the boots and his eyes followed them up to see whose they were. He gave Oleg a look of indifference, implying no more than the recognition 'We're from the same ward, aren't we?' Oleg had taken two more measured steps before Shulubin suggested to him in a half-question. 'Will you sit down?'

Shulubin was wearing a pair of high-sided house shoes, not the ordinary hospital slippers that

just hung on your toes. It meant he could go outside for walks and sit outside. His head was uncovered; on it a few tufts of grey hair were sticking up.

Oleg turned towards the bench and sat down, giving the impression that it was all the same to him whether he sat or walked on, but, come to think of it, sitting down would be better.

However their conversation began he knew he could ask Shulubin one crucial question, and the answer would provide the key to the whole man. But instead he simply asked, 'So, it's the day after tomorrow, is it, Aleksei Filippovich?'

He didn't need an answer to know that it was the day after tomorrow. The whole ward knew that Shuhubin's operation was scheduled for then. The important thing, though, was that he had called him 'Aleksei Filippovich'. No one in the ward had yet addressed the silent Shulubin in this way. It was spoken as though by one old soldier to another.

Shulubin nodded. 'It's my last chance to get a bit of sunshine.'

'Oh no, not the last' boomed Kostoglotov.

But looking at Shulubin out of the corner of his eyes he thought it might well be the last. Shulubin ate very little, less than his appetite demanded. He was preserving himself so as to diminish the pain he would feel after eating. But this undermined his strength. Kostoglotov already knew what Shulubin's disease was. 'So it's decided, is it? They're diverting the excreta through one side?' he asked him.

Shulubin compressed his lips as though about to smack them, then nodded again. They were silent for a while.

'Whatever you say there's cancer and cancer,' Shulubin declared, looking straight ahead of him instead of at Oleg. 'There's one kind of cancer beats all the others. However miserable one is, there's always someone worse off. Mine's the sort of case you can't even discuss with other people, you can't ask their advice about it.'

'Mine's the same, I think.'

'No, mine's worse, whichever way you look at it. My disease is something specially humiliating, specially offensive. The consequences are terrible. If I live - and it's a very big "if" - simply standing or sitting near me, like you are now, for instance, will be unpleasant. Everyone will do their best to keep two steps away. Even if anyone comes closer I'll still be thinking to myself, "You see, he can hardly stand it, he's cursing me". It means I'll lose the company of human beings.' Kostoglotov thought about it for a while, whistling slightly, not with his lips but through his clenched teeth, absent-mindedly letting air out through them. 'Well, it's hard to work out which of us is worse off,' he said; 'it's even harder than competing over achievement or success. One's own troubles are always the worst. For instance, I might conclude that I've led an extraordinarily unlucky life, but how do I know? Maybe yours has been even harder. How can I judge from the outside?'

'Don't judge, you're sure to be wrong,' Shulubin answered. At last he turned his head and peered at Oleg with his disturbingly expressive, round, bloodshot eyes. 'The people who drown at sea or dig the soil or search for water in the desert don't have the hardest lives. The man with the hardest life is the man who walks out of his house every day and bangs his head against the top of the door because it's too low.... As far as I can gather, you fought in the war and then you were in the labour camps, is that right?'

'Yes, and a few more things: no higher education, no officer's commission, exile in perpetuity' - Oleg listed the points thoughtfully and uncomplainingly – 'oh yes, and one more thing: cancer.'

'Well, let's call it quits about the cancer. As regards the other things, young man ...'

'Who the hell's the young man! I suppose you think I'm young just because I've got my original head on my shoulders or because I haven't had to get a new skin?'

'As regards the other things, I'll tell you something. You haven't had to do much lying, do you understand? At least you haven't had to stoop so low - you should appreciate that! You people were arrested, but we were herded into meetings to "expose" you. They executed people like you, but they made us stand up and applaud the verdicts as they were announced. And not just applaud, they made us demand the firing squad, demand it! Do you remember what they used to write in the papers? "As one man the whole Soviet nation arose in indignation on hearing of the unprecedented, heinous crimes of ..." Do you know what that "as one man" meant for us? We were individual human beings, and then suddenly we were "as one man"! When we applauded we had to hold our big-strong hands high in the air, so that those around us and those on the platform would notice. Because who doesn't want to live? Who ever came out in your defence? Who ever objected? Where are they now? I knew one - Dima Olitsky - he abstained. He wasn't opposed, good heavens no! He abstained on the vote to shoot the Industrial Party<sup>1</sup> members. "Explain!" they shouted, "Explain!" He stood up, his throat was dry as a bone. "I believe," he said, "that in the twelfth year of the Revolution we should be able to find alternative methods of repression..." Aaah, the scoundrel! Accomplice! Enemy agent! The next morning he got a summons to the G.P.U.<sup>2</sup> and there he stayed for the rest of his life.

Shulubin twisted his neck and turned his head from side to side in that strange motion of his. Bent both forwards and backwards, he sat on the bench like a large bird on a perch it wasn't used to.

Kostoglotov tried not to feel flattered by what Shulubin had said. 'Aleksei Filippovich', he said, 'it all depends on the number you happen to draw. If the position had been reversed it would have been just the opposite: you'd have been the martyrs, we'd have been the time-servers. But there's another point: people like you who understood what was happening, who understood early enough, suffered searing agonies. But those who believed were all right. Their hands were bloodstained, but then again they weren't bloodstained because they didn't understand the situation.'

The old man flashed him a sidelong scorching glance. 'Who are these people, the ones who believed?' he asked.

Well, I did. Right up to the war against Finland<sup>3</sup>,

'But how many are they, these people who believed, the ones who didn't understand? I know you can't expect much from a young boy, but I just cannot accept that our whole people

<sup>1</sup> In November 1930, several leading Soviet scientists and economists were sentenced to death as wreckers, for working for a counter-revolutionary Industrial Party. The party was, in fact, non-existent. Their trial was one of the signs of the coming Great Purge.

<sup>2</sup> The "Chief Political Administration", one of the many names held by the Soviet security police during its history.

<sup>3</sup> This war, fought during the winter of 1939-40, revealed a terrible unpreparedness within the Red Army. The result was a certain disillusionment with Stalin's rule. (Translator's notes)

suddenly became weak in the head, I can't believe it, I won't! In the old days the lord of the manor stood on the porch of his mansion and talked a lot of nonsense, but the peasants only smirked quietly in their beards. The lord of the manor saw them, so did the bailiffs standing at his side. And when the time came to bow down, true they all bowed "as one man". But does that mean the peasants believed the lord of the manor? What sort of person do you have to be to believe? Shulubin began to grow more and more angry. He had the kind of face which is violently changed and distorted by strong emotion, not one feature remaining calm. "What sort of man are we talking about?" he continued. "Suddenly all the professors and all the engineers turn out to be 'wreckers, and he believes it! The best civil-war divisional, commanders turn out to be German and Japanese spies, and he believes it! The whole of Lenin's Old Guard are shown up as vile renegades, and he believes it! His own friends and acquaintances are unmasked as enemies of the people, and he believes it! Millions of Russian soldiers turn out to have betrayed their country, and he believes it all! Whole nations, old men and babies, are mown down, and he believes in it! Then what sort of man is he, may I ask? He's a fool. But can there really be a whole nation of fools? No, you'll have to forgive me. The people are intelligent enough, it's simply that they wanted to live. There's a law big nations have - to endure and so to survive. When each of us dies and History stands over his grave and asks "What was he?", there'll only be one possible answer, Pushkin's:

*In our vile times  
... Man was, whatever his element.  
Either tyrant or traitor or prisoner !'*

Oleg started. He didn't know the lines, but there was a penetrating accuracy about them. Poet and truth became almost physically tangible.

Shulubin wagged his great finger at him. "The poet had no room in his line for "fool", even though he knew that there are fools in this world. No, the fact is there are only three possibilities, and since I can remember that I've never been in prison, and since I know for sure that I've never been a tyrant, then it must mean..." Shulubin smiled, then started to cough. "It must mean..."

As he coughed he rocked back and forth on his thighs.

"Do you think that sort of life was any easier than yours? My whole life I've lived in fear, but now I'd change places with you."

Like Shulubin, Kosloglotov was rocking forwards and backwards, slumped on the narrow bench like a crested bird on a perch.

Legs tucked underneath, their slanting black shadows lay starkly on the ground in front of them.

"No, Aleksei Filippovich, you're wrong, it's too sweeping a condemnation, it's too harsh. In my view the traitors were those who wrote denunciations or stood up as witnesses. There are millions of them too. One can reckon on one informer for every, let's say, two or three prisoners, right? That means there are millions. But to write every single person off as a traitor is much too rash. Pushkin was too rash as well. A storm breaks trees, it only bends grass. Does this mean that the grass has betrayed the trees? Everyone has his own life. As you said yourself, the law of a nation is to survive,"

Shulubin wrinkled up his face, so much so that his eyes disappeared and there was only a trace of his mouth left. One moment his great, round eyes were there, the next they had gone,

leaving only puckered, blind skin.

He let his face relax, in his eyes were the same tobacco-brown irises, the same reddened whites, but there was now a blurred look about them as well. He said, 'All right, then, let's call it a more refined form of the herd instinct, the fear of remaining alone, outside the community. There's nothing new about it. Francis Bacon set out his doctrine of idols back in the sixteenth century. He said people are not inclined to live by pure experience, that it's easier for them to pollute experience with, prejudices. These prejudices are the idols, "The idols of the tribe", Bacon called them, "the idols of the cave...'

When he said 'idols of the cave', the image of a real cave entered Oleg's mind, smoke-filled, with a fire in the middle, the savages roasting meat, while in the depths of the cave there stood, almost indiscernible, a bluish idol.

'... the idols of the theatre.' Where was this particular idol to be found? In the lobby? On the curtains? No, a more appropriate place would probably be the square in front of the theatre, in the centre of the garden there.

'What are the idols of the theatre?'

'The idols of the theatre are the authoritative opinions of others which a man likes to accept as a guide when interpreting something he hasn't experienced himself.'

'Oh, but this happens very often.'

'But sometimes he actually has experienced only it's more convenient not to believe what he's seen.'

'I've seen cases like that as well...'

'Another idol of the theatre is our over-willingness to agree with the arguments of science. One can sum this up as the voluntary acceptance of other people's errors !'

'That's good,' said Oleg. He liked the idea very much. 'Voluntary acceptance of other people's errors! That's it!' 'Finally, there are the idols of the market-place.'

This was the easiest of all to imagine: an alabaster idol towering over a swarming crowd in a market-place.

'The idols of the market-place are the errors which result from the communication and association of men with each other. They are the errors a man commits because it has become customary to use certain phrases and formulas which do violence to reason. For example, "Enemy of the people!" "Not one of us!" "Traitor!" Call a man one of these and everyone will renounce him.'

Shulubin emphasized each of these exclamations by throwing up first one hand, then the other. Again he looked like a bird with clipped wings making crooked, awkward attempts to fly.

The sun was hotter than it should be in springtime, and it was burning their backs. The branches of the trees had not yet become interwoven. Each still stood out separately in its pristine greenery, and they gave no shade. The sky had not yet been scorched pale by the southern sun; between the white flakes of the small, passing clouds of day it kept its blueness. But Shulubin didn't see it or else he didn't believe what he saw. He raised one finger above

his head and shook it as he said, 'And over all idols there is the sky of fear, the sky of fear overhung with grey clouds. You know how some evenings thick low clouds gather, black and grey clouds, even though no storm is approaching. Darkness and gloom descend before their proper time. The whole 'world makes you feel ill at ease, and all you want to do is to go and hide under the roof in a house made of bricks, skulk close to the fire with your family. I lived twenty-five years under a sky like that, I saved myself only because I bowed low and kept silent. I kept silent for twenty-five years - or maybe it was twenty-eight, count them up yourself. First I kept silent for my wife's sake, then for my children's sake, then for the sake of my own sinful body. But my wife died. And my body is a bag full of dung - they're going to drill a hole for it on one side. And my children have grown up so callous it's beyond comprehension. And when my daughter suddenly started writing to me - in the past two years she's sent three letters so far, I don't mean here, I mean to my home - it turned out it was because her Party organization demanded that she *normalize* her relationship with her father, do you understand? But they made no such request of my son

Shulubin turned towards Oleg and twitched his bushy eyebrows. His whole figure was disheveled. Oleg suddenly knew who he was - he was the Mad Miller from *The Mermaid*<sup>4</sup>: 'Me, a miller? I'm no miller, I'm a raven!'

'I don't remember any more, maybe I dreamt these children up, maybe they never existed.... Listen to me, do you think a man can become like a log of wood. A log of wood doesn't mind whether it lies by itself or among other logs. The way I live, if I lose consciousness, fall down on the floor and die, no one will find me for days, not even my neighbours. But listen! Listen!' He grabbed Oleg hard by the shoulder, as if he was frightened Oleg wouldn't hear him. 'I'm still on my guard, just as I was before, I keep looking behind me. I know I spoke out in the ward<sup>5</sup>, but I'd never dare say anything like that in Kokand, or where I work. As for what I'm telling you now, I'm only doing it because they're wheeling in a little table to take me to my operation. Even now I'd never say it if there was a third person present. No, never! That's the way it is. This is the wall they've pushed me up against,... I graduated from agricultural academy, then did advanced courses in historical and dialectical materialism. I was a university lecturer in several subjects, and in Moscow at that. But then the oak-trees began to topple. There was the fall of Muratov at the agricultural academy. Professors were being arrested by the dozen. We were supposed to confess our "mistakes"! I confessed them! We were supposed to renounce them? I renounced them! A certain percentage managed to survive, didn't they? Well, I was part of that percentage. I withdrew into the study of pure biology, I found myself a quiet haven. But then the purge started there as well, and what a purge! The professional chairs in the biological department got a thorough sweeping with the broom. We were supposed to give up lecturing! Very well, I gave up lecturing. I withdrew even further, became an assistant. I agreed to become a little man!'

He was always so silent in the ward, and yet now he was speaking with extraordinary ease. Words poured out of him as though public speaking were his daily occupation.

'They were destroying text-books written by great scientists, they were changing the curricula. Very well, I agreed to that too; we would use the new books for teaching! They suggested we reshape anatomy, microbiology and neuro-pathology to fit in with the doctrines of an ignorant agronomist and an expert in horticulture<sup>6</sup>. Bravo! I agreed! I voted in favour!

<sup>4</sup> A frequently-performed classical Russian opera by Dargomyzhsky. (Translators' note)

<sup>5</sup> Allusion to an open discussion in the ward, in a precedent chapter.

<sup>6</sup> By 'ignorant agronomist' he means Trofim Lysenko, the scientist who dominated Soviet biology until the fall of Khrushchev in 1964 and destroyed many of his opponents by denouncing them to the security

“Ho, that’s not enough. Will you please give up your assistantship as well?” “All right, I’m not arguing. I’ll work on methods of biology-teaching in schools.” But no, the sacrifice wasn’t accepted, I was sacked from that job as well. “Very well, I agree, I’ll be a librarian, a librarian in remote Kokand.” I retreated a long, long way! Still, I was alive, and my children were university graduates. But then librarians receive secret instructions from the authorities: for the destruction of books by this or that author. Well, this was nothing new for us. Had I not declared a quarter of a century earlier from my chair of dialectical materialism that that relativity theory was counter-revolutionary obscurantism? So I draw up a document, my Party secretary and special-branch representative sign it, and we shove the books into the stove. Into the stove with all your genetics, leftist aesthetics, ethics, cybernetics, arithmetic . . . ! ’

He could still laugh, that mad raven!

‘ . . . Why set up bonfires in the streets? Superfluous histrionics! Let’s do it in some quiet corner, let’s shove the books into the stove, the stove will keep us warm! The stove’s what I’ve been pushed up against - I’ve been pushed back against a stove. . . And yet I managed to raise a family and my daughter edits a provincial newspaper. She wrote a little lyrical poem:

*No, I don’t wish to retreat!  
To ask pardon I’m unable.  
If we must fight, then we fight!  
As for my father - under the table!’*

His dressing-gown hung on him like a pair of helpless wings.

‘Ye-e-e-s, I agree,’ was all Kostoglotov could say. ‘Your life hasn’t been any easier than mine.’

‘That’s right,’ said Shulubin, catching his breath. He relaxed his posture and began to speak more calmly. ‘I wonder, what is the riddle of these changing periods of history? In no more than ten years a whole people loses its social drive and courageous impulse, or rather the impulse changes the sign from plus to minus, from bravery to cowardice. You know, I have been a Bolshevik since 1917. I remember how we charged in and dispersed the local council of Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks in Tambov, even though all the weapons we had were a couple of fingers to put in our mouths and whistle with. I fought in the civil war. You know, we did nothing to protect our lives, we were happy to give them for world revolution. What happened to us? How could we have given in? What was the chief thing that got us down? Fear? The idols of the market-place? The idols of the theatre? Ah right, I’m a “little man”, but what about Nadyezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya<sup>7</sup>? Didn’t she understand, didn’t she realize what was happening? Why didn’t she raise her voice? How much a single statement from her would have meant to us all, even if it did cost her her life!, Who knows, we might have changed, might have dug our heels in and stopped it from going any further. Then what about Ordzhonikidze<sup>8</sup>? He was a real eagle of a man, wasn’t he? They couldn’t break him by locking him up in the Schliesselburg fortress or by sending him to hard labour in Siberia. What kept him from speaking up once, just once, against Stalin? But no, they preferred to die in mysterious circumstances or to commit suicide. Is that courage? Will you tell me, please?’

police. The ‘horticulturist’ is Ivan Michurin, a specialist in growing new varieties of fruit trees whose name was misused by Lysenko. (Translators’ note)

<sup>7</sup> Lenin’s widow\* (Translators’ note)

<sup>8</sup> An old Bolshevik who was in charge of industrialization in the Soviet Union during the thirties. He committed suicide in 1937. (Translators’ note)

‘How can I be the one to tell you, Aleksei Filippovich? How can I? You explain it to me.’

Shulubin sighed and tried to change his position on the bench, but it hurt no matter how he sat.

‘There’s something else that interests me. Here you are, you were born after the Revolution, but they put you in prison. Well, have you lost your faith in socialism, or haven’t you?’

Kostoglotov smiled vaguely.

‘I don’t know. Things got so tough out there, you sometimes went further than you wanted to, out of sheer fury.’

Shulubin freed the hand he had been using to prop himself up on the bench. With this hand, now enfeebled by disease, he clung to Oleg’s shoulder. ‘Young man,’ he said, ‘don’t ever make this mistake. Don’t ever blame socialism for the sufferings and the cruel years you’ve lived through. However you think about it, history has rejected capitalism once and for all!’

‘Well, out there, out there in the camps, we used to argue that there was a lot of good in private enterprise. It makes life easier, you see. You can always get everything. You know where to find things.’

‘You know, that’s a philistine’s way of reasoning. It’s true that private enterprise is extremely flexible, but it’s good only within very narrow limits. If private enterprise isn’t held in an iron grip it gives birth to people who are no better than beasts, those stock-exchange people with greedy appetites completely beyond restraint. Capitalism was doomed ethically before it was doomed economically, a long time ago.’

‘Well, to be quite honest,’ replied Oleg, twitching his forehead, ‘I’ve found people with greedy appetites beyond restraint in our society as well. And I don’t mean state-licensed craftsmen or repairmen. Take Yemelyan-Sashik<sup>9</sup>, for example

‘That’s true!’ said Shulubin, his hand weighing more and more heavily on Oleg’s shoulder. ‘But is socialism to blame? We made a very quick turn-around, we thought it was enough to change the mode of production and people would immediately change with it. But did they? The hell they did! They didn’t change a bit. Man is a biological type. It takes thousands of years to change him.’

‘Can there be socialism, then?’

‘Can there indeed? It’s an enigma, isn’t it? They talk about “democratic” socialism, but that’s just superficial, it doesn’t get to the essence of socialism. It only refers to the form in which socialism is introduced, the structure of the State that applies it. It’s merely a declaration that heads will not roll, but it doesn’t say a word about what this socialism will be built on. You can’t build socialism on an abundance of material goods, because people sometimes behave like buffaloes, they stampede and trample the goods into the ground. Nor can you have socialism that’s always banging on about hatred, because social life cannot be built on hatred. After a man has burned with hatred year in, year out, he can’t simply announce one fine day, “That’s enough! As from today I’m finished with hatred, from now on I’m only going to love!” No, if he’s used to hating he’ll go on hating. He’ll find someone closer to him whom he can

<sup>9</sup> Allusion to a previous discussion, in a previous chapter.

hate. Do you know the poem by Herwegh<sup>10</sup>?

*'Bis unsre Hand in Asche stirbt,  
Soll sie vom Schwert nicht lassen !'*

Oleg took up the lines:

*Wir haben long genug geliebt  
Und wollen endlich hassen!*

Of course I know it, we learnt it at school."

'That's right, you learnt it at school, that's what's so terrifying. They taught you that poem at school when they should've taught you the opposite: *To hell with your hatred; now, finally, we wish to love!* That's what socialism ought to be like.'

'You mean Christian socialism, is that right?' asked Oleg, trying to guess.

It's going too far to call it "Christian". There are political parties that call themselves Christian Socialists in societies that emerged from under Hitler and Mussolini, but I can't imagine with what kind of people they undertook to build this kind of socialism. At the end of the last century Tolstoy decided to spread practical Christianity through society, but his ideals turned out to be impossible for his contemporaries to live with, his preaching had no link with reality. I should say that for Russia in particular, with our repentances, confessions and revolts, our Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Kropotkin, there's only one true socialism, and that's ethical socialism. That is something completely realistic.

Kostoglotov screwed up his eyes. "But this "ethical socialism", how should we envisage it? What would it be like?"

'It's not very difficult to imagine,' said Shulubin. His voice had become lively again, and he had lost his start led expression of the 'miller-raven', It was a cheerful liveliness; clearly he was eager to persuade Kostoglotov, He spoke very distinctly, like a master giving a lesson. 'We have to show the world a society in which all relationships, fundamental principles and laws flow directly from ethics, and from them. Ethical demands must determine all considerations: how to bring up children, what to train them for, to what end the work of grown-ups should be directed, and how their leisure should be occupied. As for scientific research, it should only be conducted where it doesn't damage morality, in the first instance where it doesn't damage the researchers themselves. The same should apply to foreign policy. Whenever the question of frontiers arises, we should think not of how much richer or stronger this or that course of action will make us, or of how it will raise our prestige. We should consider one criterion only: how far is it ethical?'

'Yes, but that's hardly possible, is it - not for another two hundred years?' Kostoglotov frowned. 'But wait a moment I'm not with you on one point. Where is the material basis for your scheme? There has to be an economy, after all, doesn't there? That comes before everything else.'

'Does it? That depends. For example, Vladimir Solovyov<sup>11</sup> argues rather convincingly that an

<sup>10</sup> Georg Herwegh (1817-75) was a German revolutionary poet, at one time a friend of Karl Marx. The lines quoted mean: *Till death shall part the blade and hand, They may not separate: We've practised loving long enough. Let's come at last to hate!*

This translation is by Longfellow. (Translators' note)

<sup>11</sup> A Russian religious thinker (1853-1900) whose ideas are an important influence on modern

economy could and should be built on an ethical basis.'

'What's that? Ethics first and economics afterwards?' Kostoglotov looked bewildered.

'Exactly! Listen, you're a Russian, but I bet you haven't read a single line of Vladimir Solovyov, have you?'

Kostoglotov twisted his lips to indicate 'no'.

'Well, you've at least heard of his name? '

'Yes, when I was inside.'

'But at least you've read a page or two of Kropotkin, haven't you? His *Mutual Aid Among Men*?

Kostoglotov made the same movement with his lips.

'Yes, of course, his views are incorrect, so why read them? What about Mikhaylovski<sup>12</sup>? No, of course you haven't. He was refuted, wasn't he banned and withdrawn from the libraries?'

'When could I have read them? What books could I have read?' asked Kostoglotov indignantly. 'All my life I've sweated blood and still people keep asking me, "Have you read this? Have you read that?" When I was in the Army the shovel was never out of my hand. It was the same in the camps. And now I'm an exile it's exactly the same, only now it's a hoe. When have I had time to read?'

But Shulubin's face, with its round eyes and furry eyebrows, shone with the excitement of an animal about to overtake its quarry. 'So you see,' he said, 'that's what ethical socialism is.

One should never direct people towards happiness, because happiness too is an idol of the market-place. One should direct them towards mutual affection. A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to.'

'Oh no, I want happiness, you'd better leave me with happiness,' Oleg insisted vigorously. 'Must give me happiness for the few months I have before I die. Otherwise to hell with the whole...'

'Happiness is a mirage.' Shulubin was emphatic, straining his strength to the utmost. He had turned quite pale. 'I was happy bringing up my children, but they spat on my soul. To preserve this happiness I took books which were full of truth and burnt them in the stove. As for the so-called "happiness of future generations", it's even more of a mirage. Who knows anything about it? Who has spoken with these future generations? Who knows what idols they will worship? Ideas of what happiness is have changed too much through the ages. No one should have the effrontery to try to plan it in advance. When we have enough loaves of white bread to crush them under our heels, when we have enough to choke us, we still won't be in the least happy. But if we share things we don't have enough of, we can be happy today! If we care only about "happiness" and about reproducing our species, we shall merely crowd the earth senselessly and create a terrifying society... You know, I don't feel very well... I'll better go and lie down...'

Russian non-Marxist thought.

<sup>12</sup> A leading ideologist of populist socialism (1840-1904). (Translators' notes)

All along Shulubin's face had looked exhausted. Oleg hadn't noticed how pale, how deadly it had become.

'Come *on* then, Aleksei Filippovich, come on, I'll take your arm.'

It wasn't easy for Shulubin to get up from the position he was in. They dragged themselves along very slowly. All around them was the lightness of spring, but gravity weighed heavily on both men. Their bones, the flesh that remained to them, their clothes, their shoes, even the stream of sunlight pressed upon them heavily and burdened them.

They walked in silence. They were tired of talking.

Only when they had reached the porch steps and were standing in the shadow of the cancer wing did Shulubin speak again. Still leaning on Oleg, he lifted his head to look up at the poplar-trees and the patch of merry sky. He said, 'The only thing is, I don't want to die under the knife. I'm frightened.... No matter how long you live or what a dog's life it's been, you still want to live...'

They walked into the lobby. It was hot and stuffy. Very slowly, one step after the other, they began to climb the long staircase.

Then Oleg asked him, 'Tell me, did you think of this during those twenty-five years, while you were bowing low and renouncing your beliefs?'

Shulubin replied, his voice empty and flat, growing weaker and weaker, 'Yes, I did. I renounced everything, and I went on thinking. I shoved the old books into the stove and I turned things over in my mind. Why not? Haven't I earned the right to a few thoughts - through my suffering and through my betrayal?'