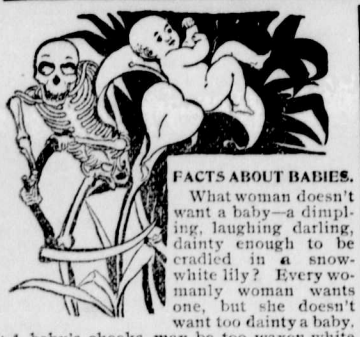

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NARKA, THE NIHILIST.

By KATHLEEN O'MEARA.

CHAPTER XX.—CONTINUED.

"He is a surgeon, I suppose," said Narka. "He does it in the interest of science."

"Nonsense! How can you talk like that, Narka? It is pure wickedness, and he is a bad, cruel man."

"I don't want to defend vivisection; I loath it," said Narka; "but it is necessary for science."

"Then science is wicked, and of the devil, and ought to be done away with. It is getting to be the curse of the world."

"What a little mediæval bigot you are!" laughed Narka.

"Am I? Well, I don't care. It makes my heart burn when I think of our poor gentle old Tempete, and I hate your cruel science that tortures our dumb fellow-servants. I think a person who invents a good poultice to relieve a poor aching body of man or beast is a greater benefactor than the man who invents how to blow up ships, or find out secrets by torturing live dogs."

"Then you care more about dogs than about human beings?"

"I care more for any dog than for that man Schenk."

They were close by the house now. A carter came round the corner, showering blows on a powerful horse that was straining and panting under a load of stones.

"Oh, why do you beat him like that?" Marguerite cried, piteously. "Poor beast, he is doing his best. If you drive him so hard he will drop."

"He's got to drop some day, like the rest of us," retorted the man, not ill-humoredly. Mais tranquillisez-vous, ma sœur, he hasn't got a soul to save."

"How do you know whether he has or not?" Marguerite said, and she laid her rough little gloveless hand on the quivering flank of the animal. The meek, strong creature turned his head toward her, and a glance from his drooping eyes seemed to thank her. She watched the man out of sight to make sure he did not begin the blows again.

"I sometimes think those dray-horses may be angels in disguise," she said; "they have such a patient look in their faces."

As they entered the house the children were being let loose from class into the play-ground. The rain had ceased, and the paved court was dry.

"I am just in time!" said Marguerite. "I am on guard during the play hour. You won't mind staying out-of-doors? We can sit down. I will just fetch my knitting." She ran into the house, and returned in a moment. Her appearance was the signal for a general assault from the children. There must have been nearly three hundred of them, Narka reckoned at a glance, and they all shouted and gathered round Marguerite, full of discourse of the greatest importance. They caught her by the sleeve, they clutched at her gown, they elbowed and fought to get close enough to attract her attention. Marguerite bore the onset quiet unfluttered, and in some mysterious way satisfied the whole flock in a minute and a half, and sent them off to their play.

The two friends sat down in a sheltered spot, but they were hardly seated when a scream from the other end of the court sent Marguerite flying off again. A small child had been knocked down by a companion twice its size, and was proclaiming in lusty yells that it was badly hurt. Marguerite picked up the toddler, and kissed it and made it well, and then with a sharp rebuke sent the delinquent to stand with her face to the wall.

"Now let us have a quiet talk," she said, coming back to Narka.

"There is not much chance of quiet with all these orphans to keep in order," said Narka, disappointed, and a little chilled.

"They are not all orphans," corrected Marguerite, as if the point must be of interest to Narka. "There are not more than thirty of them orphans, unfortunately. I mean the parents are so troublesome it is a pity they are not. They drink, and they neglect the poor little things, and maltreat them, and sometimes half kill them. I often think what a mercy it would be if the children of the poor could be born orphans."

"What a pity the parents don't kill them right off! Then the poor little wretches would go to heaven, instead of living to grow up and die and go to hell like their parents," said Narka.

"Oh, what a dreadful thing to say! Their parents generally die much better than they live. They have suffered so much, poor things, that God waits for them at the end."

"Oh, does He? I have often noticed how peacefully the peasants die with us."

"The poor die peacefully everywhere. They have found it so hard to live, you see, that it comes easy to them to die, even when they die as criminals. Death is always a release to them. I am very anxious just now about a poor man.—Mathilde, didn't you promise Sœur Lucie you wouldn't scratch your eye if she took the bandage off? If I see you scratching it again, I'll have it put on this minute.—His name is Antoine Drex. Such a sober, hard-working fellow, and so good to his mother! but he married a dreadful woman who drank, and then he took to drink. One night he came home and found her dead-drunk on the floor. He went to bed, and in the morning there she lay in the same place dead, with a great cut in her temple. He was taken up for murder. They said he gave her the blow in her head. They have kept him in prison ten months without trying him. I'm afraid they will neither acquit him nor condemn him to death, but let him off with hard labor."

"You would rather he was guillotined?"

"Why, of course. He'll have to die somehow, and he'll never have so good an opportunity of dying well. He is quite penitent for his sins, and ready to accept death, but the idea of perhaps twenty or thirty years' imprisonment with the lowest class of criminals drives him to despair."

"But the disgrace of a public execution."

"Bah! When it comes to dying, that matters very little. Public opinion only matters to the living. What consequence is it the sort of death one dies in the sight of men? It is the death one dies in the sight of God that counts. For my part, I can't think of any better way of going through the ceremony of death — except martyrdom on the battle-field — than being guillotined. You have a nice quiet time to prepare, plenty of spiritual helps, and you go out to die with your energies of mind and body unimpaired. It would be delightful."

"Your family would not be of the same opinion," Narka remarked, in the same bitter, sarcastic tone she had already used.

"That is, because they are worldly; they judge things by the standard of the world. Our Sisters tell me the criminals they attend in prison invariably die happy deaths. I suppose it is because our Saviour died on a gibbet that there are such wonderful graces for those who die that sort of death."

She was knitting away diligently, her eye everywhere over the noisy population around her. Suddenly she darted away to separate two children who were quarrelling.

Narka could stand this no longer. It had been possible for a moment at first to keep her own trouble waiting; this grimpse into Marguerite's strange life was curious and exciting; but to sit on listening to talk about paupers and orphans, and waiting in vain for a chance of speaking about what her heart was full of, this was intolerable. What a fool she had been to fancy that Marguerite had kept her human heart under that pious costume! It was clear that her vocation for ministering to paupers and orphans had left no room in her sympathies for any troubles beyond rheumatism and starvation.

"Do you ever get to care for any of those dirty brats?" she asked contemptuously, when Marguerite, panting and triumphant, came back to her.

"For any of them?" Marguerite repeated, in innocent surprise. "I care for them all. I love every one of them."

"What a capacious heart you must have!"

"Oh, not half capacious enough!" Marguerite sighed, quite unconscious of the covert sneer. "I wish it were ten times bigger. If only I could empty it of self, then God would come and fill it, and make room for everybody!"

"Oh, Marguerite!" Narka burst out, with sudden vehemence, "why can't you find a corner in it for me? I do so want a crumb of sympathy!"

Marguerite looked up quickly, and in a moment her whole heart was in her eyes. She dropped her knitting, and put her hand on Narka's arm.

"You are in trouble? Oh, dear Narka, why did you not tell me that at once? What is the matter? What has happened?"

"I am in terrible trouble, Marguerite," Narka said, and pride and self-control broke down, and her voice shook, and her eyes filled, and the tears overflowed.

Marguerite hesitated for a moment; then quilting her needles, she looked up at a window on the first story, and called out, "Sœur Claire!" There was no answer. "She is not there. Never mind. Come indoors."

"But the children?" said Narka, fearful of getting her into trouble.

"Let their angels look after them. What else have they got to do?" said Marguerite, gallantly reckless; "but I can keep an eye on them from the parlor."

They went into the parlor, whose window commanded a view of the play-ground. It was a square room with white walls, and a polished oak floor, straw chairs, and a round table; a white Christ on a black cross hung over the fireplace. Marguerite stirred up the shabby makeshift of a fire, and drew two chairs close to it, her own facing the window. "Sit down and warm yourself, dear, and tell me what is the matter," she said, as if Narka's trouble were suddenly her one interest in life. And Narka poured out her story, Marguerite listening as if she had no longer an care on earth but to share her sorrow and comfort it. Never before had Narka realized what a healing balm there is in human sympathy, and Marguerite's sympathy was strong as fire and sweet as a child's kiss.

With extraordinary quickness she grasped the whole case, her shrewd practical sense noted every detail, measured difficulties and chances. The situation was bad enough, but by no means hopeless. She said so, supporting her opinion by sensible arguments that carried judgment with them, if not conviction. Presently, by the strength of her sympathy and her buoyant nature, she had lifted Narka from the depths of despair and compelled her to take a more hopeful view of everything. Basil's love had already proved itself equal to the pressure of antagonistic circumstances; it had stood the test of absence; it was not likely to break down before the opposition of his father; he was full of resources and of energy; and they were both so young: in fact, there were many anchors of hope to cling to.

"But Sibyl!" Narka exclaimed; "oh, Sibyl!—the thought of her breaks my heart."

"Dear Narka, you are suffering as much from the destruction of an idol (which is always a good thing for us, darling, however painful) as from the blow that she has dealt you. Half of our misery in life comes from this setting up of idols; for the idol is certain to fall down some day with a crash, and we get crushed under it."

"But I thought I knew Sibyl as I know my own heart. I never could have believed it."

"There is nearly always something in our fellow-creatures' hearts—and even in our own—that we never know, or could have believed, until some test unexpectedly reveals it to us."

"I suppose so, and that is the cruelest part of adversity; it is always applying that test to our fellow-creatures, and compelling us to try them. If only we might go on to the end trusting and believing in those we love without ever having to test them!"

"But it is sometimes good for us to be tested," said Marguerite.

Narka did not answer. Presently she said, "Do you think if Sibyl knew the truth she would hate and curse me as bitterly as she does now without knowing it?"

"It is very hard to say what Sibyl would do, she is so many characters all in one; yet when I remember the agonies of grief she certainly did suffer when you were imprisoned, and how tenderly fond she was of you at Yrakow—I can see her now when we were coming away, clinging to you as if she could never unclasp her arms and let you go."

"Ah, yes; that was just what deceived me. She took me to her arms, but she never took me to her heart; I can see that now. She has been feeding me on false sacraments of love all my life. And to think that I must be dependent on her for the means of earning my bread! Oh, if it were not for Basil, I would rather starve a hundred times!"

"You need not torment yourself about that just yet," said Marguerite; "I may be able to help you; I know a great number of people. I will speak to several friends of mine, and we will find you some lessons. Try and don't fret over that trouble; and you must stay at home and take care of yourself for a few days, or else you will certainly fall ill. I will come and see you with Sibyl in a day or two, and—"

"Sibyl!" Narka broke in. "She can't come to me. The baby is ill with small-pox."

"Nonsense! It is nothing but chicken-pox. I saw the child this morning. I forgot to tell you. I went there before I went to the Rue du Bac. Sibyl sent yesterday, imploring me to come at once; she was in an agony of grief, and wanted my sympathy. But I have something else to do besides flying across the town with my sympathy, and as nobody was dead, I suspected it was some imaginary grief, as in fact it proved. But this morning came a message saying the baby was dying, so I went. It was nothing at all. The doctor had just been, and laughed at it. Sibyl was lying down, and could not be disturbed, and Gaston had gone out riding."

"Gaston is very good to me," Narka said.

"He has a great regard and admiration for you, and he would do anything in his power to serve you."

"I believe that," said Narka, tightening her grasp of his sister's hand.

Marguerite noticed that the hand which had been shivering with cold a little while ago was now burning hot.

"I wonder whether you would do something to please me?" she said, in a caressing tone.

"Of course I would. What is it?" Narka answered.

"Well, go home and get into bed, and I will give you something to take that will prevent your having a bad cold." She ran off to the dispensary, and was back in a trice with a small bottle and a mustard plaster. "If your chest feels sore to-night, you must promise me to put this on," she said; "and I am going to send you home in a cab. Nonsense! I have plenty of money, and I can't afford to lose my sister Narka, or to let her lose her voice. Just think what that would be!"

Narka dropped her head on Marguerite's shoulder and burst into tears; but it was not a bitter flood, and it loosened the pressure on her brain. Truly God had entered into Marguerite's heart, and made it a Bethlehem, a house of bread, where the hungry might come and feed upon that bread of love for want of which so many human lives are perishing.

CHAPTER XXI.

The first thing Narka did on returning home was to give notice to the concierge that she meant to leave that day week. Then, obedient to Marguerite wishes, she went to bed. The warmth and rest, or, as Narka preferred to believe, the virtue of Marguerite's cherishing sympathy, which had passed into her remedies, had the effect of staving off the illness which had seemed to threaten her. She rose feeling little the worse physically for the violent emotions and sleepless nights she had gone through, and the chill of yesterday.

In the afternoon the concierge brought up a letter from the landlord in answer to the conge. It was a polite but distinct refusal to accept it. He regretted to remind his amiable tenant that she had signed an engagement to occupy, or pay for, the apartment up to the 15th of April. Narka uttered an exclamation of dismay; but referring to the paper in question, she found that this was true; she was bound to her present expensive quarters for nearly three months longer. There was nothing to be done but trust to Providence to bring her safe out of this new difficulty, as out of so many others.

In its outward tenor her life remained, therefore undisturbed, notwithstanding the violent change that had shaken it inwardly. Marguerite's plans, practical like herself, succeeded. Through a kind and wealthy South American lady, who was a benefactress to her poor, she procured at once several rich pupils for Narka, all foreigners, who came to her house twice a week for lessons and a general singing class.

Sibyl, who was full of zeal and confident of at once gathering a crowd of pupils, was not so successful. The French mothers to whom she applied, and who had seen Narka at that brilliant soiree, generally answered: "She is too beautiful. It might be a risk for my son — for my brother."

"How stupid they are!" Sibyl said. She was vexed at failing, and this made her angry with Narka, of whom she complained to Marguerite. "I warned her what difficulties she would have to encounter, but she would not listen to me. She decided on coming, without consulting me, and then she came against my advice."

To Narka, Sibyl was affectionate as ever. She took a lively interest in the singing class, and would come and sit and listen to the lesson, and bring out the superiority of the teacher's method by her clever criticisms, thus raising Narka's value in the eyes of the pupils and of their mothers, to whom the charming and elegante Comtesse de Beaucrillon was an oracle on art as well as fashion. The singing lessons came in this way to be a pleasant social opportunity. Narka, moreover, might have led a gay life enough if she had been so inclined, for invitations poured in on her; but she refused them all. "I know my value," she said to Marguerite; "these fine ladies would be glad enough to have me to help out their entertainments, but if their sons or their brothers were the least bit civil to me, they would put me to the door. I shan't expose myself to that. Let them stay in their place, and I will stay in mine."

"Without going to soirees," Marguerite urged, "you might go and see people a little; it cannot be good for you to be always alone, brooding and moping."

"These people would do me no good," said Narka. "No solitude is so irksome to me as uncongenial company, and they are all uncongenial. They don't care a straw about me; I am simply invited to make myself useful and agreeable. They expect me to put on my best clothes and my best smiles, and exert myself for their amusement, and then be grateful to them, because they are rich and I am poor. I am making great progress in the study of human nature. I have discovered that when people are poor they are expected to have every perfection under the sun: to be perfect in manners, in principles, and in temper; never to make a mistake, to be always in good spirits, and to be useful and amusing into the bargain. If they fulfill these conditions, the world may kindly overlook their poverty, and invite them to come and cheer up its dulness."

"I won't have you turning cynic," protested Marguerite. "You must not let the trials of life embitter you, Narka."

"You won't mind if they disenchant me?" replied Narka.

But indeed sorrow had early disenchanted her with the world, and weaned her from its vanities before the time had come for tasting them. She was in no danger now of succumbing to such temptations as came in her path. Her heart was shielded from them by suffering, and by a love that absorbed her to the exclusion of all petty personal cares. She had not had a sign from Basil since that terrible letter from the prince, and there was no one to whom she could even mention his name except Marguerite. Sibyl, as if the subject were too intolerable, avoided it. When she did speak of it, it was to pity her father and herself, and to contemn Basil, and wish the woman dead who had entrapped him.

The only person who might have given her any news of Basil was Ivan Gorff; but he had left Paris as soon as he had conducted her there, and had never written since, and she did not know his address. There was of late something very mysterious about Ivan. Narka knew that he associated with the most advanced revolutionists, yet he came and went perfectly free, while Basil, for merely conniving at the movement which Ivan was, she suspected, actively precipitating, had been seriously compromised, only escaping imprisonment through a lucky chance. Then Ivan was leading a strange life for a man of thirty, in possession of a fortune, which, since Sophie's death, must be reckoned by millions. His personal appearance suggested biting economy, offensive slovenliness, or sordid avarice, whereas in former days he had been somewhat dandified in his dress, and generous as a king. On the journey from Koenigsberg he had put up at a miserable inn at Berlin, apologizing to Narka for taking her there, but pleading as a reason that the people were honest, and that he was in the habit of staying there. What motive could induce a man of his wealth to deprive himself not alone of luxuries, but of the comforts that he had all his life been accustomed to?

One afternoon, on coming home from a lesson, Narka, who had been thinking a great deal about Ivan, and wishing to hear from him, found that in her absence he had called and left word that he would call again next morning. It was a bitter disappointment to have missed him; he was sure to have news of Basil; he had probably seen him. She was too excited to sleep, and counted the hours till morning. But morning came, and Ivan did not appear. He had left no address, so she could not write to him. The singing class was at 1 o'clock, and Narka's terror was that he would call while it was going on, and that she should miss him again. But the singing class came to an end, and there was still no sign of him. Immediately after the lesson Sibyl came to take her for a drive. There was no ostensible reason for refusing, so Narka had to go. It was the longest drive she ever took, and Sibyl noticed that she was strangely preoccupied. On returning home she found a note from Ivan saying he had been hindered from coming by an accident, but he hoped to see her in a few days. Narka was too impatient to wait for his visit. The note contained his address, so early the next morning she set out to see him. The Rue B——, where he was staying, was a narrow sort of laneway behind the Pantheon; the house a shabby-looking maison meublee.

"Yes, monsieur is at home," the concierge said, giving her the number of the room on the fifth story.

Narka did not stop to think of the proprieties. She mounted the dark stairs, steep and narrow as a ladder, and knocked at Number 96.

"Come in," said a voice.

She opened the door. It was a small attic room, full of tobacco smoke, with the roof slanting on one side, no fire, no carpet. Ivan was sitting in a high-backed arm-chair, buttoned to his chin in a huge furred coat, a pipe in his mouth, his head swathed to an enormous size in a woollen scarf. He looked like some grotesque caricature of a man.

"Narka Larik!" he said, removing his pipe, and his blue eyes widened and sparkled with that inarticulate laughter which gave to his countenance its peculiar expression of childlike candor and merriment.

"I thought something must have happened, as you did not keep your appointment," Narka replied. "You have met with an accident?"

"No; only a savage fit of pain that seized me like a tiger. It knocked me over in an hour. I was half mad. But it is gone now. Schenk pricked me with morphine, and killed the pain."

"Schenk?" said Narka, interrogatively.

"He is a doctor, a very clever fellow, and a friend of mine. Sit down, won't you?" He pushed toward her the arm-chair he had been occupying, the only one in the room.

What could have reduced Ivan Gorff to these extremities?

"When did you arrive in Paris?" Narka asked.

"The day before yesterday. I have come straight from St. Petersburg without drawing bridle; I took cold on the journey. It was like travelling through Siberia."

Narka bethought herself that if he had travelled first-class he would not have had to complain of the cold.

"You saw Basil?" she said.

"Yes. He is well, but as savage as a bear. He and the Prince quarrel all day. Basil has got himself into a fine dilemma. He ought to have kept his affairs to himself, at least for a while longer."

"It was not he who told the Prince of our engagement. Some one whom he had trusted with the secret betrayed him."

"He ought not to have trusted anybody with it. He ought never to have put a line on paper about it. I warned him many a time to be cautious, that the police had their eyes and ears everywhere; but it was no use. What did you do with those papers of his?"

"I have them safe with me."

"That is foolish. You ought to burn them. They may get you into trouble again."

"How so? What do the police know about me here?"

Ivan's round eyes widened and twinkled until it seemed as if they were going to explode with laughter.

"You fancy the police don't know just as much about you here as if you were in St. Petersburg? You are very naive, Narka Larik."

"Am I? Well, you have something more interesting to say than that, have you not? Tell me about the Prince and Basil. The Prince wrote to Sibyl that if Basil did not surrender within three months he would have him sent to Kronstadt, and consigned to the town until he came to his senses. Do you think he is capable of carrying out that threat?"

"He will try all soft means before he has recourse to the hard. He is trying to bribe Basil now with the promise of getting Father Christopher liberated and brought back to bless his marriage with Princess Krinsky."

"Basil is not such a fool as to fall into that trap." Narka laughed.

"Humph!" Ivan moved his huge bundle of a head slowly up and down. "The Prince is convinced that if he went to the Emperor and told him the whole story, he would grant Father Christopher's release at once. Marie Krinsky is in love with Basil, and Prince Krinsky is in high favor. The Empress, too, is greatly annoyed at Basil's refusing to marry her pet maid of honor. Basil knows all this, and then the thought of Father Christopher's captivity haunts him perpetually."

Narka grew pale. "The Emperor does not know about Basil's supposed share in Larchoff's death?" she asked.

"No; but Basil thinks he does. He never heard, of course, of that tampering with his letters."

"Does the Prince know who it is that Basil wants to marry?"

"He did not tell me if he did."

"Basil would have told you?"

"Very likely, if he had a chance; but we were hardly five minutes alone. He wanted me to come next day and have a quiet talk; but I was bound for time. I had to leave the next morning."

What could this business be that drove Ivan from city to city, compelling him to renounce the pleasure of a meeting with his best friend? Narka felt that she must know at all costs.

"Why cannot you trust me as Basil does," she said, looking him straight in the eyes.

Ivan met her challenging glance with a beam of satisfaction. "To trust our friends is sometimes the unkindest thing we can do. Basil proved that to you. But now that you are comparatively out of harm's way, I will tell you anything you care to know. I have thrown in my lot with those who want to do away with tyrants and set the nations free. This involves ways and means which those who don't want to risk their heads had better know nothing about. I don't care about risking mine. If it had gone while that tigerish pain was clawing it yesterday I should have been glad enough. But, on the other hand, it would upset a lot of things if I were to drop off now. I am the telegraph between all the centres. There is not a plot hatched anywhere but I am the first to hear of it. I carry messages that can't be written; I organize meetings; I get the pamphlets published; I work the occult machinery of the Socialist press, and direct its underground operations. All this gives me plenty to do. It is not the work that brings pay and glory, like the work of the hero in livery who serves a tyrant, and calls it serving his country; but it is a hero's work all the same. The man who undertakes it must renounce everything and risk everything, and live every day with death dogging him like his shadow."

Narka looked at Ivan with a new interest: no man ever presented a more unheroic appearance than he did with his ungainly figure and his huge beturbaned head. Nevertheless she began to recognize in him a hero of some grand though perhaps dangerous type. "And is Basil involved in this work?" she inquired.

"Yes; he has thrown himself into it body and soul."

"Ah!"

They were silent for a moment. Then Ivan said: "Why should not you join us, Narka Larik? You might help greatly, and without the same risk, here in France."

"Show me how. Show me anything this head or these hands can do, and I will do it," she answered, impulsively.

Ivan held out his hand to her, and she laid hers in the broad palm that closed on it with a strong clasp. As they sat thus, hand in hand, the door opened, and a man came quickly in.

Narka recognized Dr. Schenk, and colored violently.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" Ivan said, slowly releasihg her hand. "This is my good friend Dr. Schenk, Mademoisella Narka Larik, one of ours."

Narka bowed and stood up.

"Pray don't let me send you away, mademoiselle. I won't detain Gorff a minute," said Schenk.

"I was just going," Narka replied, her embarrassment relieved by his perfect ease and respectful manner. "I hope there is nothing serious the matter with M. Gorff?"

"It is serious—a case of suicidal mania," observed the medical man. "If he exercised common humanity to himself he

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Holland Landing, Ont.