

Martyrs

by Anton Chekhov

Lizotchka Kudrinsky, a young married lady who had many admirers, was suddenly taken ill, and so seriously that her husband did not go to his office, and a telegram was sent to her mamma at Tver. This is how she told the story of her illness:

"I went to Lyesnoe to auntie's. I stayed there a week and then I went with all the rest to cousin Varya's. Varya's husband is a surly brute and a despot (I'd shoot a husband like that), but we had a very jolly time there. To begin with I took part in some private theatricals. It was *A Scandal in a Respectable Family*. Hrustalev acted marvellously! Between the acts I drank some cold, awfully cold, lemon squash, with the tiniest nip of brandy in it. Lemon squash with brandy in it is very much like champagne.... I drank it and I felt nothing. Next day after the performance I rode out on horseback with that Adolf Ivanitch. It was rather damp and there was a strong wind. It was most likely then that I caught cold. Three days later I came home to see how my dear, good Vassya was getting on, and while here to get my silk dress, the one that has little flowers on it. Vassya, of course, I did not find at home. I went into the kitchen to tell Praskovya to set the samovar, and there I saw on the table some pretty little carrots and turnips like playthings. I ate one little carrot and well, a turnip too. I ate very little, but only fancy, I

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began having a sharp pain at once — spasms... spasms... spasms... ah, I am dying. Vassya runs from the office. Naturally he clutches at his hair and turns white. They run for the doctor.... Do you understand, I am dying, dying."

The spasms began at midday, before three o'clock the doctor came, and at six Lizotchka fell asleep and slept soundly till two o'clock in the morning.

It strikes two.... The light of the little night lamp filters scantily through the pale blue shade. Lizotchka is lying in bed, her white lace cap stands out sharply against the dark background of the red cushion. Shadows from the blue lamp-shade lie in patterns on her pale face and her round plump shoulders. Vassily Stepanovitch is sitting at her feet. The poor fellow is happy that his wife is at home at last, and at the same time he is terribly alarmed by her illness.

"Well, how do you feel, Lizotchka?" he asks in a whisper, noticing that she is awake.

"I am better," moans Lizotchka. "I don't feel the spasms now, but there is no sleeping.... I can't get to sleep!"

"Isn't it time to change the compress, my angel?"

Lizotchka sits up slowly with the expression of a martyr and gracefully turns her head on one side. Vassily Stepanovitch with reverent awe, scarcely touching her hot body with his fingers, changes the compress. Lizotchka shrinks, laughs at the cold water which tickles her, and lies down again.

"You are getting no sleep, poor boy!" she moans.

"As though I could sleep!"

"It's my nerves, Vassya, I am a very nervous woman. The doctor has prescribed for stomach trouble, but I feel that he doesn't understand my illness. It's nerves and not the stomach, I

swear that it is my nerves. There is only one thing I am afraid of, that my illness may take a bad turn."

"No, Lizotchka, no, to-morrow you will be all right!"

"Hardly likely! I am not afraid for myself.... I don't care, indeed, I shall be glad to die, but I am sorry for you! You'll be a widower and left all alone."

Vassitchka rarely enjoys his wife's society, and has long been used to solitude, but Lizotchka's words agitate him.

"Goodness knows what you are saying, little woman! Why these gloomy thoughts?"

"Well, you will cry and grieve, and then you will get used to it. You'll even get married again."

The husband clutches his head.

"There, there, I won't!" Lizotchka soothes him, "only you ought to be prepared for anything."

"And all of a sudden I shall die," she thinks, shutting her eyes.

And Lizotchka draws a mental picture of her own death, how her mother, her husband, her cousin Varya with her husband, her relations, the admirers of her "talent" press round her death bed, as she whispers her last farewell. All are weeping. Then when she is dead they dress her, interestingly pale and dark-haired, in a pink dress (it suits her) and lay her in a very expensive coffin on gold legs, full of flowers. There is a smell of incense, the candles splutter. Her husband never leaves the coffin, while the admirers of her talent cannot take their eyes off her, and say: "As though living! She is lovely in her coffin!" The whole town is talking of the life cut short so prematurely. But now they are carrying her to the church. The bearers are Ivan Petrovitch, Adolf Ivanitch, Varya's husband, Nikolay

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Semyonitch, and the black-eyed student who had taught her to drink lemon squash with brandy. It's only a pity there's no music playing. After the burial service comes the leave-taking. The church is full of sobs, they bring the lid with tassels, and... Lizotchka is shut off from the light of day for ever, there is the sound of hammering nails. Knock, knock, knock.

Lizotchka shudders and opens her eyes.

"Vassya, are you here?" she asks. "I have such gloomy thoughts. Goodness, why am I so unlucky as not to sleep. Vassya, have pity, do tell me something!"

"What shall I tell you?"

"Something about love," Lizotchka says languidly. "Or some anecdote about Jews...."

Vassily Stepanovitch, ready for anything if only his wife will be cheerful and not talk about death, combs locks of hair over his ears, makes an absurd face, and goes up to Lizotchka.

"Does your vatch vant mending?" he asks.

"It does, it does," giggles Lizotchka, and hands him her gold watch from the little table. "Mend it."

Vassya takes the watch, examines the mechanism for a long time, and wriggling and shrugging, says: "She can not be mended... in vun veel two cogs are vanting...."

This is the whole performance. Lizotchka laughs and claps her hands.

"Capital," she exclaims. "Wonderful. Do you know, Vassya, it's awfully stupid of you not to take part in amateur theatricals! You have a remarkable talent! You are much better than Sysunov. There was an amateur called Sysunov who played with us in It's My Birthday. A first-class comic talent, only fancy: a nose as thick as a parsnip, green eyes, and he walks like a crane...."

We all roared; stay, I will show you how he walks."

Lizotchka springs out of bed and begins pacing about the floor, barefooted and without her cap.

"A very good day to you!" she says in a bass, imitating a man's voice. "Anything pretty? Anything new under the moon? Ha, ha, ha!" she laughs.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Vassya seconds her. And the young pair, roaring with laughter, forgetting the illness, chase one another about the room. The race ends in Vassya's catching his wife by her nightgown and eagerly showering kisses upon her. After one particularly passionate embrace Lizotchka suddenly remembers that she is seriously ill....

"What silliness!" she says, making a serious face and covering herself with the quilt. "I suppose you have forgotten that I am ill! Clever, I must say!"

"Sorry..." falters her husband in confusion.

"If my illness takes a bad turn it will be your fault. Not kind! not good!"

Lizotchka closes her eyes and is silent. Her former languor and expression of martyrdom return again, there is a sound of gentle moans. Vassya changes the compress, and glad that his wife is at home and not gadding off to her aunt's, sits meekly at her feet. He does not sleep all night. At ten o'clock the doctor comes.

"Well, how are we feeling?" he asks as he takes her pulse. "Have you slept?"

"Badly," Lizotchka's husband answers for her, "very badly."

The doctor walks away to the window and stares at a passing chimney sweep.

"Doctor, may I have coffee to-day?" asks Lizotchka.

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"You may."

"And may I get up?"

"You might, perhaps, but... you had better lie in bed another day."

"She is awfully depressed," Vassya whispers in his ear, "such gloomy thoughts, such pessimism. I am dreadfully uneasy about her."

The doctor sits down to the little table, and rubbing his forehead, prescribes bromide of potassium for Lizotchka, then makes his bow, and promising to look in again in the evening, departs. Vassya does not go to the office, but sits all day at his wife's feet.

At midday the admirers of her talent arrive in a crowd. They are agitated and alarmed, they bring masses of flowers and French novels. Lizotchka, in a snow-white cap and a light dressing jacket, lies in bed with an enigmatic look, as though she did not believe in her own recovery. The admirers of her talent see her husband, but readily forgive his presence: they and he are united by one calamity at that bedside!

At six o'clock in the evening Lizotchka falls asleep, and again sleeps till two o'clock in the morning. Vassya as before sits at her feet, struggles with drowsiness, changes her compress, plays at being a Jew, and in the morning after a second night of suffering, Liza is prinking before the looking-glass and putting on her hat.

"Wherever are you going, my dear?" asks Vassya, with an imploring look at her.

"What?" says Lizotchka in wonder, assuming a scared expression, "don't you know that there is a rehearsal to-day at Marya Lvovna's?"

After escorting her there, Vassya having nothing to do to while away his boredom, takes his portfolio and goes to the office. His head aches so violently from his sleepless nights that his left eye shuts of itself and refuses to open....

"What's the matter with you, my good sir?" his chief asks him. "What is it?"

Vassy a waves his hand and sits down.

"Don't ask me, your Excellency," he says with a sigh. "What I have suffered in these two days, what I have suffered! Liza has been ill!"

"Good heavens," cried his chief in alarm. "Lizaveta Pavlovna, what is wrong with her?"

Vassily Stepanovitch merely throws up his hands and raises his eyes to the ceiling, as though he would say: "It's the will of Providence."

"Ah, my boy, I can sympathise with you with all my heart!" sighs his chief, rolling his eyes. "I've lost my wife, my dear, I understand. That is a loss, it is a loss! It's awful, awful! I hope Lizaveta Pavlovna is better now! What doctor is attending her?"

"Von Schterk."

"Von Schterk! But you would have been better to have called in Magnus or Semandritsky. But how very pale your face is. You are ill yourself! This is awful!"

"Yes, your Excellency, I haven't slept. What I have suffered, what I have been through!"

"And yet you came! Why you came I can't understand? One can't force oneself like that! One mustn't do oneself harm like that. Go home and stay there till you are well again! Go home, I command you! Zeal is a very fine thing in a young

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official, but you mustn't forget as the Romans used to say: 'mens sana in corpore sano,' that is, a healthy brain in a healthy body."

Vassya agrees, puts his papers back in his portfolio, and, taking leave of his chief, goes home to bed.