Laughter

By Charles Caldwell Dobie

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As Suvaroff neared his lodgings, he began to wonder whether the Italian who had the room next him would continue to grind out tunes all night upon his accordion. The thought made Suvaroff shudder. What in Heaven's name possessed people to grind out tunes, Suvaroff found himself inquiring, unless one earned one's living that way? Certainly this weather-beaten Italian was no musician; he smelled too strongly of fish for any one to mistake his occupation. He tortured melody from choice, blandly, for the pure enjoyment of the thing. With Suvaroff it was different; if he did not play, he did not eat.

Suvaroff's head had ached all day. The café where he scraped his violin from early afternoon until midnight had never seemed so stuffy, so tawdry, so impossible! All day he had sat and played and played, while people ate and chattered and danced. No, that did not describe what people did; they gorged and shrieked and gyrated like decapitated fowls, accomplishing everything with a furious energy, primitive, abandoned, disgusting. He wondered if he would ever again see people eat quietly and simply, like normal human beings.

If only the Italian would go away, or decide to sleep, or die! Yes, Suvaroff would have been glad to have found his neighbor quite dead--anything to still that terrible accordion, which had been pumping out tunes for over a week at all hours of the day and night! The music did not have the virtue of an attempt at gaiety; instead it droned out prolonged wails, melancholy and indescribably discordant.

The night was damp, a typical San Francisco midsummer night. A drizzling fog had swept in from the ocean and fell refreshingly on the gray city. But the keenness of the air irritated Suvaroff's headache instead of soothing it; he felt the wind upon his temples as one feels the cool cut of a knife. In short, everything irritated Suvaroff--his profession, the café where he fiddled, the strident streets of the city, the evening mist, the Hôtel des Alpes Maritimes, where he lodged, and the Italian fisherman and his doleful accordion.

Turning off Kearny Street into Broadway, he had half a notion not to go home, but his dissatisfaction was so inclusive that home seemed, at once, quite as good and as hopeless a place to go as any other. So he pushed open the door of his lodging-house and stamped rather heavily up-stairs.

Although midnight, the first sound which greeted Suvaroff was the wheezing of the Italian's accordion.

"Now," muttered Suvaroff, "I shall suffer in silence no longer. Nobody in this city, much less in these wretched lodgings, has an ear for anything but the clink of money and the shrill laughter of women. If fifty men were to file saws in front of the entrance of any one of these rooms, there would be not the slightest concern. Every one would go on sleeping as if they had nothing more weighty on their conscience than the theft of a kiss from a pretty girl."

He tossed his hat on the bed and made for the Italian's door. He did not wait to knock, but broke in noisily. The accordion stopped with a prolonged wail; its owner rose, visibly frightened.

"Ah!" cried the Italian, "it is you! I am glad of that. See, I have not left the house for three days."

There was a genial simplicity about the man; Suvaroff felt overcome with confusion. "What is the matter? Are you ill?" he stammered, closing the door.

"No. I am afraid to go out. There is somebody waiting for me. Tell me, did you see a cripple standing on the corner, near Bollo's Wine Shop, as you came in?"

Suvaroff reflected. "Well, not a cripple, exactly. But I saw a hunchback with--with--"

"Yes! yes!" cried the other, excitedly. "A hunchback with a handsome face! That is he! I am afraid of him. For three days he has sat there, waiting!"

"For you? How absurd! Why should any one do such a ridiculous thing?"

The Italian slipped his hands from the accordion and laid it aside. "Nobody but one who is mad would do it, but he is mad. There is no doubt about that!"

Suvaroff began to feel irritated. "What are you talking about? Have you lost your senses? If he is waiting for you, why do you not go out and send him away? Go out and pay him what you owe him."

The Italian rose and began to shudder. "I owe him nothing. He is waiting for me--*to kill me*!"

"Nonsense!" cried Suvaroff. "What is his reason?"

"He is waiting to kill me because I laughed at him."

"That is ridiculous!" said Suvaroff.

"Nevertheless, it is true," replied the Italian. "He kills every one who laughs at him. Three days ago I laughed at him. But I ran away. He followed me. He does not know where I lodge, but he has wit enough to understand that if

he waits long enough he will find me out. In Heaven's name, my friend, can you not help me? See, I am a simple soul. I cannot think quickly. I have prayed to the Virgin, but it is no use. Tell me, what can I do to escape?"

"Why do you not see a policeman?"

The Italian let his hands fall hopelessly. "A policeman? What good would that do? Even *you* do not believe me!"

A chill seized Suvaroff. He began to shake, and in the next instant a fever burned his cheeks. His head as full of little darting pains. He turned away from the Italian, impatiently. "You must be a pretty sort of man to let a little hunchback frighten you! Good night."

And with that Suvaroff went out, slamming the door.

When Suvaroff got to his room he felt dizzy. He threw himself on the bed and lay for some time in a stupor. When he came to his senses again the first sound to greet him was the wail of his neighbor's accordion.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered. "Here I go bursting into this Italian's room for the purpose of asking him to quit his abominable noise, and I listen like a dumb sheep to *his* bleatings, and so forget my errand!"

The noise continued, grew more insistent, became unbearable. Suvaroff covered his ears with a comforter. His head was throbbing so violently that even the ticking of a clock upon the table by his bed cut his senses like a two-edged sword. He rose, stumbling about with a feeling of indescribable weakness. What was the matter? Why did he feel so ill? His eyes burned, his legs seemed weighted, his throat was so dry that there was no comfort when he swallowed. All this he could have stood if it had not been for the fiendish noise which, he began to feel, was being played merely for his torture.

He put on his hat and stumbled down-stairs, out into the night. Crossing the street, he went at once to Bollo's Wine Shop. The hunchback was sitting on a garbage-can, almost at the entrance. At the sight of this misshapen figure, the irritating memory of the Italian and his impossible music recurred to Suvaroff. A sudden sinister cruelty came over him; he felt a wanton ruthlessness that the sight of ugliness sometimes engenders in natures sensitive to beauty. He went up to the hunchback and looked searchingly into the man's face. It was a strangely handsome face, and its incongruity struck Suvaroff. Had Nature been weary, or merely in a satirical mood, when she fashioned such a thing of horror?--for Suvaroff found that the handsome face seemed even more horrible than the twisted body, so sharp and violent was the contrast.

The hunchback returned Suvaroff's stare with almost insulting indifference, but there was something in the look that quickened the beating of Suvaroff's heart.

"You are waiting here," began Suvaroff, "for an Italian who lodges across the street. Would you like me to tell you where he may be found?"

The hunchback shrugged. "It does not matter in the slightest, one way or another. If you tell me where he lodges, the inevitable will happen more quickly than if I sat and waited for the rat to come out of his hole. Waiting has its own peculiar interest. If you have ever waited, as I wait now, you know the joy that a cat feels--expectation is two-thirds of any game."

Suvaroff shuddered. He had an impulse to walk away, but the eyes of the other burned with a strange fascination.

"Nevertheless," said Suvaroff, "I shall tell--"

The hunchback waved him to silence. "Do whatever you wish, my friend, but remember, if you do tell me this thing, you and I will be forever bound by a tie that it will be impossible to break. With me it does not matter, but you are a young man, and all your life you will drag a secret about like a dead thing chained to your wrist. I am Flavio Minetti, and I kill every one who laughs at me! This Italian of whom you speak has laughed at me. I may wait a week--a month. It will be the same. No one has yet escaped me."

An exquisite fear began to move Suvaroff. "Nevertheless," he repeated again, "I shall tell you where he lodges. You will find him upon the third landing of the Hôtel des Alpes Maritimes. There are no numbers on the doors, but it will be impossible for you to mistake his room. All day and night he sits playing an accordion."

Flavio Minetti took a cigarette from his pocket. "Remember, my young friend, I gave you fair warning."

"I shall not forget," replied Suvaroff.

* * *

Suvaroff climbed back to his room. He sat upon his bed holding his head in his hands. The sound of the accordion seemed gruesome now.

Presently he heard a step on the landing. His heart stood still. Sounds drifted down the passageway. The noise was not heavy and clattering, but it had a pattering quality, like a bird upon a roof. Above the wailing of the music, Suvaroff heard a door opened--slowly, cautiously. There followed a moment of silence; Suvaroff was frightened. But almost immediately the playing began again.

"Now," thought Suvaroff, "why is the Italian not frightened? The door has been opened and he goes on playing, undisturbed.... It must be that he is sitting with his back to the door. If this is so, God help him!... Well, why need I worry? What is it to me? It is not my fault if a fool like that sits with his door unlocked and his face turned from the face of danger."

And, curiously, Suvaroff's thoughts wandered to other things, and a picture of his native country flashed over him--Little Russia in the languid embrace of summer--green and blue and golden. The soft notes of the balalaika at twilight came to him, and the dim shapes of dancing peasants, whirling like aspen-leaves in a fresh breeze. He remembered the noonday laughter of skylarks; the pear-trees bending patiently beneath their harvest; the placid river winding its willow-hedged way, cutting the plain like a thin silver knife.

Now, suddenly, it came upon him that the music in the next room had stopped. He waited. There was not a sound!... After a time the door banged sharply. The pattering began again, and died away. But still there was no music!...

Suvaroff rose and began to strip off his clothes. His teeth were chattering. "Well, at last," he muttered, "I shall have some peace!" He threw himself on the bed, drawing the coverings up over his head.... Presently a thud shook the house. "He has slipped from his seat," said Suvaroff aloud. "It is all over!" And he drew the bedclothes higher and went to sleep.

* * *

Next morning, Suvaroff felt better. To be sure, he was weak, but he rose and dressed.

"What strange dreams people have when they are in a fever!" he exclaimed, as he put on his hat. Nevertheless, as he left the house, he did not so much as glance at the Italian's door.

It was a pleasant morning, the mist had lifted and the sky was a freshly washed blue. Suvaroff walked down Kearny Street, and past Portsmouth Square. At this hour the little park was cleared of its human wreckage, and dowdy sparrows hopped unafraid upon the deserted benches. A Chinese woman and her child romped upon the green; a weather-beaten peddler stooped to the fountain and drank; the three poplar-trees about the Stevenson monument trembled to silver in the frank sunshine. Suvaroff could not remember when the city had appeared so fresh and innocent. It seemed to him as if the gray, cold drizzle of the night had washed away even the sins of the wine-red town. But an indefinite disquiet rippled the surface of his content. His peace was filled with a vague suggestion of sinister things to follow, like the dead calm of this very morning, which so skilfully bound up the night wind in its cool, placid air. He would have liked to linger a moment in the park, but he passed quickly by and went into a little chop-house for his morning meal.

As he dawdled over his cup of muddy coffee he had a curious sense that his mind was intent on keeping at bay some half-formulated fear. He felt pursued, as by an indistinct dream. Yet he was cunning enough to pretend that this something was too illusive to capture outright, so he turned his thoughts to all manner of remote things. But there are times when it is almost as difficult to deceive oneself as to cheat others. In the midst of his thoughts he suddenly realized that under the stimulating influence of a second cup of coffee he was feeling quite himself again.

"That is because I got such a good night's sleep," he muttered. "For over a week this Italian and his wretched accordion--" He halted his thoughts abruptly. "What am I thinking about?" he demanded. Then he rose, paid his bill, and departed.

He turned back to his lodgings. At Bollo's Wine Shop he hesitated. A knot of people stood at the entrance of the Hôtel des Alpes Maritimes, and a curious wagon was drawn up to the curb.

He stopped a child. "What is the trouble?" he inquired.

The girl raised a pair of mournful eyes to him. "A man has been killed!" she answered.

Suvaroff turned quickly and walked in another direction. He went to the café where he fiddled. At this hour it was like an empty cavern. A smell of stale beer and tobacco smoke pervaded the imprisoned air. He sat down upon the deserted platform and pretended to practise. He played erratically, feverishly. The waiters, moving about their morning preparations with an almost uncanny quiet, listened attentively. Finally one of them stopped before him.

"What has come over you, Suvaroff?" questioned the man. "You are making our flesh creep!"

"Oh, pardon me!" cried Suvaroff. "I shall not trouble you further!"

And with that he packed up his violin and left. He did not go back to the café, even at the appointed hour. Instead, he wandered aimlessly about. All day he tramped the streets. He listened to street-fakirs, peered into shop-windows, threw himself upon the grass of the public squares and stared up at the blue sky. He had very little personal consciousness; he seemed to have lost track of himself. He had an absurd feeling that he had come away from somewhere and left behind a vital part of his being.

"Suvaroff! Suvaroff!" he would repeat over and over to himself, as if trying to recall the memory of some one whose precise outline had escaped him.

He caught a glimpse of his figure in the mirror of a shop-window. He went closer, staring for some moments at the face opposite him. There followed an infinitesimal fraction of time when his spirit deserted him as completely as if he were dead. When he recovered himself he had a sense that he was staring at the reflection of a stranger. He moved away, puzzled. Was he going mad? Then, suddenly,

everything grew quite clear. He remembered the Italian, the accordion, the hunchback. Characters, circumstances, sequences--all stood out as sharply as the sky-line of a city in the glow of sunset.... He put his fingers to his pulse. Everything seemed normal; his skin was moist and cool. Yet last night he had been very ill. That was it! Last night he had been ill!

"What strange dreams people have when they are in a fever!" he exclaimed for the second time that day. He decided to go home. "I wonder, though," thought he, "whether the Italian is still playing that awful instrument?" Curiously enough, the idea did not disturb him in the least. "I shall teach him a Russian tune or two!" he decided, cheerfully. "Then, maybe his playing will be endurable."

When he came again to his lodgings he was surprised to find a knot of curious people on the opposite side of the street, and another before the entrance. He went up the stairs. His landlady came to meet him.

"Mr. Suvaroff," she began at once, "have you not heard what has happened? The man in the next room to you was found this morning--*dead*!"

He did not pretend to be surprised. "Well," he announced, brutally, "at least we shall have no more of dreadful music! How did he kill himself?"

The woman gave way to his advance with a movement of flattering confusion. "The knife was in his side," she answered. "In his side--toward the back."

"Ah, then he was murdered!"

"Yes."

He was mounting the second flight of stairs when his landlady again halted him. "Mr. Suvaroff," she ventured, "I hope you will not be angry! But his mother came early this morning. All day she has sat in your room, weeping. I cannot persuade her to go away. What am I to do?"

Suvaroff glared at her for a moment. "It is nothing!" he announced, as he passed on, shrugging.

The door of his room was open; he went in. A gnarled old woman sat on the edge of the bed; a female consoler was on either side. At the sight of Suvaroff the mourner rose and stood trembling before him, rolling a gaudy handkerchief into a moist bundle.

"My good woman," said Suvaroff, kindly, "do not stand; sit down."

"Kind gentleman!" the old woman began. "Kind gentleman--"

She got no further because of her tears. The other women rose and sat her down again. She began to moan. Suvaroff, awkward and disturbed, stood as men do in such situations.

Finally the old woman found her voice. "Kind gentleman," she said, "I am a poor old woman, and my son--Ah! I was washing his socks when they came after me.... You see what has happened! He was a good son. Once a week he came to me and brought me five dollars. Now--What am I to do, my kind gentleman?"

Suvaroff said nothing.

She swayed back and forth, and spoke again. "Only last week he said: 'There is a man who lodges next me who plays music.' Yes, my son was fond of you because of that. He said: 'I have seen him only once. He plays music all day and night, so that he may have money enough to live on. When I hear him coming up the stairs I take down my accordion and begin to play. All day and night he plays for others. So I think, Now it will be nice to give him some pleasure. So I take down my accordion and play for *him*!'... Yes, yes! He was like that all his life. He was a good son. Now what am I to do?"

A shudder passed over Suvaroff. There was a soft tap upon the door. The three women and Suvaroff looked up. Flavio Minetti stood in the doorway.

The three women gave the hunchback swift, inclusive glances, such as women always use when they measure a newcomer, and speedily dropped their eyes. Suvaroff stared silently at the warped figure. Minetti leaned against the door; his smile was at once both cruel and curiously touching. At length Minetti spoke. The sound of his voice provoked a sort of terror in the breast of Suvaroff.

"I have just heard," he said, benevolently, "from the proprietor of the wine-shop across the way, that your neighbor has been murdered. The landlady tells me that his mother is here."

The old woman roused herself. "Yes--you can see for yourself that I am here. I am a poor old woman, and my son--Ah! I was washing his socks when--"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the hunchback, advancing into the room. "You are a poor old woman! Let me give you some money in all charity."

He threw gold into her lap. She began to tremble. Suvaroff saw her hands greedily close over the coins, and the sight sickened him.

"Why did you come?" Suvaroff demanded of Minetti. "Go away! You are not wanted here!"

The three women rose. The old woman began to mumble a blessing. She even put up her hand in the fashion of

bestowing a benediction. Suvaroff fancied that he saw Minetti wince.

"He was a good son," the old woman began to mutter they led her out. At the door she looked back. Suvaroff turned away. "Once a week he came to me and brought me five dollars," she said, quite calmly. "He was a good son. He even played his music to give pleasure to others. Yes, yes! He was like that all his life...."

When the women were gone, Suvaroff felt the hunchback's hand upon his. Suvaroff turned a face of dry-eyed hopelessness toward his tormentor.

"Did you not sleep peacefully last night, my friend?" Minetti inquired, mockingly.

"After the thud I knew nothing," replied Suvaroff.

"The thud?"

"He fell from his chair."

"Of course. That was to be expected. Just so."

"You see for yourself what you have done? Fancy, this man has a mother!"

"See, it is just as I said. Already you are dragging this dead thing about, chained to your wrist. Come, forget it. I should have killed him, anyway."

"That is not the point. The point is--My God! Tell me, in what fashion do these people laugh at you? Tell me how it is done."

"Laughter cannot be taught, my friend."

"Then Heaven help me! for I should like to laugh at you. If I could but laugh at you, all would be over."

"Ah!" said the hunchback. "I see."

* * *

At the end of the week Minetti came to Suvaroff one evening and said, not unkindly: "Why don't you leave? You are killing yourself. Go away--miles away. It would have happened, anyway."

Suvaroff was lying upon his bed. His face was turned toward the wall. He did not trouble to look at Minetti.

"I cannot leave. You know that as well as I do. When I am absent from this room I am in a fever until I get back to it again. I lie here and close my eyes and think.... Whenever a thud shakes the house I leap up, trembling. I have not worked for five days. They have given up sending for me from the café. Yesterday his mother came and sat with me. She drove me mad. But I sat and listened to her. 'Yes, he was a good son!' She repeats this by the hour, and rolls and unrolls her handkerchief.... It is bad enough in the daytime. But at night--God! If only the music would play again! I cannot endure such silence."

He buried his face in the pillow. Minetti shrugged and left.

In about an hour Suvaroff rose and went out. He found a squalid wine-shop in the quarter just below the Barbary Coast. He went in and sat alone at a table. The floors had not been freshly sanded for weeks; a dank mildew covered the green wall-paper. He called for brandy, and a fat, greasy-haired man placed a bottle of villainous stuff before him. Suvaroff poured out a drink and swallowed it greedily. He drank another and another. The room began to fill. The lights were dim, and the arrival and departure of patrons threw an endless procession of grotesque silhouettes upon the walls. Suvaroff was fascinated by these dancing shadows. They seemed familiar and friendly. He sat sipping his brandy, now, with a quieter, more leisurely air. The shadows were indescribably fascinating; they were so horrible and amusing! He began to wonder whether their antics would move him to laughter if he sat and drank long enough. He had a feeling that laughter and sleep went hand in hand. If he could but laugh again he was quite sure that he would fall asleep. But he discovered a truth while he sat there. Amusement and laughter were often strangers. He had known this all his life, of course, but he had never thought of it. Once, when he was a child, an old man had fallen in the road before him, in a fit. Suvaroff had stood rooted to the spot with amusement, but he had not laughed. Yet the man had gone through the contortions of a clown.... Well, then he was not to be moved to laughter, after all. He wearily put the cork back in the bottle of brandy. The fat bartender came forward. Suvaroff paid him and departed.

He went to the wine-shop the next night--and the next. He began to have a hope that if he persisted he would discover a shadow grotesque enough to make him laugh. He sat for hours, drinking abominable brandy. The patrons of the shop did not interest him. They were squalid, dirty, uninteresting. But their shadows were things of wonder. How was it possible for such drab people to have even interesting shadows? And why were these shadows so familiar? Suvaroff recognized each in turn, as if it were an old friend that he remembered but could not name. After the second night he came to a definite conclusion.

"They are not old friends at all," he said to himself. "They are not even the shadows of these people who come here. They are merely the silhouettes of my own thoughts.... If I could but draw my thoughts, they would be as black and as fantastic."

But at another time he dismissed this theory.

"No," he muttered, "they are not the shadows of my thoughts at all. They are the souls of these men. They are the twisted, dark, horrible souls of these men, that cannot

crawl out except at nightfall! They are the souls of these men seeking to escape, like dogs chained to their kennels!... I wonder if the Italian had such a soul?..."

He rose suddenly. "I am wasting my time here," he said, almost aloud. "One may learn to laugh at a shadow. One may even learn to laugh at the picture of one's thoughts. But to laugh at a soul--No! A man's soul is too dreadful a thing to laugh at." He staggered out into the night.

On his way home he went into a pawn-shop and bought a pistol. He was in a fever to get back to his lodgings. He found Minetti waiting for him. He tried to conceal the pistol, but he knew that Minetti had seen it. Minetti was as pleasant as one could imagine. He told the most droll stories of his life in London. It appeared that he had lived there in a hotbed of exiled radicals; but he, himself, seemed to have no convictions. Everything he described was touched with a certain ironic humor. When he rose to go he said, quite simply:

"How are things? Do you sleep nights now?"

"No. I never expect to sleep again."

Minetti made no comment. "I see you have bought a pistol," he observed.

"Yes," replied Suvaroff.

"You have wasted your money, my young friend," declared the hunchback. "You will never use it."

With that Minetti left the room. Suvaroff laid the pistol on the table and threw himself upon the bed. He lay there without moving until morning.... Toward six o'clock he rose. He went over to the table and deliberately put the pistol to his temple. The coldness of the muzzle sent a tremor through him.... He put down the weapon in disgust.

* * *

Suvaroff stayed away from the wine-shop for two nights, but finally the memory of its fascinating shadows lured him back. The fat bartender saw him enter, and came forward with a bottle of brandy. Suvaroff smiled grimly and said nothing. He turned his back upon the company and began to watch the shadows enter and disappear. To-night the puppets seemed more whimsical than grotesque, and once he nearly laughed. A shadow with an enormous nose appeared; and a fly, as big as a bumblebee, lit upon the nose and sat rubbing its legs together in insolent content. A hand, upraised, struck at the fly. The nose disappeared as if completely annihilated by the blow, while the fly hovered safely aloof. Feeling encouraged, Suvaroff took another drink. But the more he drank the less genial were the shadows, and by midnight they all had become as sinister and terrible as ever.

On the way home to his room Suvaroff suddenly remembered that he had a friend who was a druggist.

"Perhaps he can give me something to make me sleep," Suvaroff muttered.

But the drug-store was closed. Suvaroff climbed wearily up the stairs of the Hôtel des Alpes Maritimes. Minetti was sitting on the steps near the third landing.

"I was preparing to go home," said the hunchback. "What kept you so late?"

"I went around another way," answered Suvaroff. "I thought I might get something from a druggist friend to help me sleep."

They stood before the door of Suvaroff's room. Suvaroff opened the door and they went in.

"Sleeping-powders are dangerous," observed Minetti, throwing his hat upon the bed.

"So I fancied," replied Suvaroff, dryly.

"Where do you spend your nights?" Minetti demanded suddenly.

Suvaroff sat down. "Watching shadows in a wine-shop."

"Ah--a puppet show!"

"No, not exactly. I will explain.... No; come to think of it, there is no explanation. But it is extremely amusing. To-night, for instance, I nearly laughed.... Have you ever watched shadows upon a wall? Really, they are diverting beyond belief."

"Yes. I have watched them often. They are more real to me than actual people, because they are uglier. Beauty is a lie!"

A note of dreadful conviction crept into the hunchback's voice. Suvaroff looked at him intently, and said, quite simply:

"What a bitter truth *you* are, my friend!"

Minetti stared at Suvaroff, and he rose. "Perhaps I shall see you at your puppet show some evening," he said. And, without waiting for a reply, he left the room.

Suvaroff lay again all night upon his bed staring in a mute agony at the ceiling. Once or twice he fancied he heard the sounds of music from the next room. His heart leaped joyfully. But almost instantly his hopes sank back, like spent swimmers in a relentless sea. It seemed as if his brain were thirsting. He was in a pitiless desert of white-heated thought, and there was not a cloud of oblivion upon the horizon of his despair. Remembrance flamed like a

molten sun, greedily withering every green, refreshing thing in its path. How long before this dreadful memory would consume him utterly?

"If I could only laugh!" he cried in his agony. "*If I could only laugh!*"

* * *

All next day Suvaroff was in a fever; not a physical fever, but a mental fever that burned with devastating insistence. He could not lie still upon his bed, so he rose and stumbled about the city's streets. But nothing diverted him. Before his eyes a sheet of fire burned, and a blinding light seemed to shut out everything else from his vision. Even his thoughts crackled like dry faggots in a flame.

"When evening comes," he said, "a breeze will spring up and I shall have some relief." But almost at once he thought: "A breeze will do no good. It will only make matters worse! I have heard that nothing puts out a fire so quickly as a shower. Let me see--It is now the middle of August.... It does not rain in this part of the world until October. Well, I must wait until October, then. No; a breeze at evening will do no good. I will go and watch the shadows again. Shadows are cool affairs if one sits in them, but how...."

And he began to wonder how he could contrive to sit in shadows that fell only on a wall.

How he got to the wine-shop he did not know, but at a late hour he found himself sitting at his accustomed seat. His bottle of brandy stood before him. To-night the shadows were blacker than ever, as if the fury of the flames within him were providing these dancing figures with a brighter background.

"These shadows are not the pictures of my thoughts," he said to himself. "Neither are they chained souls seeking to escape. They are the smoke from the fire in my head. They are the black smoke from my brain which is slowly burning away!"

He sat for hours, staring at the wall. The figures came and went, but they ceased to have any form or meaning. He merely sat and drank, and stared.... All at once a strange shadow appeared. A shadow? No; a phantom--a dreadful thing! Suvaroff leaned forward. His breath came quickly, his body trembled in the grip of a convulsion, his hands were clenched. He rose in his seat, and suddenly--quite suddenly, without warning--he began to laugh.... The shadow halted in its flight across the wall. Suvaroff circled the room with his gaze. In the center of the wine-shop stood Flavio Minetti. Suvaroff sat down. He was still shaking with laughter.

Presently Suvaroff was conscious that Minetti had disappeared. The fire in his brain had ceased to burn. Instead his senses seemed chilled, not disagreeably, but with a certain pleasant numbness. He glanced about. What was he doing in such a strange, squalid place? And the brandy was abominable! He called the waiter, paid him what was owing, and left at once.

There was no mist in the air to-night. The sky was clear and a wisp of moon crept on its disdainful way through the heavens.

"I shall sleep to-night," muttered Suvaroff, as he climbed up to his room upon the third story of the Hôtel des Alpes Maritimes.

He undressed deliberately. All his former frenzy was gone. Shortly after he had crawled into bed he heard a step on the landing. Then, as usual, sounds began to drift down the passageway, not in heavy and clattering fashion, but with a pattering quality like a bird upon a roof. And, curiously, Suvaroff's thoughts wandered to other things, and a picture of his native country flashed over him--Little Russia in the languid embrace of summer--green and blue and golden. The soft notes of the balalaika at twilight came to him, and the dim shapes of dancing peasants, whirling like aspen-leaves in a fresh breeze. He remembered the noonday laughter of skylarks; the pear-trees bending patiently beneath their harvest; the placid river winding its willow-hedged way, cutting the plain like a thin silver knife.

A fresh current of air began to blow upon him. He heard the creak of a rusty hinge.

"He has opened the door," Suvaroff whispered. His teeth began to chatter. "Nevertheless, I shall sleep to-night," he said to himself reassuringly.

A faint footfall sounded upon the threshold.... Suvaroff drew the bedclothes higher.