

## *The Wall and the Shadows*

### I

Volodya Lovlev, a slender, pale boy about twelve years old, had just returned from school and was waiting for dinner. He was standing in the living room by the piano looking through the latest issue of the magazine *Niva* which had arrived in the morning mail.

A little booklet printed on thin gray paper fell out of the newspaper which was lying there too, covering up a page of *Niva*. It was an advertisement for an illustrated magazine. In the booklet the publisher listed some fifty well-known literary names—the future contributors—and then went on with verbose praise for the magazine as a whole and for its highly diverse sections. Included was a small sample of illustrations.

Volodya absent-mindedly began to leaf through the little gray booklet, looking at the tiny pictures. The large eyes in his pale face moved wearily.

One page suddenly caught the boy's attention and caused his wide eyes to open even wider. Printed down the page was a series of six drawings, showing various hand positions whose shadows, thrown on a white wall, formed dark silhouettes: the head of a girl in a funny peaked hat, the heads of a donkey and a bull, a squirrel in a sitting position, and things of that kind.

Smiling, Volodya became more absorbed in looking at the sketches. This was a game that was familiar to him: he himself could arrange the fingers of one hand so as to make a rabbit's head appear on the wall. But here were some things Volodya had

never seen before and above all, these were more complicated figures involving both hands.

Volodya wanted to reproduce these shadows. But of course now, in the diffused light of the late autumn day, nothing would come out well.

"I'll just have to keep this booklet," he thought. "I'm sure it isn't important."

Just then he heard the approaching footsteps and voice of his mother in the next room. For some reason he blushed, and quickly thrusting the booklet into his pocket he moved away from the piano to meet his mother. She came in, smiling tenderly, so much like him, with the very same wide eyes in her pale, beautiful face.

She asked, as she usually did, "So what's new today?"

"Nothing's new," Volodya said sullenly.

But immediately it seemed to him that he was speaking rudely to his mother, and he was ashamed because of it. He smiled tenderly and began to recall what had happened at school, but in so doing, he felt the vexation even more clearly.

"Pruzhinin distinguished himself again," and he began to tell about his teacher who was disliked by the students because of his crudeness. "Leontev was reciting the lesson and he got mixed up. Pruzhinin said, 'That's enough. Sit down! Blockhead!'"

"You notice everything right away," his mother said, smiling.

"He's always awful crude."

Volodya was silent for a moment, then he sighed and began to speak in a complaining voice:

"And they're always in a rush."

"Who?" asked his mother.

"I mean the teachers. Every one of them wants to finish up the course as soon as possible and to review for the exams. If you ask a question, they probably think: here's a student who's showing off to kill time until the bell rings, so he won't be quizzed."

"Then speak to them after class."

"Yes, but after classes they're in a rush too, to get home or to go to lessons at the girls' school. And everything is done in such a hurry—no sooner are you done with geometry, then you have to study Greek!"

"It keeps you on your toes!"

"It keeps me on my toes all right! I'm like a squirrel in a cage. Really, it irritates me."

His mother smiled gently.

## II

After dinner, Volodya went off to his room to study. His mother had taken pains to see that Volodya was comfortable—and his room had everything he might need. No one bothered him there and even his mother did not come to him then. A little later, she would come to help Volodya if he needed it.

Volodya was a conscientious and, as they say, able boy. But today it was difficult for him to study. No matter which lesson he took up, he was reminded of something unpleasant—each subject brought to mind that teacher's passing remarks which were either sarcastic or crude and went straight to the depths of the sensitive boy's soul.

For some reason it happened that many of his recent lessons had been unsuccessful: the teachers seemed dissatisfied and things were not going well with them. Their ill temper was communicated to Volodya and now a gloomy, vague uneasiness was transmitted to him from his books and notebooks.

He went hurriedly from one lesson to another, then to a third; and this haste to complete trivial tasks so that the next day he would not be the one to be called a blockhead, this incoherent and unnecessary haste, irritated him. He even began to yawn from boredom and vexation, impatiently dangling his legs and squirming about in his chair.

But he knew very well that he had to learn all these lessons without fail, that it was very important, that his whole future

depended on it, and so he conscientiously went on with the task so boring for him.

Volodya had made a small ink spot on his notebook and he put his pen aside. After examining it carefully, he decided it could be removed with his penknife. He was happy for the distraction.

His knife was not on the table. Volodya put his hand in his pocket and rummaged about there. In the midst of all the litter and junk small boys habitually have crammed into their pockets, he caught hold of his knife and pulled it out together with some sort of booklet.

He did not know yet what the paper in his hand was, but as he was fishing it out, he suddenly remembered that it was the booklet with the shadows—and all at once he grew cheerful and animated.

Yes, there it was—that same booklet which he had already forgotten while doing his lessons.

He jumped nimbly off his chair, moved the lamp closer to the wall, cast a look cautiously at the closed door—to see that no one should enter—and, having turned the booklet to the familiar page, began to examine the first drawing carefully and to arrange his fingers according to the drawing. At first the shadow came out awkwardly, not at all as it should have—Volodya moved the lamp this way and that, bent and stretched out his fingers—and finally, on the white wallpaper of his room, he achieved the little head of a woman in a peaked hat.

Volodya grew cheerful. He bent his hands and moved his fingers slightly—the little head bowed, smiled, and made funny faces.

Volodya went on to the second figure, then to the next ones. At first, they all came out wrong, but Volodya eventually managed with them.

He spent about a half an hour with this pastime and forgot all about his lessons, about school, about everything in the world.

Suddenly he heard familiar steps behind the door, Volodya

blushed, shoved the booklet in his pocket, quickly moved the lamp back into place, nearly overturning it in the process—and sat down, bending over his notebook. His mother entered.

“Let’s have some tea, Volodya dear,” she said.

Volodya pretended that he was looking at the ink spot and was about to open his penknife. His mother tenderly put her hands on his head—Volodya threw down his knife and pressed his blushing face against his mother. Apparently his mother noticed nothing and this made Volodya glad. But he was still ashamed, it was as though he had been caught at some stupid prank.

### III

On the round table in the middle of the dining room the samovar was quietly humming its cooing song. The hanging lamp was shedding a drowsy feeling along the white tablecloth and the dark wallpaper.

Volodya’s mother was pondering something, leaning her beautiful pale face over the table. Volodya had his arm on the table and was stirring the spoon in his glass. Sweet little streams from the sugar were running through the tea, thin bubbles were rising to the top. The silver spoon was jangling quietly.

The boiling water sputtered out of the samovar’s spigot into his mother’s cup.

A faint shadow was running from the little spoon onto the saucer and to the tablecloth and dissolved in the tea. Volodya scrutinized it: among the shadows cast by the sweet streams and bubbles of air, it was reminiscent of something—what exactly, Volodya could not decide. He inclined and twirled the little spoon, ran his fingers over it, but nothing emerged.

“Still and all,” he thought stubbornly, “it’s not just with fingers that shadows can be made. Anything can be used, you need only adapt yourself.”

And Volodya began to scrutinize the shadows of the samovar, of the chairs, of his mother’s head and the shadows thrown on

the table by the dishes—and he tried to catch a resemblance to something in all of these shadows. His mother was saying something—Volodya was listening inattentively.

“How is Lesha Sitnikov doing in school now?” his mother asked.

Meanwhile, Volodya was observing the shadow of the milk pitcher. He roused himself and answered hastily:

“Like a tomcat.”

“Volodya, you are sound asleep,” his mother said with surprise. “What tomcat?”

Volodya blushed.

“I don’t know what I meant,” he said. “I’m sorry, mama, I didn’t catch what you were saying.”

#### IV

The next evening before tea, Volodya again thought of the shadows and once more he busied himself with them. One of his shadows kept coming out poorly no matter how he held or bent his fingers.

Volodya was so engrossed that he did not notice his mother approaching. When he heard the scrape of the door opening, he thrust the booklet into his pocket and turned away from the wall, embarrassed. But his mother was already looking at his hands and a fearful uneasiness flashed in her wide eyes.

“What are you doing, Volodya? What have you hidden?”

“No, oh—nothing,” muttered Volodya, blushing and shifting awkwardly.

His mother imagined for some reason that Volodya wanted to smoke and was hiding a cigarette.

“Volodya, show me at once what you are hiding,” she said in a frightened voice.

“Really, mama . . . .”

She took Volodya by the elbow.

“All right then, shall I look in your pocket myself?”

Volodya grew even redder and pulled the booklet out of his pocket.

“Here,” he said, handing it over to his mother.

“Just what is it?”

“Well, you see,” explained Volodya, “here are some little drawings—of shadows. Well, I was making them on the wall, but I really didn’t have much success.”

“So what was there to hide then!” his mother said, having put her mind at rest. “Just what kind of shadows are they? Show me!”

Volodya felt ashamed, but obediently began to show his mother the shadows.

“Here’s one—a bald man’s head. And this is a rabbit’s head.”

“So!” his mother said, “This is how you prepare your lessons!”

“But I only do it for a little while, mother.”

“So, just a little while! Then why are you blushing so, my dear? Never mind. I know very well that you will do everything you are supposed to.”

His mother ruffled Volodya’s short hair, and Volodya began to laugh and hid his burning face under his mother’s elbows.

His mother left—but Volodya still felt awkward and ashamed. His mother had caught him doing something that he himself would have ridiculed had he found a friend at it.

Volodya knew that he was an intelligent child, and he considered himself to be serious, but this was really a game fit for gatherings of little girls.

He thrust the booklet with the shadows a little farther back in the table drawer and did not take it out for more than a week; indeed, during that whole week he gave very little thought to the shadows. Only sometimes in the evening, while going from one lesson to another, he would smile when he happened to think of the woman’s little head in the peaked hat—sometimes, he even poked about in the drawer after the booklet, but he would remember at once how his mother had caught him, and he would feel ashamed and go about his work even more quickly.

## V

Volodya and his mother, Eugenia Stepanovna, lived in her house on the outskirts of a provincial town. Eugenia Stepanovna had been a widow for nine years. She was now thirty-five, still young and pretty, and Volodya loved her tenderly. She lived solely for her son; she studied ancient languages for his sake, and suffered over all his anxieties about school. A quiet and affectionate person, she viewed the world somewhat timidly through her wide eyes which glimmered meekly in her pale face.

They lived with one servant. Praskovya, a sullen, middle-class widow, was strong and vigorous; she was about forty-five years old, but because of her stern taciturnity, she looked like a hundred-year-old woman.

When Volodya looked at her gloomy, stonelike face, he often wanted to find out what she was thinking about during the long winter evenings in her kitchen, as her cold knitting needles, clicking, moved rhythmically in her bony hands, and her dried-up lips kept count soundlessly. Is she recalling her drunken husband? Or her children who died prematurely? Or does her lonely and homeless old age loom before her?

Her stony face is hopelessly despondent and severe.

## VI

It is a long, autumn evening. On the other side of the wall are both wind and rain.

How tiresomely, how indifferently the lamp burns!

Volodya leaned on his elbow, bending completely over the table to the left and looked at the white wall and the white window blinds.

The pale flowers of the wallpaper are not visible. . . . There is the boring, white color. . . .

The white lampshade partially diverts the lamp's rays. The whole upper half of the room is in half-light.

Volodya stretched his right arm upward. Along the wall shaded

by the lampshade, a long shadow stretched; it was blurry in outline, vague. . . .

It is the shadow of an angel, flying off to heaven away from a depraved and grieving world; it is a transparent shadow with widespread wings and with its head bowed sorrowfully on its high breast.

Isn't there something significant, yet scorned, being carried away from the world in the gentle hands of the angel?

Volodya drew a heavy breath; his arm dropped lazily. He turned his bored eyes back to his books.

It is a long, autumn evening. . . . There is the boring white color. . . . Beyond the wall, something cries and murmurs. . . .

## VII

Volodya's mother caught him a second time with the shadows.

This time he had been very successful in making the bull's head and he was admiring it, making the bull stretch its neck and bellow.

But his mother was displeased.

"So, this is how you study!" she said reproachfully.

"But I've just been at it for a little while, mother," Volodya whispered, embarrassed.

"You could do that during your spare time," his mother continued. "You aren't a little boy any longer—you should be ashamed to waste your time on such foolishness!"

"I won't do it any more, mama."

But it was difficult for Volodya to keep his promise. He liked to make shadows very much, and the desire to do so often overcame him during an uninteresting lesson.

Some evenings this mischief took up a great deal of his time and prevented him from preparing his homework well. Then he had to make up for it and lose some sleep. But how could he give up his fun?

Volodya succeeded in inventing several new figures by using things other than his fingers, and these figures lived on the wall and it sometimes seemed to Volodya that they carried on entertaining conversations with him.

But Volodya had always been a great one to daydream.

## VIII

It is night. Volodya's room is dark. Volodya had gone to bed, but he cannot sleep. He is lying on his back, looking at the ceiling.

Someone is walking along the street with a lantern. His shadow moves across the ceiling among the red spots of light from the lantern. It is apparent that the lantern is swinging in the hands of the passer-by—the shadow wavers and flickers unevenly.

For some reason Volodya becomes terrified. Quickly he pulls the covers over his head and, trembling all over from haste, he hurriedly turns on his right side and begins to daydream.

He feels warmed and soothed. The sweet, naïve dreams which visit him before sleep begin to take shape in his head.

Often, when he goes to bed, he suddenly feels terrified, it seems he is becoming smaller and weaker—and he hides in his pillows, forgets this childishness and feels tender and affectionate, and he wants to embrace his mother and cover her with kisses.

## IX

The gray twilight grew thicker. Shadows merged. Volodya felt melancholy.

But there was the lamp. Its light spilled over the green tablecloth and the vague, beloved shadows stole along the wall.

Volodya felt a rush of joy and animation and he made haste to take out the gray booklet.

The bull is bellowing . . . . The woman is laughing loudly. . . . What evil, round eyes this bald man is making!

Then he begins to make up his own figures.

It is steppe country. There is a wanderer with a knapsack. It seems one can hear the sad, drawn-out song of the road . . . .

Volodya is happy and melancholy.

## X

"Volodya, this is the third time I've seen you with that little book. What do you do—spend the whole evening admiring your fingers?"

Volodya was standing awkwardly by the table, like a naughty boy who had been caught, and he turned the little book in his burning fingers.

"Give it to me!" his mother said.

Abashed, Volodya handed over the little book. His mother took it, and left without speaking—Volodya sat down to his schoolwork.

He was ashamed that he had brought himself to this. He felt very awkward and his annoyance with his mother tormented him: he was ashamed at being angry with her, but he could not help being angry. And because it was shameful to get angry, he became even angrier.

"So let her take it away," he thought finally, "I'll manage somehow."

And, indeed, Volodya already knew the figures by heart and had used the booklet only for checking them.

## XI

His mother took the booklet with the drawings of the shadows to her room and opened it—and was plunged into thought. "He really is a bright, good boy—and suddenly he is carried away by such nonsense!"

"No, it must not be just nonsense."

"What is it then?" she asked herself insistently.

A strange fear was born in her, a kind of hostile, timid feeling towards these black drawings.

She rose and lit the candle. With the little gray book in her hands, she went to the wall and paused in fearful anguish.

"Yes, finally I must find out what this is all about," she decided—and she began to make the shadows, from the first to the last.

Persistently and carefully she arranged her fingers and bent her hands until she had succeeded in making the figures she wanted. A vague, apprehensive feeling stirred within her. She tried to overcome it. But her fear grew and captivated her. Her hands were trembling, but her thought, intimidated by life's twilight, ran head on toward the threatening sorrows.

Suddenly, she heard her son's footsteps. She shuddered, hid the little book, and put out the candle.

Volodya entered and stopped at the threshold; he was confused by his mother's stern look and her awkward, strange stance near the wall.

"What do you want?" his mother asked in a severe, uneven voice.

A vague conjecture flitted through Volodya's mind, but Volodya quickly dismissed it and began to talk with his mother.

## XII

Volodya had left.

His mother paced around the room several times. She noticed that her shadow was moving behind her on the floor and—strange as it was—for the first time in her life, her shadow made her feel awkward. The thought that it was indeed a shadow was constantly in her mind, but for some reason, Eugenia Stepanovna was afraid of this thought, and she even tried to avoid looking at her shadow.

But the shadow crawled along after her and taunted her. Eugenia Stepanovna tried to think about something else—in vain.

Suddenly she stopped—pale, agitated.

"But it's a shadow, a shadow!" she exclaimed aloud with a

strange irritation, stamping her foot. "So what of it? What, indeed?"

And at once she realized that it was stupid to cry out so and stamp her foot, and she became quiet.

She went up to the mirror. Her face was paler than usual, and her lips quivered with frightened anger.

"It's nerves," she thought. "I must take myself in hand."

## XIII

Twilight was falling. Volodya was daydreaming.

"Come, let's go for a walk, Volodya," his mother said.

But on the street, too, there were shadows everywhere—nocturnal, mysterious, elusive—and they were whispering to Volodya something familiar and infinitely sad.

In the hazy sky two or three stars peeped out, they were distant and foreign both to Volodya and the shadows surrounding him. But Volodya, in order to please his mother, began to think about those stars: they alone were foreign to the shadows.

"Mama," he said, not noticing that he had interrupted her as she was telling him something, "What a pity that it is impossible to reach those stars."

His mother glanced at the sky and answered:

"It isn't necessary. Things go well for us only on earth; there it is quite different."

"But how faintly they shine! Anyway, that's all for the better."

"Why?"

"Because if they shone more strongly, then they would create shadows."

"Oh, Volodya, why is it you think only about shadows?"

"I didn't mean to, mama," Volodya said in a penitent voice.

## XIV

Volodya tried harder to prepare his lessons better; he was afraid of grieving his mother with his laziness. But in the evenings he used the full power of his imagination to cover the table with a

pile of objects which would cast a new and fantastic shadow. He arranged this way and that everything that came to hand, and he rejoiced when definable shapes took form on the white wall. These shadowy outlines became near and dear to him. They were not dumb, for they spoke—and Volodya understood their murmuring language.

He understood what that despondent passerby was grumbling about as he wandered along the great road into the autumnal mire with a crutch in his trembling hands and a knapsack on his bowed back.

He understood why the snow-covered woods, grieving in the wintry calm, complained with the frosty crackle of dry branches, why the lingering raven was cawing in the gnarled oak, and why the bustling squirrel was lamenting over its deserted hollow.

He understood why the old beggar women, decrepit and homeless, cried in the mournful, autumnal wind, shivering in their threadbare rags among the rickety crosses and hopelessly black tombs of the crowded graveyard.

Self-forgetfulness and agonizing sadness!

#### XV

His mother had noticed that Volodya was continuing to misbehave.

At dinner she said: ~

"Volodya, you should get interested in something else."

"But what?"

"You could read."

"Yes, but when you begin to read, the shadows still beg to be made."

"See if you can't think of another pastime—like blowing soap bubbles."

Volodya smiled sadly.

"Yes, the bubbles will fly off and there will be shadows behind them on the wall."

"Volodya, you'll end up ruining your nerves this way. I can see that you have even lost weight because of all this."

"Mama, you exaggerate!"

"Not at all! I do know that you have started sleeping poorly at night and sometimes you are even delirious. Just imagine if you were to be taken ill!"

"What an idea!"

"God forbid that you should go insane or die. What grief that would be for me!"

Volodya began to laugh and threw himself on his mother's neck.

"Mama, I won't die. And I won't do it anymore."

His mother saw that already Volodya was crying.

"Now that's enough," she said, "God is merciful. There, you see how nervous you have become? You're laughing and crying at the same time!"

#### XVI

Volodya's mother observed him intently and fearfully. Every trifle disturbed her now.

She noticed that Volodya's head was somewhat asymmetrical: one ear was higher than the other and his chin was slightly off center. His mother looked in the mirror and noticed that Volodya was like her in this respect.

"Perhaps," she thought, "this is one of the signs of bad heredity—of degeneration. And in whom was this seed of evil? Is it I, who am so unbalanced? Or was it his father?"

Eugenia Stepanovna recalled her late husband. He was one of the kindest and dearest of people, but weak-willed and given to senseless impulses—now enthusiastic, now mystical in mood. He envisioned a better social order and went among the people—and he had been drinking heavily during the last years of his life.

He was young when he died—only thirty-five.



His mother even took Volodya to a doctor to whom she described the illness. The doctor, a cheerful young man, heard her out, and laughing a bit, gave her some advice about the boy's diet and way of life, accompanied by some witty remarks; he cheerfully scribbled a prescription and added playfully, clapping Volodya on the back:

"The very best medicine would be a spanking."

Volodya's mother was deeply offended for her son, but she carried out all the other instructions exactly.

## XVII

Volodya was sitting in class. He was bored. He was listening inattentively.

He raised his eyes. A shadow moved on the ceiling next to the entry. Volodya noticed that it came in from the first window. In the beginning, it stretched from the window to the middle of the room, but then it stole forward quickly past Volodya—obviously someone was walking on the street under the window. While this shadow was still moving, another shadow appeared from the second window; it too began at the back wall, then quickly moved forward to the entry. And so it went with the third and fourth windows—the shadows appeared in the classroom on the ceiling and depending on how much the passerby moved forward, they stretched out backward.

"Yes," thought Volodya, "this is not the same as in an open space where the shadow stretches out behind the person; in here, when the person walks forward, the shadow slides backward and still other shadows meet him up in front."

Volodya turned his eyes to the dried-up figure of the teacher. The teacher's cold, yellow face irritates Volodya. Volodya looks for his shadow and finds it on the wall, behind the teacher's chair. The deformed shadow bends and sways, but it does not have the yellow face and caustic grin, and Volodya enjoys watching it. His thoughts run off somewhere far away, and he no longer hears anything.

"Lovlev!" his teacher calls him.

Volodya rises as usual and stands, looking stupidly at the teacher. He has such a vacant look that his comrades laugh, but the teacher makes a reproachful face.

Then Volodya hears the teacher jeering at him in his polite and malicious way. Volodya is shaking from mortification and from weakness. The teacher announces that he is giving him an "F" for his ignorance and inattention; and he invites him to sit down.

Volodya smiles stupidly and tries to imagine just what has happened to him.

## XVIII

This "F" is the first in Volodya's life!

How strange this was for Volodya!

"Lovlev!" his comrades tease him, laughing and jostling about, "got a big 'F.' Congratulations!"

Volodya feels awkward. He does not know how to behave in these circumstances.

"So I got an 'F'," he says angrily, "what business is it of yours!"

"Lovlev!" the lazy Snegirev yells to him, "Our forces have increased!"

His first "F"! And he had to show it to his mother.

It was embarrassing and demeaning. Volodya felt a strange heaviness and awkwardness in the knapsack on his back: the "F" was stuck most uncomfortably in his consciousness and was connected in no way with anything else in his mind.

An "F"!

He could not get used to the idea of an "F," and yet he could not think of anything else. When the policeman near the school looked at him severely as he usually did, Volodya, for some reason, thought:

"But if only you knew that I got an 'F'!"

It was totally awkward and unusual—Volodya did not know how he should hold his head or where to put his hands—there was an awkwardness throughout his whole body.

And still, he had to put on a carefree look for his friends and talk about something else.

His friends! Volodya was convinced that they were all terribly happy about his "F."

## XIX

His mother looked at the "F" and turned her uncomprehending eyes on Volodya, glanced once more at the mark and quietly exclaimed:

"Volodya!"

Volodya was standing before her, crushed. He was looking at the folds of his mother's dress, at his mother's pale hands and he felt her frightened glances on his trembling eyelids.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Well what of it, mama?" Volodya began to speak suddenly, "After all, this is my first 'F'!"

"Your first!"

"But it could happen to anyone. And really, it was an accident."

"Oh, Volodya, Volodya!"

Volodya began to cry, rubbing the tears across his cheeks with the palm of his hand like a child.

"Mommy, don't be angry," he whispered.

"There, it's those shadows of yours!" his mother said.

Volodya detected tears in her voice. It wrung his heart. He glanced at his mother. She was crying. He threw himself to her.

"Mama, mama," he repeated, kissing her hands, "I'll give up those shadows. Really I will."

## XX

Volodya made an enormous effort of will and did not get involved with the shadows, no matter how drawn he was to them. He tried to make up for what he had skipped from his lessons.

But the shadows appeared persistently before him. Though he

did not summon them by manipulating his fingers, or pile up objects so that their shadows would appear on the wall, still the troublesome, relentless shadows clustered themselves about him.

Soon objects were no longer entertaining for Volodya, he almost ceased to see them—his whole attention was directed to their shadows.

When he was walking home, and the sun happened to peep through the autumn clouds as if through a smoke-colored icon frame—he was glad, because there were shadows running about everywhere.

The shadows from the lamp gathered around him when he was at home in the evening.

The shadows are everywhere around—sharp shadows from flames, dim ones from the waning light of day—they all crowded toward Volodya, crisscrossing and enveloping him in an indissoluble net.

Some of the shadows were incomprehensible, mysterious; others hinted at, reminded him of something—out there were also the beloved shadows, intimate and familiar—it was these that Volodya himself, however casually, sought out and detected everywhere in the confused flashing of the alien shadows.

But these beloved and familiar shadows were sad.

Whenever Volodya noticed that he was seeking out these shadows, his conscience bothered him and he went to confess to his mother.

Once it happened that Volodya did not overcome this temptation, and he moved close to the wall and began to make a shadow of a calf. His mother caught him.

"Again!" she exclaimed angrily. "I'm going to ask the director to give you a seat in the punishment room after all."

Volodya blushed from vexation and answered morosely,

"There's a wall there, too. Walls are everywhere."

"Volodya!" his mother exclaimed mournfully, "what are you saying!"

But Volodya already repented his rudeness and was crying. "Mama, I don't know myself what's happening to me."

## XXI

But still his mother is unable to overcome her superstitious fear of shadows. She begins more often to think that, like Volodya, she too will become lost in the contemplation of shadows, but she tries to comfort herself.

"What stupid thoughts!" she tells herself. "God grant that everything will turn out fine; he will misbehave, but then he will stop."

But a secret terror grips her heart and her thoughts, frightened in the face of life, persistently rush off to meet future sorrows.

In the melancholy moments of early morning she examines her soul, recalls her life—and sees its emptiness, uselessness, aimlessness. There is nothing but the senseless flashing of shadows, merging in the thickening twilight.

"Why have I lived?" she asks herself, "For my son? But for what? That he, too, should become the prey to shadows, a maniac with a narrow horizon—chained to his illusions, to senseless reflections on a lifeless wall?"

"And he, too, will enter into life and give his life to a series of existences as illusory and unnecessary as a dream."

She sits down in an armchair by the window and thinks and thinks.

Her thoughts are bitter, drawn-out.

She begins, in her grief, to wring her beautiful, white hands.

Her thoughts are scattered. She looks at her contorted hands and begins to imagine what kind of shadow figures she could make out of them. She catches herself and jumps up in fright.

"My God!" she exclaims, "Why, this is—madness!"

## XXII

At dinner, she watches Volodya.

"He has grown pale and thin since he came upon that unfor-

tunate booklet. He has changed completely—in character, in everything."

"They say that one's character changes before death. What if he were to die?"

"No, no, God forbid!"

The spoon began to tremble in her hand. She raised her fear-filled eyes to the icon.

"Volodya, why didn't you finish your soup?" she asks in a frightened voice.

"I don't want it, mama."

"Volodya, don't be difficult, my dear; it's bad for you not to eat your soup."

Volodya smiles lazily and slowly finishes his soup. His mother has poured the bowl too full. He leans back in his chair and wants to say, from annoyance, that the soup did not taste good. But his mother has such a worried look that Volodya cannot mention it, and he smiles faintly.

"I'm full now," he says.

"But Volodya, I have all your favorites today."

Volodya sighs sadly: he knows that when his mother speaks about his favorite dishes, it means she will stuff him. He also guesses that just like yesterday, his mother will force him to eat some meat after tea.

## XXIII

In the evening Volodya's mother says to him:

"Volodya dear, you will be carried away again; perhaps you had better not close the door!"

"I just can't work this way," he shouts, pushing back his chair noisily. "I can't study when the door is open."

"Volodya, why are you shouting?" his mother reproaches him tenderly.

Volodya is already repentant and he is crying. His mother caresses him and tries to persuade him.

"But Volodya dearest, I look after you in order to help you cope with your distractions."

"Mama, sit here a while," begs Volodya.

His mother takes a book and sits by Volodya's table. Volodya works calmly for a few minutes. But little by little, his mother's figure begins to irritate him.

"It's as if she were watching over a sick person," he thinks maliciously.

His thoughts are interrupted; he moves forward with vexation and bites his lips. Finally his mother notices this and leaves the room.

But Volodya feels no relief. He is tormented by regret at having shown his impatience. He tries to study—but he cannot. Finally, he goes to his mother.

"Mama, why did you leave?" he asks timidly.

#### XXIV

It is the eve of a holiday. The little lamps are burning in front of the icons.

It is late and quiet. Volodya's mother is not asleep. In the mysterious darkness of her bedroom, she gets down on her knees and prays and cries, sobbing like a child.

Her braids fall on her white dress, her shoulders are shaking. With an imploring movement, she raises her hands to her breast and with tear-filled eyes, looks at the icon. The little lamp moves imperceptibly on its chains from her ardent breathing. Shadows flit, crowding into the corners, stirring behind the icon case, and they murmur mysteriously. There is a hopeless yearning in their murmurings, an inexplicable melancholy in their slowly wavering movements.

She stands up, pale, with wide, strange eyes, and she sways on her unsteady legs.

She goes in quietly to Volodya. The shadows cluster around her, rustling softly behind her back, crawling around her feet;

light as a spiderweb they fall onto her shoulders and, looking into her wide eyes, they murmur something incomprehensible.

She approaches her son's bed cautiously. His face is pale in the light of the icon-lamp. Sharp, strange shadows lie on him. His breathing is inaudible—he sleeps so quietly that his mother is terrified.

She stands, surrounded by vague shadows, fanned by vague fears.

#### XXV

The high vaults of the church are dark and mysterious. The vespers rise up to these vaults and resound there with exultant sadness. The dark icons, illuminated by the yellow flames of wax candles, appear enigmatic and stern. The warm breathing of wax and incense fills the air with a majestic sorrow.

Eugenia Stepanovna placed a candle in front of the icon of the Holy Virgin and got down on her knees. But her prayer is distraught. She looks at her candle. Its flame surges. The shadows from the candles fall on Eugenia Stepanovna's black dress and onto the floor and waver adversely.

The shadows hover about the walls of the church and become lost up in those dark vaults where the solemn, sorrowful songs resound.

#### XXVI

It is another night.

Volodya awakened. The darkness has surrounded him and it moves without a sound.

Volodya has freed and raised his hands and begins to move them, fixing his eyes on them. He does not see them in the darkness, but it seems to him that dark shapes are moving before his eyes . . .

They are black, mysterious, and they bear in them sorrow and the murmuring of lonely grief . . .

His mother also does not sleep—anguish torments her.

She lights a candle and walks quietly to her son's room, to see how he is sleeping.

She opened the door soundlessly and looked timidly at Volodya's bed.

A ray of yellow light trembled on the wall, cutting across Volodya's red blanket. The boy reaches his hands towards the light, and with a beating heart, watches the shadows. He does not even question where the light comes from.

He is completely immersed in the shadows. His eyes, riveted to the wall, are completely mad.

The strip of light grows wider; the shadows are running, morose and hunched, like homeless women wanderers hurrying to carry off someplace their decrepit belongings which burden their shoulders.

Volodya's mother, shaking from terror, approached his bed, and softly called to her son:

"Volodya!"

Volodya came to himself. For half a minute he looked at his mother with wide eyes, then began to tremble all over, he jumped out of bed and fell at his mother's feet, embracing her knees and sobbing.

"What dreams you do dream, Volodya!" his mother exclaimed sorrowfully.

#### XXVII

"Volodya," his mother said at morning tea, "you can't go on this way, my dear. You will be completely exhausted if you make shadows during the night, too!"

The pale boy hung his head morosely. His lips twitched nervously.

"You know what we will do?" his mother continued. "Perhaps we had better play a little while together with the shadows each evening and then sit down to homework. Shall we?"

Volodya grew a bit more lively.

"Mama, you are a dear!" he said shyly.

#### XXVIII

On the street Volodya felt sleepy and fearful. The fog was spreading; it was cold, dismal. The silhouettes of houses looked strange in the fog. The gloomy human figures moved in the foggy mist like ominous, unfriendly shadows. Everything seemed immensely unusual. The coachman's horse, dozing at the intersection, appeared in the fog like an enormous, unknown beast.

The policeman gave Volodya a hostile look. A crow on a low roof presaged sorrow to Volodya. But sorrow was already in his heart—he felt sad to see how everything was hostile to him.

A little dog with mangy fur began to yap at him from a gateway, and Volodya felt strangely offended.

And it seemed that the little street urchins wanted to insult and make fun of Volodya. In the past, he would have boldly made short work of them, but now fear gripped his breast and left his hands powerless.

When Volodya returned home, Praskovya opened the door for him and greeted him with a sullen, hostile look. It made Volodya uncomfortable. He went inside quickly and did not raise his eyes to Praskovya's cheerless face.

#### XXIX

His mother was sitting alone in her room. It was twilight—and it was boring.

Somewhere a light flashed.

Volodya ran in, animated, happy, with wide, somewhat wild eyes.

"Mama, the lamp is burning; let's play a little."

She smiles, and follows Volodya.

"Mama, I've thought up a new figure," Volodya says excitedly, positioning the lamp. "Watch . . . there, you see? This is the

steppe, covered with snow, and it is snowing—a real snowstorm.”

Volodya raises his hands and arranges them.

“Now, there—you see? It’s an old man, a wanderer, up to his knees in snow. It’s difficult to walk. He is alone. Just the open field. The village is far away. He is tired, cold, frightened. He is completely bent over—he’s such an old man.”

His mother rearranges Volodya’s fingers.

“Oh, oh!” Volodya exclaims excitedly. “The wind tears his hat off, blows his hair about, buries him in the snow. The snowdrifts get higher and higher. Mama, mamã, do you hear?”

“It’s a blizzard.”

“And he?”

“The old man?”

“Do you hear, he’s moaning?”

“Help me!”

Both are pale, they are looking at the wall. Volodya’s hands shake—the old man falls.

His mother was the first to come to herself.

“It’s time to get down to business,” she says.

### XXX

It is morning. Volodya’s mother is home alone. Immersed in incoherent, melancholy thoughts, she is walking from room to room.

Her shadow was outlined on the white door, dimly in the scattered rays of the fog-bound sun. She stopped by the door and raised her hand in a wide, strange movement. The shadow on the door wavered and began to whisper about something familiar and sad. A strange feeling of comfort spread through Eugenia Stepanovna’s soul and she moved both hands, standing in front of the door, smiling a wild smile as she followed the flashing shadows.

Praskovya’s steps sounded, and Eugenia Stepanovna realized she was doing something absurd.

Once more she feels terrified and melancholy.

“We must move,” she thinks. “Go anywhere far away, where everything will be new.”

“We must run away from here, run!”

And suddenly she remembers Volodya’s words:

“There will be a wall there, too. There are walls everywhere.”

“There is no place to run!”

In her despair she wrings her pale, beautiful hands.

### XXXI

It is evening.

The lighted lamp stands on the floor in Volodya’s room. Volodya and his mother are sitting on the floor behind it, near the wall. They are looking at the wall and making strange movements with their hands.

The shadows are running and surging along the wall.

Volodya and his mother understand them. They smile sadly and say agonizing and impossible things to one another. Their faces are peaceful and their visions are clear; their joy is hopelessly sorrowful and their sorrow is wildly joyful.

Madness shines in their eyes, blessed madness.

Night is falling over them.