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Two Days in the Life of the Terrestrial Globe and Other Stories

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*Two Days in the Life
of the Terrestrial Globe
and Other Stories*

TWO DAYS IN THE LIFE
OF THE TERRESTRIAL GLOBE

1828; dated 1825

THERE WERE A LOT OF GUESTS at Countess B—'s. It was midnight; the candles were getting used up, and the conversational heat was weakening, along with the decreasing light. Already, young girls were starting to talk over all the costumes for the next ball; the men had finished telling each other all the city news; the younger ladies had picked over all their acquaintances one by one, and the older ones had predicted the fates of several marriages. The gamblers had settled up amongst themselves and, having rejoined the social circle, had livened it up quite a bit with their tales of the mockery of fate, causing quite a few smiles and quite a few sighs, but soon this subject too had been exhausted. The hostess, who was extremely well versed in high-society chatter, any lull in which would be understood as boredom, was using all her skills to stir up garrulity in her tired guests. But all her efforts would have been in vain, had she not happened to glance out of the window. By good fortune, the comet was just then roaming over the starry sky and impelling astronomers to calculate, journalists to pontificate, simple folk to predict, and just about everyone else to have something to say about it. However, not one person from this entire company of gentry was as committed to it at this moment in time as Countess B—. In one instant, coming to the Countess's rescue, the comet had jumped from the horizon right into her drawing room, and had forced its way through an unbelievable quantity of hats and bonnets,

to be greeted by a similarly immeasurable quantity of different comments, some humorous and some regrettable. Some people were indeed afraid that this comet would play tricks on them; others, laughing, were convinced that it augured some wedding, or some divorce, and so on and so forth.

“You must be joking,” said one of the guests, who had spent his whole life in society, engaged in astronomy (*par originalité*).* “You may joke, but I remember one astronomer declaring that comets can come very close to the Earth, even collide with it – and then it would be no joke at all.”

“Oh! How terrible!” the ladies cried.

“But tell us, what would happen then, when a comet hits the Earth? Will the Earth fall down?” several voices muttered.

“The Earth will be shattered to bits,” said the society astronomer.

“Oh, my God! And so that’s when the social world will really be seen for what it is,” said one rather aged lady.

“Rest assured,” replied the astronomer, “other scientists maintain that this cannot happen, and that the Earth gets one degree nearer to the Sun every hundred and fifty years and that the day will finally come when the Earth will get burnt up by the Sun.”

“Oh, stop, do stop,” cried the ladies. “How awful!”

The astronomer’s words attracted widespread attention; at this point, endless arguments began. There were no disasters, at that moment, to which the terrestrial globe was not being subjected. They were burning it in fire, drowning it in water, and all of this was being affirmed, of course, not through the testimony of any scientists, but by quoting the utterances of some dear deceased uncle, who had been a chamberlain, or some late aunt, who had been a lady of state, and so on.

“Listen,” the hostess finally exclaimed, “instead of arguing about it, let’s, every one of us, write down on a piece of paper our thoughts on the subject, and then, why don’t we all guess who wrote down this or that opinion?”

“Oh, yes! Yes, let’s all write something,” all the guests shouted.

“How do you want us to write it?” asked one young man timidly. “In French or in Russian?”

“*Fi donc – mauvais genre!*”* said the hostess. “Who in this day and age writes in French? *Messieurs et Mesdames!* You have to write in Russian.”

Paper was given out. Many sat down there and then at the table, but a lot of people, realizing that things were stretching to an inkwell and to the Russian language, whispered into their neighbours’ ear that there were still a number of visits to be made – and promptly disappeared.

When the writing had been finished, all the bits of paper were mixed up, and each person in turn read out their allotted piece. What follows is one of these conjectures, which seemed to us more remarkable than the rest, and which we here impart to our readers.

I

It had come about. The destruction of the terrestrial globe had begun. The astronomers have made their pronouncement; the people’s voice corroborates their view. This voice is implacable; it faithfully fulfils its promises. This comet, unprecedented until now, at an immeasurable speed accelerates towards the Earth. The sun only has to go down for this dreadful *wayfarer* to flare up. Delights are forgotten, misfortunes are forgotten, passions are stilled, desires have faded; there is neither peace nor activity, neither sleep nor wakefulness. Both day and night, people of all callings, in all conditions, lament upon the squares, and their trembling, pale faces are illuminated by a crimson flame.

Huge towers were turned into an observatory. Day and night the gazes of astronomers were fixed on the sky. Everyone came running to them, as though to all-powerful gods. Their words went flying from mouth to mouth. Astronomy was turning

into the popular science. Everyone was doing calculations of the size of the comet and the speed of its motion. They were thirsting for mistakes in the astronomers' computations, but didn't find them.

"Look here, just look," one person said, "yesterday it was no bigger than the Moon, but now it's twice the size... What's it going to be like tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow it'll run into the Earth and crush us," said another.

"Couldn't we go off to the other side of the globe?" said a third person.

"Couldn't we construct defensive positions to repulse it with machines?" said a fourth. "What is the government thinking about?"

"There's no way out!" shouted one young man, out of puff. "I've just come from the tower – the scientists are saying that, even before it runs into the Earth, there will be storms, earthquakes and the surface will be ablaze..."

"Who will stand against the anger of God?" exclaimed one elder.

Meanwhile time moves on and with it grows the size of the comet, as well as public alarm. It is now getting visibly bigger. By day, the sun shuts it out; at night it hangs over the Earth as a fiery cleft. Already a silent, awesome certainty had given way to despair. Neither groan nor lamentation was to be heard. The prisons were opened: the freed prisoners wander among the crowds with drooping heads. Rarely, only rarely, are the silence and the inaction interrupted: there's the cry of an infant who has been left without food, but then he will be silent again, admiring the awful heavenly spectacle; or now a father embraces the killer of his son.

But when the wind blows or thunder resounds, the crowd will start to stir – and everyone's lips are ready to mouth the question, but they fear to utter it.

In a secluded street of one European city an eighty-year-old man at his domestic hearth was cooking himself some food; suddenly his son runs up to him.

“What are you doing, Father?” he exclaims.

“What should I be doing?” the old man replies calmly. “You’ve all left – you’re running about the streets, whereas I just go hungry...”

“Father! Is it really the time now to be thinking about food?”

“It’s precisely this time, as it always is...”

“But our destruction...”

“Calm down. This groundless fear will pass, as do all earthly calamities...”

“But have you really completely lost your hearing and your vision?”

“Quite the opposite; not only have I preserved both, but also something above that, which you don’t have: peace of spirit and strength of reason. Calm down, I say to you. The comet just appeared unexpectedly and will disappear likewise; and the destruction of the Earth is not at all as imminent as you think. The Earth has still not achieved maturity... an inner feeling assures me of that...”

“My dear Father! Your whole life you’ve had a stronger belief in this feeling, or in your daydreams, than in reality! Are you really, even now, going to remain dedicated to imagination?”

“The fear that I can see on your face, and the faces of those like you! This shabby fear is not compatible with the profound moment of demise...”

“How dreadful!” exclaimed the young man. “My father has completely lost his reason...”

At that same instant a terrible thunderbolt shook the territory; lightning flared; rain deluged down; a gale removed roofs from the buildings – the population threw themselves to the ground.

The night passed, the sky brightened and a gentle zephyr dried the ground, which had been awash with rain. The people

did not dare to raise their lowered heads; eventually they did take the liberty. They by now feel themselves to be in the guise of bodiless spirits... Finally they stand up and look about them: the same familiar places, the same bright sky, the same people. An involuntary motion lifts everyone's gaze to the sky: the comet was moving away from the skyline.

II

This brought on a collective feast of the terrestrial globe. There was no tempestuous joy at this feast; nor were loud ejaculations heard! Long since had lively merriment turned for them into silent delight, into the usual round. Long since had they stepped over the obstacles preventing a human being from being a human being. The memory had already gone of the times when crude matter could laugh at the efforts of the spirit, when need gave way to necessity. The times of imperfection and prejudice had long since passed, together with human diseases. The planet was the mighty dwelling place of only the most powerful tsars, so no one was surprised at nature's magnificent feast. Everyone awaited it, for long had the premonition of it appeared to the imagination of the chosen ones in the form of a delightful vision. No one asked others anything about it; a triumphant thought shone across all faces and everyone could understand this mute eloquence. Quietly, the Earth drew near to the Sun, and an unburning warmth, like a fire of inspiration, extended across it. Just another moment – and the heavenly became the earthly, the earthly the heavenly: the Sun became the Earth and the Earth the Sun...

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