

**ANTON
PAVLOVICH
CHEKHOV**

THE WITCH, AND OTHER
STORIES

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The Witch, and Other Stories

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Содержание

THE WITCH	5
PEASANT WIVES	12
THE POST	20
THE NEW VILLA	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

The Witch, and Other Stories

THE WITCH

IT was approaching nightfall. The sexton, Savely Gykin, was lying in his huge bed in the hut adjoining the church. He was not asleep, though it was his habit to go to sleep at the same time as the hens. His coarse red hair peeped from under one end of the greasy patchwork quilt, made up of coloured rags, while his big unwashed feet stuck out from the other. He was listening. His hut adjoined the wall that encircled the church and the solitary window in it looked out upon the open country. And out there a regular battle was going on. It was hard to say who was being wiped off the face of the earth, and for the sake of whose destruction nature was being churned up into such a ferment; but, judging from the unceasing malignant roar, someone was getting it very hot. A victorious force was in full chase over the fields, storming in the forest and on the church roof, battering spitefully with its fists upon the windows, raging and tearing, while something vanquished was howling and wailing... A plaintive lament sobbed at the window, on the roof, or in the stove. It sounded not like a call for help, but like a cry of misery, a consciousness that it was too late, that there was no salvation. The snowdrifts were covered with a thin coating of ice; tears quivered on them and on the trees; a dark slush of mud and melting snow flowed along the roads and paths. In short, it was thawing, but through the dark night the heavens failed to see it, and flung flakes of fresh snow upon the melting earth at a terrific rate. And the wind staggered like a drunkard. It would not let the snow settle on the ground, and whirled it round in the darkness at random.

Savely listened to all this din and frowned. The fact was that he knew, or at any rate suspected, what all this racket outside the window was tending to and whose handiwork it was.

“I know!” he muttered, shaking his finger menacingly under the bedclothes; “I know all about it.”

On a stool by the window sat the sexton’s wife, Raissa Nilovna. A tin lamp standing on another stool, as though timid and distrustful of its powers, shed a dim and flickering light on her broad shoulders, on the handsome, tempting-looking contours of her person, and on her thick plait, which reached to the floor. She was making sacks out of coarse hempen stuff. Her hands moved nimbly, while her whole body, her eyes, her eyebrows, her full lips, her white neck were as still as though they were asleep, absorbed in the monotonous, mechanical toil. Only from time to time she raised her head to rest her weary neck, glanced for a moment towards the window, beyond which the snowstorm was raging, and bent again over her sacking. No desire, no joy, no grief, nothing was expressed by her handsome face with its turned-up nose and its dimples. So a beautiful fountain expresses nothing when it is not playing.

But at last she had finished a sack. She flung it aside, and, stretching luxuriously, rested her motionless, lack-lustre eyes on the window. The panes were swimming with drops like tears, and white with short-lived snowflakes which fell on the window, glanced at Raissa, and melted...

“Come to bed!” growled the sexton. Raissa remained mute. But suddenly her eyelashes flickered and there was a gleam of attention in her eye. Savely, all the time watching her expression from under the quilt, put out his head and asked:

“What is it?”

“Nothing... I fancy someone’s coming,” she answered quietly.

The sexton flung the quilt off with his arms and legs, knelt up in bed, and looked blankly at his wife. The timid light of the lamp illuminated his hirsute, pock-marked countenance and glided over his rough matted hair.

“Do you hear?” asked his wife.

Through the monotonous roar of the storm he caught a scarcely audible thin and jingling monotone like the shrill note of a gnat when it wants to settle on one’s cheek and is angry at being prevented.

“It’s the post,” muttered Savely, squatting on his heels.

Two miles from the church ran the posting road. In windy weather, when the wind was blowing from the road to the church, the inmates of the hut caught the sound of bells.

“Lord! fancy people wanting to drive about in such weather,” sighed Raissa.

“It’s government work. You’ve to go whether you like or not.”

The murmur hung in the air and died away.

“It has driven by,” said Savely, getting into bed.

But before he had time to cover himself up with the bedclothes he heard a distinct sound of the bell. The sexton looked anxiously at his wife, leapt out of bed and walked, waddling, to and fro by the stove. The bell went on ringing for a little, then died away again as though it had ceased.

“I don’t hear it,” said the sexton, stopping and looking at his wife with his eyes screwed up.

But at that moment the wind rapped on the window and with it floated a shrill jingling note. Savely turned pale, cleared his throat, and flopped about the floor with his bare feet again.

“The postman is lost in the storm,” he wheezed out glancing malignantly at his wife. “Do you hear? The postman has lost his way!.. I... I know! Do you suppose I... don’t understand?” he muttered. “I know all about it, curse you!”

“What do you know?” Raissa asked quietly, keeping her eyes fixed on the window.

“I know that it’s all your doing, you she-devil! Your doing, damn you! This snowstorm and the post going wrong, you’ve done it all – you!”

“You’re mad, you silly,” his wife answered calmly.

“I’ve been watching you for a long time past and I’ve seen it. From the first day I married you I noticed that you’d bitch’s blood in you!”

“Tfoo!” said Raissa, surprised, shrugging her shoulders and crossing herself. “Cross yourself, you fool!”

“A witch is a witch,” Savely pronounced in a hollow, tearful voice, hurriedly blowing his nose on the hem of his shirt; “though you are my wife, though you are of a clerical family, I’d say what you are even at confession... Why, God have mercy upon us! Last year on the Eve of the Prophet Daniel and the Three Young Men there was a snowstorm, and what happened then? The mechanic came in to warm himself. Then on St. Alexey’s Day the ice broke on the river and the district policeman turned up, and he was chatting with you all night... the damned brute! And when he came out in the morning and I looked at him, he had rings under his eyes and his cheeks were hollow! Eh? During the August fast there were two storms and each time the huntsman turned up. I saw it all, damn him! Oh, she is redder than a crab now, aha!”

“You didn’t see anything.”

“Didn’t I! And this winter before Christmas on the Day of the Ten Martyrs of Crete, when the storm lasted for a whole day and night – do you remember? – the marshal’s clerk was lost, and turned up here, the hound... Tfoo! To be tempted by the clerk! It was worth upsetting God’s weather for him! A drivelling scribbler, not a foot from the ground, pimples all over his mug and his neck awry! If he were good-looking, anyway – but he, tfoo! he is as ugly as Satan!”

The sexton took breath, wiped his lips and listened. The bell was not to be heard, but the wind banged on the roof, and again there came a tinkle in the darkness.

“And it’s the same thing now!” Savely went on. “It’s not for nothing the postman is lost! Blast my eyes if the postman isn’t looking for you! Oh, the devil is a good hand at his work; he is a fine one to help! He will turn him round and round and bring him here. I know, I see! You can’t conceal it, you devil’s bauble, you heathen wanton! As soon as the storm began I knew what you were up to.”

“Here’s a fool!” smiled his wife. “Why, do you suppose, you thick-head, that I make the storm?”

“H’m!.. Grin away! Whether it’s your doing or not, I only know that when your blood’s on fire there’s sure to be bad weather, and when there’s bad weather there’s bound to be some crazy fellow turning up here. It happens so every time! So it must be you!”

To be more impressive the sexton put his finger to his forehead, closed his left eye, and said in a singsong voice:

“Oh, the madness! oh, the unclean Judas! If you really are a human being and not a witch, you ought to think what if he is not the mechanic, or the clerk, or the huntsman, but the devil in their form! Ah! You’d better think of that!”

“Why, you are stupid, Savely,” said his wife, looking at him compassionately. “When father was alive and living here, all sorts of people used to come to him to be cured of the ague: from the village, and the hamlets, and the Armenian settlement. They came almost every day, and no one called them devils. But if anyone once a year comes in bad weather to warm himself, you wonder at it, you silly, and take all sorts of notions into your head at once.”

His wife’s logic touched Savely. He stood with his bare feet wide apart, bent his head, and pondered. He was not firmly convinced yet of the truth of his suspicions, and his wife’s genuine and unconcerned tone quite disconcerted him. Yet after a moment’s thought he wagged his head and said:

“It’s not as though they were old men or bandy-legged cripples; it’s always young men who want to come for the night... Why is that? And if they only wanted to warm themselves – But they are up to mischief. No, woman; there’s no creature in this world as cunning as your female sort! Of real brains you’ve not an ounce, less than a starling, but for devilish slyness – oo-oo-oo! The Queen of Heaven protect us! There is the postman’s bell! When the storm was only beginning I knew all that was in your mind. That’s your witchery, you spider!”

“Why do you keep on at me, you heathen?” His wife lost her patience at last. “Why do you keep sticking to it like pitch?”

“I stick to it because if anything – God forbid – happens to-night... do you hear?.. if anything happens to-night, I’ll go straight off to-morrow morning to Father Nikodim and tell him all about it. ‘Father Nikodim,’ I shall say, ‘graciously excuse me, but she is a witch.’ ‘Why so?’ ‘H’m! do you want to know why?’ ‘Certainly...’ And I shall tell him. And woe to you, woman! Not only at the dread Seat of Judgment, but in your earthly life you’ll be punished, too! It’s not for nothing there are prayers in the breviary against your kind!”

Suddenly there was a knock at the window, so loud and unusual that Savely turned pale and almost dropped backwards with fright. His wife jumped up, and she, too, turned pale.

“For God’s sake, let us come in and get warm!” they heard in a trembling deep bass. “Who lives here? For mercy’s sake! We’ve lost our way.”

“Who are you?” asked Raissa, afraid to look at the window.

“The post,” answered a second voice.

“You’ve succeeded with your devil’s tricks,” said Savely with a wave of his hand. “No mistake; I am right! Well, you’d better look out!”

The sexton jumped on to the bed in two skips, stretched himself on the feather mattress, and sniffing angrily, turned with his face to the wall. Soon he felt a draught of cold air on his back. The door creaked and the tall figure of a man, plastered over with snow from head to foot, appeared in the doorway. Behind him could be seen a second figure as white.

“Am I to bring in the bags?” asked the second in a hoarse bass voice.

“You can’t leave them there.” Saying this, the first figure began untying his hood, but gave it up, and pulling it off impatiently with his cap, angrily flung it near the stove. Then taking off his greatcoat, he threw that down beside it, and, without saying good-evening, began pacing up and down the hut.

He was a fair-haired, young postman wearing a shabby uniform and black rusty-looking high boots. After warming himself by walking to and fro, he sat down at the table, stretched out his muddy

feet towards the sacks and leaned his chin on his fist. His pale face, reddened in places by the cold, still bore vivid traces of the pain and terror he had just been through. Though distorted by anger and bearing traces of recent suffering, physical and moral, it was handsome in spite of the melting snow on the eyebrows, moustaches, and short beard.

“It’s a dog’s life!” muttered the postman, looking round the walls and seeming hardly able to believe that he was in the warmth. “We were nearly lost! If it had not been for your light, I don’t know what would have happened. Goodness only knows when it will all be over! There’s no end to this dog’s life! Where have we come?” he asked, dropping his voice and raising his eyes to the sexton’s wife.

“To the Gulyaevsky Hill on General Kalinovsky’s estate,” she answered, startled and blushing.

“Do you hear, Stepan?” The postman turned to the driver, who was wedged in the doorway with a huge mail-bag on his shoulders. “We’ve got to Gulyaevsky Hill.”

“Yes... we’re a long way out.” Jerking out these words like a hoarse sigh, the driver went out and soon after returned with another bag, then went out once more and this time brought the postman’s sword on a big belt, of the pattern of that long flat blade with which Judith is portrayed by the bedside of Holofernes in cheap woodcuts. Laying the bags along the wall, he went out into the outer room, sat down there and lighted his pipe.

“Perhaps you’d like some tea after your journey?” Raissa inquired.

“How can we sit drinking tea?” said the postman, frowning. “We must make haste and get warm, and then set off, or we shall be late for the mail train. We’ll stay ten minutes and then get on our way. Only be so good as to show us the way.”

“What an infliction it is, this weather!” sighed Raissa.

“H’m, yes... Who may you be?”

“We? We live here, by the church... We belong to the clergy... There lies my husband. Savely, get up and say good-evening! This used to be a separate parish till eighteen months ago. Of course, when the gentry lived here there were more people, and it was worth while to have the services. But now the gentry have gone, and I need not tell you there’s nothing for the clergy to live on. The nearest village is Markovka, and that’s over three miles away. Savely is on the retired list now, and has got the watchman’s job; he has to look after the church...”

And the postman was immediately informed that if Savely were to go to the General’s lady and ask her for a letter to the bishop, he would be given a good berth. “But he doesn’t go to the General’s lady because he is lazy and afraid of people. We belong to the clergy all the same...” added Raissa.

“What do you live on?” asked the postman.

“There’s a kitchen garden and a meadow belonging to the church. Only we don’t get much from that,” sighed Raissa. “The old skinflint, Father Nikodim, from the next village celebrates here on St. Nicolas’ Day in the winter and on St. Nicolas’ Day in the summer, and for that he takes almost all the crops for himself. There’s no one to stick up for us!”

“You are lying,” Savely growled hoarsely. “Father Nikodim is a saintly soul, a luminary of the Church; and if he does take it, it’s the regulation!”

“You’ve a cross one!” said the postman, with a grin. “Have you been married long?”

“It was three years ago the last Sunday before Lent. My father was sexton here in the old days, and when the time came for him to die, he went to the Consistory and asked them to send some unmarried man to marry me that I might keep the place. So I married him.”

“Aha, so you killed two birds with one stone!” said the postman, looking at Savely’s back. “Got wife and job together.”

Savely wriggled his leg impatiently and moved closer to the wall. The postman moved away from the table, stretched, and sat down on the mail-bag. After a moment’s thought he squeezed the bags with his hands, shifted his sword to the other side, and lay down with one foot touching the floor.

“It’s a dog’s life,” he muttered, putting his hands behind his head and closing his eyes. “I wouldn’t wish a wild Tatar such a life.”

Soon everything was still. Nothing was audible except the sniffing of Savely and the slow, even breathing of the sleeping postman, who uttered a deep prolonged “h-h-h” at every breath. From time to time there was a sound like a creaking wheel in his throat, and his twitching foot rustled against the bag.

Savely fidgeted under the quilt and looked round slowly. His wife was sitting on the stool, and with her hands pressed against her cheeks was gazing at the postman’s face. Her face was immovable, like the face of some one frightened and astonished.

“Well, what are you gaping at?” Savely whispered angrily.

“What is it to you? Lie down!” answered his wife without taking her eyes off the flaxen head.

Savely angrily puffed all the air out of his chest and turned abruptly to the wall. Three minutes later he turned over restlessly again, knelt up on the bed, and with his hands on the pillow looked askance at his wife. She was still sitting motionless, staring at the visitor. Her cheeks were pale and her eyes were glowing with a strange fire. The sexton cleared his throat, crawled on his stomach off the bed, and going up to the postman, put a handkerchief over his face.

“What’s that for?” asked his wife.

“To keep the light out of his eyes.”

“Then put out the light!”

Savely looked distrustfully at his wife, put out his lips towards the lamp, but at once thought better of it and clasped his hands.

“Isn’t that devilish cunning?” he exclaimed. “Ah! Is there any creature slyer than womenkind?”

“Ah, you long-skirted devil!” hissed his wife, frowning with vexation. “You wait a bit!”

And settling herself more comfortably, she stared at the postman again.

It did not matter to her that his face was covered. She was not so much interested in his face as in his whole appearance, in the novelty of this man. His chest was broad and powerful, his hands were slender and well formed, and his graceful, muscular legs were much comelier than Savely’s stumps. There could be no comparison, in fact.

“Though I am a long-skirted devil,” Savely said after a brief interval, “they’ve no business to sleep here... It’s government work; we shall have to answer for keeping them. If you carry the letters, carry them, you can’t go to sleep... Hey! you!” Savely shouted into the outer room. “You, driver. What’s your name? Shall I show you the way? Get up; postmen mustn’t sleep!”

And Savely, thoroughly roused, ran up to the postman and tugged him by the sleeve.

“Hey, your honour, if you must go, go; and if you don’t, it’s not the thing... Sleeping won’t do.”

The postman jumped up, sat down, looked with blank eyes round the hut, and lay down again.

“But when are you going?” Savely pattered away. “That’s what the post is for – to get there in good time, do you hear? I’ll take you.”

The postman opened his eyes. Warmed and relaxed by his first sweet sleep, and not yet quite awake, he saw as through a mist the white neck and the immovable, alluring eyes of the sexton’s wife. He closed his eyes and smiled as though he had been dreaming it all.

“Come, how can you go in such weather!” he heard a soft feminine voice; “you ought to have a sound sleep and it would do you good!”

“And what about the post?” said Savely anxiously. “Who’s going to take the post? Are you going to take it, pray, you?”

The postman opened his eyes again, looked at the play of the dimples on Raissa’s face, remembered where he was, and understood Savely. The thought that he had to go out into the cold darkness sent a chill shudder all down him, and he winced.

“I might sleep another five minutes,” he said, yawning. “I shall be late, anyway...”

“We might be just in time,” came a voice from the outer room. “All days are not alike; the train may be late for a bit of luck.”

The postman got up, and stretching lazily began putting on his coat.

Savely positively neighed with delight when he saw his visitors were getting ready to go.

“Give us a hand,” the driver shouted to him as he lifted up a mail-bag.

The sexton ran out and helped him drag the post-bags into the yard. The postman began undoing the knot in his hood. The sexton’s wife gazed into his eyes, and seemed trying to look right into his soul.

“You ought to have a cup of tea...” she said.

“I wouldn’t say no... but, you see, they’re getting ready,” he assented. “We are late, anyway.”

“Do stay,” she whispered, dropping her eyes and touching him by the sleeve.

The postman got the knot undone at last and flung the hood over his elbow, hesitating. He felt it comfortable standing by Raissa.

“What a... neck you’ve got!..” And he touched her neck with two fingers. Seeing that she did not resist, he stroked her neck and shoulders.

“I say, you are...”

“You’d better stay... have some tea.”

“Where are you putting it?” The driver’s voice could be heard outside. “Lay it crossways.”

“You’d better stay... Hark how the wind howls.”

And the postman, not yet quite awake, not yet quite able to shake off the intoxicating sleep of youth and fatigue, was suddenly overwhelmed by a desire for the sake of which mail-bags, postal trains... and all things in the world, are forgotten. He glanced at the door in a frightened way, as though he wanted to escape or hide himself, seized Raissa round the waist, and was just bending over the lamp to put out the light, when he heard the tramp of boots in the outer room, and the driver appeared in the doorway. Savely peeped in over his shoulder. The postman dropped his hands quickly and stood still as though irresolute.

“It’s all ready,” said the driver. The postman stood still for a moment, resolutely threw up his head as though waking up completely, and followed the driver out. Raissa was left alone.

“Come, get in and show us the way!” she heard.

One bell sounded languidly, then another, and the jingling notes in a long delicate chain floated away from the hut.

When little by little they had died away, Raissa got up and nervously paced to and fro. At first she was pale, then she flushed all over. Her face was contorted with hate, her breathing was tremulous, her eyes gleamed with wild, savage anger, and, pacing up and down as in a cage, she looked like a tigress menaced with red-hot iron. For a moment she stood still and looked at her abode. Almost half of the room was filled up by the bed, which stretched the length of the whole wall and consisted of a dirty feather-bed, coarse grey pillows, a quilt, and nameless rags of various sorts. The bed was a shapeless ugly mass which suggested the shock of hair that always stood up on Savely’s head whenever it occurred to him to oil it. From the bed to the door that led into the cold outer room stretched the dark stove surrounded by pots and hanging cloths. Everything, including the absent Savely himself, was dirty, greasy, and smutty to the last degree, so that it was strange to see a woman’s white neck and delicate skin in such surroundings.

Raissa ran up to the bed, stretched out her hands as though she wanted to fling it all about, stamp it underfoot, and tear it to shreds. But then, as though frightened by contact with the dirt, she leapt back and began pacing up and down again.

When Savely returned two hours later, worn out and covered with snow, she was undressed and in bed. Her eyes were closed, but from the slight tremor that ran over her face he guessed that she was not asleep. On his way home he had vowed inwardly to wait till next day and not to touch her, but he could not resist a biting taunt at her.

“Your witchery was all in vain: he’s gone off,” he said, grinning with malignant joy.

His wife remained mute, but her chin quivered. Savely undressed slowly, clambered over his wife, and lay down next to the wall.

“To-morrow I’ll let Father Nikodim know what sort of wife you are!” he muttered, curling himself up.

Raissa turned her face to him and her eyes gleamed.

“The job’s enough for you, and you can look for a wife in the forest, blast you!” she said. “I am no wife for you, a clumsy lout, a slug-a-bed, God forgive me!”

“Come, come... go to sleep!”

“How miserable I am!” sobbed his wife. “If it weren’t for you, I might have married a merchant or some gentleman! If it weren’t for you, I should love my husband now! And you haven’t been buried in the snow, you haven’t been frozen on the highroad, you Herod!”

Raissa cried for a long time. At last she drew a deep sigh and was still. The storm still raged without. Something wailed in the stove, in the chimney, outside the walls, and it seemed to Savely that the wailing was within him, in his ears. This evening had completely confirmed him in his suspicions about his wife. He no longer doubted that his wife, with the aid of the Evil One, controlled the winds and the post sledges. But to add to his grief, this mysteriousness, this supernatural, weird power gave the woman beside him a peculiar, incomprehensible charm of which he had not been conscious before. The fact that in his stupidity he unconsciously threw a poetic glamour over her made her seem, as it were, whiter, sleeker, more unapproachable.

“Witch!” he muttered indignantly. “Tfoo, horrid creature!”

Yet, waiting till she was quiet and began breathing evenly, he touched her head with his finger... held her thick plait in his hand for a minute. She did not feel it. Then he grew bolder and stroked her neck.

“Leave off!” she shouted, and prodded him on the nose with her elbow with such violence that he saw stars before his eyes.

The pain in his nose was soon over, but the torture in his heart remained.

PEASANT WIVES

IN the village of Reybuzh, just facing the church, stands a two-storeyed house with a stone foundation and an iron roof. In the lower storey the owner himself, Filip Ivanov Kashin, nicknamed Dyudya, lives with his family, and on the upper floor, where it is apt to be very hot in summer and very cold in winter, they put up government officials, merchants, or landowners, who chance to be travelling that way. Dyudya rents some bits of land, keeps a tavern on the highroad, does a trade in tar, honey, cattle, and jackdaws, and has already something like eight thousand roubles put by in the bank in the town.

His elder son, Fyodor, is head engineer in the factory, and, as the peasants say of him, he has risen so high in the world that he is quite out of reach now. Fyodor's wife, Sofya, a plain, ailing woman, lives at home at her father-in-law's. She is for ever crying, and every Sunday she goes over to the hospital for medicine. Dyudya's second son, the hunchback Alyoshka, is living at home at his father's. He has only lately been married to Varvara, whom they singled out for him from a poor family. She is a handsome young woman, smart and buxom. When officials or merchants put up at the house, they always insist on having Varvara to bring in the samovar and make their beds.

One June evening when the sun was setting and the air was full of the smell of hay, of steaming dung-heaps and new milk, a plain-looking cart drove into Dyudya's yard with three people in it: a man of about thirty in a canvas suit, beside him a little boy of seven or eight in a long black coat with big bone buttons, and on the driver's seat a young fellow in a red shirt.

The young fellow took out the horses and led them out into the street to walk them up and down a bit, while the traveller washed, said a prayer, turning towards the church, then spread a rug near the cart and sat down with the boy to supper. He ate without haste, sedately, and Dyudya, who had seen a good many travellers in his time, knew him from his manners for a businesslike man, serious and aware of his own value.

Dyudya was sitting on the step in his waistcoat without a cap on, waiting for the visitor to speak first. He was used to hearing all kinds of stories from the travellers in the evening, and he liked listening to them before going to bed. His old wife, Afanasyevna, and his daughter-in-law Sofya, were milking in the cowshed. The other daughter-in-law, Varvara, was sitting at the open window of the upper storey, eating sunflower seeds.

"The little chap will be your son, I'm thinking?" Dyudya asked the traveller.

"No; adopted. An orphan. I took him for my soul's salvation."

They got into conversation. The stranger seemed to be a man fond of talking and ready of speech, and Dyudya learned from him that he was from the town, was of the tradesman class, and had a house of his own, that his name was Matvey Savitch, that he was on his way now to look at some gardens that he was renting from some German colonists, and that the boy's name was Kuzka. The evening was hot and close, no one felt inclined for sleep. When it was getting dark and pale stars began to twinkle here and there in the sky, Matvey Savitch began to tell how he had come by Kuzka. Afanasyevna and Sofya stood a little way off, listening. Kuzka had gone to the gate.

"It's a complicated story, old man," began Matvey Savitch, "and if I were to tell you all just as it happened, it would take all night and more. Ten years ago in a little house in our street, next door to me, where now there's a tallow and oil factory, there was living an old widow, Marfa Semyonovna Kapluntsev, and she had two sons: one was a guard on the railway, but the other, Vasya, who was just my own age, lived at home with his mother. Old Kapluntsev had kept five pair of horses and sent carriers all over the town; his widow had not given up the business, but managed the carriers as well as her husband had done, so that some days they would bring in as much as five roubles from their rounds.

“The young fellow, too, made a trifle on his own account. He used to breed fancy pigeons and sell them to fanciers; at times he would stand for hours on the roof, waving a broom in the air and whistling; his pigeons were right up in the clouds, but it wasn’t enough for him, and he’d want them to go higher yet. Siskins and starlings, too, he used to catch, and he made cages for sale. All trifles, but, mind you, he’d pick up some ten roubles a month over such trifles. Well, as time went on, the old lady lost the use of her legs and took to her bed. In consequence of which event the house was left without a woman to look after it, and that’s for all the world like a man without an eye. The old lady bestirred herself and made up her mind to marry Vasya. They called in a matchmaker at once, the women got to talking of one thing and another, and Vasya went off to have a look at the girls. He picked out Mashenka, a widow’s daughter. They made up their minds without loss of time and in a week it was all settled. The girl was a little slip of a thing, seventeen, but fair-skinned and pretty-looking, and like a lady in all her ways; and a decent dowry with her, five hundred roubles, a cow, a bed... Well, the old lady – it seemed as though she had known it was coming – three days after the wedding, departed to the Heavenly Jerusalem where is neither sickness nor sighing. The young people gave her a good funeral and began their life together. For just six months they got on splendidly, and then all of a sudden another misfortune. It never rains but it pours: Vasya was summoned to the recruiting office to draw lots for the service. He was taken, poor chap, for a soldier, and not even granted exemption. They shaved his head and packed him off to Poland. It was God’s will; there was nothing to be done. When he said good-bye to his wife in the yard, he bore it all right; but as he glanced up at the hay-loft and his pigeons for the last time, he burst out crying. It was pitiful to see him.

“At first Mashenka got her mother to stay with her, that she mightn’t be dull all alone; she stayed till the baby – this very Kuzka here – was born, and then she went off to Oboyan to another married daughter’s and left Mashenka alone with the baby. There were five peasants – the carriers – a drunken saucy lot; horses, too, and dray-carts to see to, and then the fence would be broken or the soot afire in the chimney – jobs beyond a woman, and through our being neighbours, she got into the way of turning to me for every little thing... Well, I’d go over, set things to rights, and give advice... Naturally, not without going indoors, drinking a cup of tea and having a little chat with her. I was a young fellow, intellectual, and fond of talking on all sorts of subjects; she, too, was well-bred and educated. She was always neatly dressed, and in summer she walked out with a sunshade. Sometimes I would begin upon religion or politics with her, and she was flattered and would entertain me with tea and jam... In a word, not to make a long story of it, I must tell you, old man, a year had not passed before the Evil One, the enemy of all mankind, confounded me. I began to notice that any day I didn’t go to see her, I seemed out of sorts and dull. And I’d be continually making up something that I must see her about: ‘It’s high time,’ I’d say to myself, ‘to put the double windows in for the winter,’ and the whole day I’d idle away over at her place putting in the windows and take good care to leave a couple of them over for the next day too.

“I ought to count over Vasya’s pigeons, to see none of them have strayed,’ and so on. I used always to be talking to her across the fence, and in the end I made a little gate in the fence so as not to have to go so far round. From womankind comes much evil into the world and every kind of abomination. Not we sinners only; even the saints themselves have been led astray by them. Mashenka did not try to keep me at a distance. Instead of thinking of her husband and being on her guard, she fell in love with me. I began to notice that she was dull without me, and was always walking to and fro by the fence looking into my yard through the cracks.

“My brains were going round in my head in a sort of frenzy. On Thursday in Holy Week I was going early in the morning – it was scarcely light – to market. I passed close by her gate, and the Evil One was by me – at my elbow. I looked – she had a gate with open trellis work at the top – and there she was, up already, standing in the middle of the yard, feeding the ducks. I could not restrain myself, and I called her name. She came up and looked at me through the trellis... Her little face was white, her eyes soft and sleepy-looking... I liked her looks immensely, and I began paying her compliments,

as though we were not at the gate, but just as one does on namedays, while she blushed, and laughed, and kept looking straight into my eyes without winking... I lost all sense and began to declare my love to her... She opened the gate, and from that morning we began to live as man and wife..."

The hunchback Alyoshka came into the yard from the street and ran out of breath into the house, not looking at any one. A minute later he ran out of the house with a concertina. Jangling some coppers in his pocket, and cracking sunflower seeds as he ran, he went out at the gate.

"And who's that, pray?" asked Matvey Savitch.

"My son Alexey," answered Dyudya. "He's off on a spree, the rascal. God has afflicted him with a hump, so we are not very hard on him."

"And he's always drinking with the other fellows, always drinking," sighed Afanasyevna. "Before Carnival we married him, thinking he'd be steadier, but there! he's worse than ever."

"It's been no use. Simply keeping another man's daughter for nothing," said Dyudya.

Somewhere behind the church they began to sing a glorious, mournful song. The words they could not catch and only the voices could be heard – two tenors and a bass. All were listening; there was complete stillness in the yard... Two voices suddenly broke off with a loud roar of laughter, but the third, a tenor, still sang on, and took so high a note that every one instinctively looked upwards, as though the voice had soared to heaven itself.

Varvara came out of the house, and screening her eyes with her hand, as though from the sun, she looked towards the church.

"It's the priest's sons with the schoolmaster," she said.

Again all the three voices began to sing together. Matvey Savitch sighed and went on:

"Well, that's how it was, old man. Two years later we got a letter from Vasya from Warsaw. He wrote that he was being sent home sick. He was ill. By that time I had put all that foolishness out of my head, and I had a fine match picked out all ready for me, only I didn't know how to break it off with my sweetheart. Every day I'd make up my mind to have it out with Mashenka, but I didn't know how to approach her so as not to have a woman's screeching about my ears. The letter freed my hands. I read it through with Mashenka; she turned white as a sheet, while I said to her: 'Thank God; now,' says I, 'you'll be a married woman again.' But says she: 'I'm not going to live with him.' 'Why, isn't he your husband?' said I. 'Is it an easy thing?.. I never loved him and I married him not of my own free will. My mother made me.' 'Don't try to get out of it, silly,' said I, 'but tell me this: were you married to him in church or not?' 'I was married,' she said, 'but it's you that I love, and I will stay with you to the day of my death. Folks may jeer. I don't care... 'You're a Christian woman,' said I, 'and have read the Scriptures; what is written there?'

"Once married, with her husband she must live," said Dyudya.

"Man and wife are one flesh. We have sinned,' I said, 'you and I, and it is enough; we must repent and fear God. We must confess it all to Vasya,' said I; 'he's a quiet fellow and soft – he won't kill you. And indeed,' said I, 'better to suffer torments in this world at the hands of your lawful master than to gnash your teeth at the dread Seat of Judgment.' The wench wouldn't listen; she stuck to her silly, 'It's you I love!' and nothing more could I get out of her.

"Vasya came back on the Saturday before Trinity, early in the morning. From my fence I could see everything; he ran into the house, and came back a minute later with Kuzka in his arms, and he was laughing and crying all at once; he was kissing Kuzka and looking up at the hay-loft, and hadn't the heart to put the child down, and yet he was longing to go to his pigeons. He was always a soft sort of chap – sentimental. That day passed off very well, all quiet and proper. They had begun ringing the church bells for the evening service, when the thought struck me: 'To-morrow's Trinity Sunday; how is it they are not decking the gates and the fence with green? Something's wrong,' I thought. I went over to them. I peeped in, and there he was, sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, his eyes staring like a drunken man's, the tears streaming down his cheeks and his hands shaking; he was pulling cracknels, necklaces, gingerbread nuts, and all sorts of little presents out of his bundle and

flinging them on the floor. Kuzka – he was three years old – was crawling on the floor, munching the gingerbreads, while Mashenka stood by the stove, white and shivering all over, muttering: ‘I’m not your wife; I can’t live with you,’ and all sorts of foolishness. I bowed down at Vasya’s feet, and said: ‘We have sinned against you, Vassily Maximitch; forgive us, for Christ’s sake!’ Then I got up and spoke to Mashenka: ‘You, Marya Semyonovna, ought now to wash Vassily Maximitch’s feet and drink the water. Do you be an obedient wife to him, and pray to God for me, that He in His mercy may forgive my transgression.’ It came to me like an inspiration from an angel of Heaven; I gave her solemn counsel and spoke with such feeling that my own tears flowed too. And so two days later Vasya comes to me: ‘Matyusha,’ says he, ‘I forgive you and my wife; God have mercy on you! She was a soldier’s wife, a young thing all alone; it was hard for her to be on her guard. She’s not the first, nor will she be the last. Only,’ he says, ‘I beg you to behave as though there had never been anything between you, and to make no sign, while I,’ says he, ‘will do my best to please her in every way, so that she may come to love me again.’ He gave me his hand on it, drank a cup of tea, and went away more cheerful.

“‘Well,’ thought I, ‘thank God!’ and I did feel glad that everything had gone off so well. But no sooner had Vasya gone out of the yard, when in came Mashenka. Ah! What I had to suffer! She hung on my neck, weeping and praying: ‘For God’s sake, don’t cast me off; I can’t live without you!’”

“‘The vile hussy!’” sighed Dyudya.

“I swore at her, stamped my foot, and dragging her into the passage, I fastened the door with the hook. ‘Go to your husband,’ I cried. ‘Don’t shame me before folks. Fear God!’ And every day there was a scene of that sort.

“One morning I was standing in my yard near the stable cleaning a bridle. All at once I saw her running through the little gate into my yard, with bare feet, in her petticoat, and straight towards me; she clutched at the bridle, getting all smeared with the pitch, and shaking and weeping, she cried: ‘I can’t stand him; I loathe him; I can’t bear it! If you don’t love me, better kill me!’ I was angry, and I struck her twice with the bridle, but at that instant Vasya ran in at the gate, and in a despairing voice he shouted: ‘Don’t beat her! Don’t beat her!’ But he ran up himself, and waving his arms, as though he were mad, he let fly with his fists at her with all his might, then flung her on the ground and kicked her. I tried to defend her, but he snatched up the reins and thrashed her with them, and all the while, like a colt’s whinny, he went: ‘He – he – he!’”

“‘I’d take the reins and let you feel them,’” muttered Varvara, moving away; “‘murdering our sister, the damned brutes!..”

“‘Hold your tongue, you jade!’” Dyudya shouted at her.

“‘He – he – he!’” Matvey Savitch went on. “A carrier ran out of his yard; I called to my workman, and the three of us got Mashenka away from him and carried her home in our arms. The disgrace of it! The same day I went over in the evening to see how things were. She was lying in bed, all wrapped up in bandages, nothing but her eyes and nose to be seen; she was looking at the ceiling. I said: ‘Good-evening, Marya Semyonovna!’ She did not speak. And Vasya was sitting in the next room, his head in his hands, crying and saying: ‘Brute that I am! I’ve ruined my life! O God, let me die!’ I sat for half an hour by Mashenka and gave her a good talking-to. I tried to frighten her a bit. ‘The righteous,’ said I, ‘after this life go to Paradise, but you will go to a Gehenna of fire, like all adulteresses. Don’t strive against your husband, go and lay yourself at his feet.’ But never a word from her; she didn’t so much as blink an eyelid, for all the world as though I were talking to a post. The next day Vasya fell ill with something like cholera, and in the evening I heard that he was dead. Well, so they buried him, and Mashenka did not go to the funeral; she didn’t care to show her shameless face and her bruises. And soon there began to be talk all over the district that Vasya had not died a natural death, that Mashenka had made away with him. It got to the ears of the police; they had Vasya dug up and cut open, and in his stomach they found arsenic. It was clear he had been poisoned; the police came and took Mashenka away, and with her the innocent Kuzka. They were put in prison...

The woman had gone too far – God punished her... Eight months later they tried her. She sat, I remember, on a low stool, with a little white kerchief on her head, wearing a grey gown, and she was so thin, so pale, so sharp-eyed it made one sad to look at her. Behind her stood a soldier with a gun. She would not confess her guilt. Some in the court said she had poisoned her husband and others declared he had poisoned himself for grief. I was one of the witnesses. When they questioned me, I told the whole truth according to my oath. ‘Hers,’ said I, ‘is the guilt. It’s no good to conceal it; she did not love her husband, and she had a will of her own...’ The trial began in the morning and towards night they passed this sentence: to send her to hard labour in Siberia for thirteen years. After that sentence Mashenka remained three months longer in prison. I went to see her, and from Christian charity I took her a little tea and sugar. But as soon as she set eyes on me she began to shake all over, wringing her hands and muttering: ‘Go away! go away!’ And Kuzka she clasped to her as though she were afraid I would take him away. ‘See,’ said I, ‘what you have come to! Ah, Masha, Masha! you would not listen to me when I gave you good advice, and now you must repent it. You are yourself to blame,’ said I; ‘blame yourself!’ I was giving her good counsel, but she: ‘Go away, go away!’ huddling herself and Kuzka against the wall, and trembling all over.

“When they were taking her away to the chief town of our province, I walked by the escort as far as the station and slipped a rouble into her bundle for my soul’s salvation. But she did not get as far as Siberia... She fell sick of fever and died in prison.”

“Live like a dog and you must die a dog’s death,” said Dyudya.

“Kuzka was sent back home... I thought it over and took him to bring up. After all – though a convict’s child – still he was a living soul, a Christian... I was sorry for him. I shall make him my clerk, and if I have no children of my own, I’ll make a merchant of him. Wherever I go now, I take him with me; let him learn his work.”

All the while Matvey Savitch had been telling his story, Kuzka had sat on a little stone near the gate. His head propped in both hands, he gazed at the sky, and in the distance he looked in the dark like a stump of wood.

“Kuzka, come to bed,” Matvey Savitch bawled to him.

“Yes, it’s time,” said Dyudya, getting up; he yawned loudly and added:

“Folks will go their own way, and that’s what comes of it.”

Over the yard the moon was floating now in the heavens; she was moving one way, while the clouds beneath moved the other way; the clouds were disappearing into the darkness, but still the moon could be seen high above the yard.

Matvey Savitch said a prayer, facing the church, and saying good-night, he lay down on the ground near his cart. Kuzka, too, said a prayer, lay down in the cart, and covered himself with his little overcoat; he made himself a little hole in the hay so as to be more comfortable, and curled up so that his elbows looked like knees. From the yard Dyudya could be seen lighting a candle in his room below, putting on his spectacles and standing in the corner with a book. He was a long while reading and crossing himself.

The travellers fell asleep. Afanasyevna and Sofya came up to the cart and began looking at Kuzka.

“The little orphan’s asleep,” said the old woman. “He’s thin and frail, nothing but bones. No mother and no one to care for him properly.”

“My Grishutka must be two years older,” said Sofya. “Up at the factory he lives like a slave without his mother. The foreman beats him, I dare say. When I looked at this poor mite just now, I thought of my own Grishutka, and my heart went cold within me.”

A minute passed in silence.

“Doesn’t remember his mother, I suppose,” said the old woman.

“How could he remember?”

And big tears began dropping from Sofya’s eyes.

“He’s curled himself up like a cat,” she said, sobbing and laughing with tenderness and sorrow... “Poor motherless mite!”

Kuzka started and opened his eyes. He saw before him an ugly, wrinkled, tear-stained face, and beside it another, aged and toothless, with a sharp chin and hooked nose, and high above them the infinite sky with the flying clouds and the moon. He cried out in fright, and Sofya, too, uttered a cry; both were answered by the echo, and a faint stir passed over the stifling air; a watchman tapped somewhere near, a dog barked. Matvey Savitch muttered something in his sleep and turned over on the other side.

Late at night when Dyudya and the old woman and the neighbouring watchman were all asleep, Sofya went out to the gate and sat down on the bench. She felt stifled and her head ached from weeping. The street was a wide and long one; it stretched for nearly two miles to the right and as far to the left, and the end of it was out of sight. The moon was now not over the yard, but behind the church. One side of the street was flooded with moonlight, while the other side lay in black shadow. The long shadows of the poplars and the starling-cotes stretched right across the street, while the church cast a broad shadow, black and terrible that enfolded Dyudya’s gates and half his house. The street was still and deserted. From time to time the strains of music floated faintly from the end of the street – Alyoshka, most likely, playing his concertina.

Someone moved in the shadow near the church enclosure, and Sofya could not make out whether it were a man or a cow, or perhaps merely a big bird rustling in the trees. But then a figure stepped out of the shadow, halted, and said something in a man’s voice, then vanished down the turning by the church. A little later, not three yards from the gate, another figure came into sight; it walked straight from the church to the gate and stopped short, seeing Sofya on the bench.

“Varvara, is that you?” said Sofya.

“And if it were?”

It was Varvara. She stood still a minute, then came up to the bench and sat down.

“Where have you been?” asked Sofya.

Varvara made no answer.

“You’d better mind you don’t get into trouble with such goings-on, my girl,” said Sofya. “Did you hear how Mashenka was kicked and lashed with the reins? You’d better look out, or they’ll treat you the same.”

“Well, let them!”

Varvara laughed into her kerchief and whispered:

“I have just been with the priest’s son.”

“Nonsense!”

“I have!”

“It’s a sin!” whispered Sofya.

“Well, let it be... What do I care? If it’s a sin, then it is a sin, but better be struck dead by thunder than live like this. I’m young and strong, and I’ve a filthy crooked hunchback for a husband, worse than Dyudya himself, curse him! When I was a girl, I hadn’t bread to eat, or a shoe to my foot, and to get away from that wretchedness I was tempted by Alyoshka’s money, and got caught like a fish in a net, and I’d rather have a viper for my bedfellow than that scurvy Alyoshka. And what’s your life? It makes me sick to look at it. Your Fyodor sent you packing from the factory and he’s taken up with another woman. They have robbed you of your boy and made a slave of him. You work like a horse, and never hear a kind word. I’d rather pine all my days an old maid, I’d rather get half a rouble from the priest’s son, I’d rather beg my bread, or throw myself into the well...”

“It’s a sin!” whispered Sofya again.

“Well, let it be.”

Somewhere behind the church the same three voices, two tenors and a bass, began singing again a mournful song. And again the words could not be distinguished.

“They are not early to bed,” Varvara said, laughing.

And she began telling in a whisper of her midnight walks with the priest’s son, and of the stories he had told her, and of his comrades, and of the fun she had with the travellers who stayed in the house. The mournful song stirred a longing for life and freedom. Sofya began to laugh; she thought it sinful and terrible and sweet to hear about, and she felt envious and sorry that she, too, had not been a sinner when she was young and pretty.

In the churchyard they heard twelve strokes beaten on the watchman’s board.

“It’s time we were asleep,” said Sofya, getting up, “or, maybe, we shall catch it from Dyudya.”

They both went softly into the yard.

“I went away without hearing what he was telling about Mashenka,” said Varvara, making herself a bed under the window.

“She died in prison, he said. She poisoned her husband.”

Varvara lay down beside Sofya a while, and said softly:

“I’d make away with my Alyoshka and never regret it.”

“You talk nonsense; God forgive you.”

When Sofya was just dropping asleep, Varvara, coming close, whispered in her ear:

“Let us get rid of Dyudya and Alyoshka!”

Sofya started and said nothing. Then she opened her eyes and gazed a long while steadily at the sky.

“People would find out,” she said.

“No, they wouldn’t. Dyudya’s an old man, it’s time he did die; and they’d say Alyoshka died of drink.”

“I’m afraid... God would chastise us.”

“Well, let Him...”

Both lay awake thinking in silence.

“It’s cold,” said Sofya, beginning to shiver all over. “It will soon be morning... Are you asleep?”

“No... Don’t you mind what I say, dear,” whispered Varvara; “I get so mad with the damned brutes, I don’t know what I do say. Go to sleep, or it will be daylight directly... Go to sleep.”

Both were quiet and soon they fell asleep.

Earlier than all woke the old woman. She waked up Sofya and they went together into the cowshed to milk the cows. The hunchback Alyoshka came in hopelessly drunk without his concertina; his breast and knees had been in the dust and straw – he must have fallen down in the road. Staggering, he went into the cowshed, and without undressing he rolled into a sledge and began to snore at once. When first the crosses on the church and then the windows were flashing in the light of the rising sun, and shadows stretched across the yard over the dewy grass from the trees and the top of the well, Matvey Savitch jumped up and began hurrying about:

“Kuzka! get up!” he shouted. “It’s time to put in the horses! Look sharp!”

The bustle of morning was beginning. A young Jewess in a brown gown with flounces led a horse into the yard to drink. The pulley of the well creaked plaintively, the bucket knocked as it went down...

Kuzka, sleepy, tired, covered with dew, sat up in the cart, lazily putting on his little overcoat, and listening to the drip of the water from the bucket into the well as he shivered with the cold.

“Auntie!” shouted Matvey Savitch to Sofya, “tell my lad to hurry up and to harness the horses!”

And Dyudya at the same instant shouted from the window:

“Sofya, take a farthing from the Jewess for the horse’s drink! They’re always in here, the mangy creatures!”

In the street sheep were running up and down, baaing; the peasant women were shouting at the shepherd, while he played his pipes, cracked his whip, or answered them in a thick sleepy bass. Three sheep strayed into the yard, and not finding the gate again, pushed at the fence.

Varvara was waked by the noise, and bundling her bedding up in her arms, she went into the house.

“You might at least drive the sheep out!” the old woman bawled after her, “my lady!”

“I dare say! As if I were going to slave for you Herods!” muttered Varvara, going into the house.

Dyudya came out of the house with his accounts in his hands, sat down on the step, and began reckoning how much the traveller owed him for the night’s lodging, oats, and watering his horses.

“You charge pretty heavily for the oats, my good man,” said Matvey Savitch.

“If it’s too much, don’t take them. There’s no compulsion, merchant.”

When the travellers were ready to start, they were detained for a minute. Kuzka had lost his cap.

“Little swine, where did you put it?” Matvey Savitch roared angrily. “Where is it?”

Kuzka’s face was working with terror; he ran up and down near the cart, and not finding it there, ran to the gate and then to the shed. The old woman and Sofya helped him look.

“I’ll pull your ears off!” yelled Matvey Savitch. “Dirty brat!”

The cap was found at the bottom of the cart.

Kuzka brushed the hay off it with his sleeve, put it on, and timidly he crawled into the cart, still with an expression of terror on his face as though he were afraid of a blow from behind.

Matvey Savitch crossed himself. The driver gave a tug at the reins and the cart rolled out of the yard.

THE POST

IT was three o'clock in the night. The postman, ready to set off, in his cap and his coat, with a rusty sword in his hand, was standing near the door, waiting for the driver to finish putting the mail bags into the cart which had just been brought round with three horses. The sleepy postmaster sat at his table, which was like a counter; he was filling up a form and saying:

"My nephew, the student, wants to go to the station at once. So look here, Ignatyev, let him get into the mail cart and take him with you to the station: though it is against the regulations to take people with the mail, what's one to do? It's better for him to drive with you free than for me to hire horses for him."

"Ready!" they heard a shout from the yard.

"Well, go then, and God be with you," said the postmaster. "Which driver is going?"

"Semyon Glazov."

"Come, sign the receipt."

The postman signed the receipt and went out. At the entrance of the post-office there was the dark outline of a cart and three horses. The horses were standing still except that one of the tracehorses kept uneasily shifting from one leg to the other and tossing its head, making the bell clang from time to time. The cart with the mail bags looked like a patch of darkness. Two silhouettes were moving lazily beside it: the student with a portmanteau in his hand and a driver. The latter was smoking a short pipe; the light of the pipe moved about in the darkness, dying away and flaring up again; for an instant it lighted up a bit of a sleeve, then a shaggy moustache and big copper-red nose, then stern-looking, overhanging eyebrows. The postman pressed down the mail bags with his hands, laid his sword on them and jumped into the cart. The student clambered irresolutely in after him, and accidentally touching him with his elbow, said timidly and politely: "I beg your pardon."

The pipe went out. The postmaster came out of the post-office just as he was, in his waistcoat and slippers; shrinking from the night dampness and clearing his throat, he walked beside the cart and said:

"Well, God speed! Give my love to your mother, Mihailo. Give my love to them all. And you, Ignatyev, mind you don't forget to give the parcel to Bystretsov... Off!"

The driver took the reins in one hand, blew his nose, and, arranging the seat under himself, clicked to the horses.

"Give them my love," the postmaster repeated.

The big bell clanged something to the little bells, the little bells gave it a friendly answer. The cart squeaked, moved. The big bell lamented, the little bells laughed. Standing up in his seat the driver lashed the restless tracehorse twice, and the cart rumbled with a hollow sound along the dusty road. The little town was asleep. Houses and trees stood black on each side of the broad street, and not a light was to be seen. Narrow clouds stretched here and there over the star-spangled sky, and where the dawn would soon be coming there was a narrow crescent moon; but neither the stars, of which there were many, nor the half-moon, which looked white, lighted up the night air. It was cold and damp, and there was a smell of autumn.

The student, who thought that politeness required him to talk affably to a man who had not refused to let him accompany him, began:

"In summer it would be light at this time, but now there is not even a sign of the dawn. Summer is over!"

The student looked at the sky and went on:

"Even from the sky one can see that it is autumn. Look to the right. Do you see three stars side by side in a straight line? That is the constellation of Orion, which, in our hemisphere, only becomes visible in September."

The postman, thrusting his hands into his sleeves and retreating up to his ears into his coat collar, did not stir and did not glance at the sky. Apparently the constellation of Orion did not interest him. He was accustomed to see the stars, and probably he had long grown weary of them. The student paused for a while and then said:

“It’s cold! It’s time for the dawn to begin. Do you know what time the sun rises?”

“What?”

“What time does the sun rise now?”

“Between five and six,” said the driver.

The mail cart drove out of the town. Now nothing could be seen on either side of the road but the fences of kitchen gardens and here and there a solitary willow-tree; everything in front of them was shrouded in darkness. Here in the open country the half-moon looked bigger and the stars shone more brightly. Then came a scent of dampness; the postman shrank further into his collar, the student felt an unpleasant chill first creeping about his feet, then over the mail bags, over his hands and his face. The horses moved more slowly; the bell was mute as though it were frozen. There was the sound of the splash of water, and stars reflected in the water danced under the horses’ feet and round the wheels.

But ten minutes later it became so dark that neither the stars nor the moon could be seen. The mail cart had entered the forest. Prickly pine branches were continually hitting the student on his cap and a spider’s web settled on his face. Wheels and hoofs knocked against huge roots, and the mail cart swayed from side to side as though it were drunk.

“Keep to the road,” said the postman angrily. “Why do you run up the edge? My face is scratched all over by the twigs! Keep more to the right!”

But at that point there was nearly an accident. The cart suddenly bounded as though in the throes of a convulsion, began trembling, and, with a creak, lurched heavily first to the right and then to the left, and at a fearful pace dashed along the forest track. The horses had taken fright at something and bolted.

“Wo! wo!” the driver cried in alarm. “Wo... you devils!”

The student, violently shaken, bent forward and tried to find something to catch hold of so as to keep his balance and save himself from being thrown out, but the leather mail bags were slippery, and the driver, whose belt the student tried to catch at, was himself tossed up and down and seemed every moment on the point of flying out. Through the rattle of the wheels and the creaking of the cart they heard the sword fall with a clank on the ground, then a little later something fell with two heavy thuds behind the mail cart.

“Wo!” the driver cried in a piercing voice, bending backwards. “Stop!”

The student fell on his face and bruised his forehead against the driver’s seat, but was at once tossed back again and knocked his spine violently against the back of the cart.

“I am falling!” was the thought that flashed through his mind, but at that instant the horses dashed out of the forest into the open, turned sharply to the right, and rumbling over a bridge of logs, suddenly stopped dead, and the suddenness of this halt flung the student forward again.

The driver and the student were both breathless. The postman was not in the cart. He had been thrown out, together with his sword, the student’s portmanteau, and one of the mail bags.

“Stop, you rascal! Sto-op!” they heard him shout from the forest. “You damned blackguard!” he shouted, running up to the cart, and there was a note of pain and fury in his tearful voice. “You anathema, plague take you!” he roared, dashing up to the driver and shaking his fist at him.

“What a to-do! Lord have mercy on us!” muttered the driver in a conscience-stricken voice, setting right something in the harness at the horses’ heads. “It’s all that devil of a tracehorse. Cursed filly; it is only a week since she has run in harness. She goes all right, but as soon as we go down hill there is trouble! She wants a touch or two on the nose, then she wouldn’t play about like this... Stea-eady! Damn!”

While the driver was setting the horses to rights and looking for the portmanteau, the mail bag, and the sword on the road, the postman in a plaintive voice shrill with anger ejaculated oaths. After replacing the luggage the driver for no reason whatever led the horses for a hundred paces, grumbled at the restless tracehorse, and jumped up on the box.

When his fright was over the student felt amused and good-humoured. It was the first time in his life that he had driven by night in a mail cart, and the shaking he had just been through, the postman's having been thrown out, and the pain in his own back struck him as interesting adventures. He lighted a cigarette and said with a laugh:

“Why you know, you might break your neck like that! I very nearly flew out, and I didn't even notice you had been thrown out. I can fancy what it is like driving in autumn!”

The postman did not speak.

“Have you been going with the post for long?” the student asked.

“Eleven years.”

“Oho; every day?”

“Yes, every day. I take this post and drive back again at once. Why?”

Making the journey every day, he must have had a good many interesting adventures in eleven years. On bright summer and gloomy autumn nights, or in winter when a ferocious snowstorm whirled howling round the mail cart, it must have been hard to avoid feeling frightened and uncanny. No doubt more than once the horses had bolted, the mail cart had stuck in the mud, they had been attacked by highwaymen, or had lost their way in the blizzard...

“I can fancy what adventures you must have had in eleven years!” said the student. “I expect it must be terrible driving?”

He said this and expected that the postman would tell him something, but the latter preserved a sullen silence and retreated into his collar. Meanwhile it began to get light. The sky changed colour imperceptibly; it still seemed dark, but by now the horses and the driver and the road could be seen. The crescent moon looked bigger and bigger, and the cloud that stretched below it, shaped like a cannon in a gun-carriage, showed a faint yellow on its lower edge. Soon the postman's face was visible. It was wet with dew, grey and rigid as the face of a corpse. An expression of dull, sullen anger was set upon it, as though the postman were still in pain and still angry with the driver.

“Thank God it is daylight!” said the student, looking at his chilled and angry face. “I am quite frozen. The nights are cold in September, but as soon as the sun rises it isn't cold. Shall we soon reach the station?”

The postman frowned and made a wry face.

“How fond you are of talking, upon my word!” he said. “Can't you keep quiet when you are travelling?”

The student was confused, and did not approach him again all the journey. The morning came on rapidly. The moon turned pale and melted away into the dull grey sky, the cloud turned yellow all over, the stars grew dim, but the east was still cold-looking and the same colour as the rest of the sky, so that one could hardly believe the sun was hidden in it.

The chill of the morning and the surliness of the postman gradually infected the student. He looked apathetically at the country around him, waited for the warmth of the sun, and thought of nothing but how dreadful and horrible it must be for the poor trees and the grass to endure the cold nights. The sun rose dim, drowsy, and cold. The tree-tops were not gilded by the rays of the rising sun, as usually described, the sunbeams did not creep over the earth and there was no sign of joy in the flight of the sleepy birds. The cold remained just the same now that the sun was up as it had been in the night.

The student looked drowsily and ill-humouredly at the curtained windows of a mansion by which the mail cart drove. Behind those windows, he thought, people were most likely enjoying their soundest morning sleep not hearing the bells, nor feeling the cold, nor seeing the postman's angry

face; and if the bell did wake some young lady, she would turn over on the other side, smile in the fulness of her warmth and comfort, and, drawing up her feet and putting her hand under her cheek, would go off to sleep more soundly than ever.

The student looked at the pond which gleamed near the house and thought of the carp and the pike which find it possible to live in cold water...

“It’s against the regulations to take anyone with the post...” the postman said unexpectedly. “It’s not allowed! And since it is not allowed, people have no business... to get in... Yes. It makes no difference to me, it’s true, only I don’t like it, and I don’t wish it.”

“Why didn’t you say so before, if you don’t like it?”

The postman made no answer but still had an unfriendly, angry expression. When, a little later, the horses stopped at the entrance of the station the student thanked him and got out of the cart. The mail train had not yet come in. A long goods train stood in a siding; in the tender the engine driver and his assistant, with faces wet with dew, were drinking tea from a dirty tin teapot. The carriages, the platforms, the seats were all wet and cold. Until the train came in the student stood at the buffet drinking tea while the postman, with his hands thrust up his sleeves and the same look of anger still on his face, paced up and down the platform in solitude, staring at the ground under his feet.

With whom was he angry? Was it with people, with poverty, with the autumn nights?

THE NEW VILLA

I

Two miles from the village of Obrutchanovo a huge bridge was being built. From the village, which stood up high on the steep river-bank, its trellis-like skeleton could be seen, and in foggy weather and on still winter days, when its delicate iron girders and all the scaffolding around was covered with hoar frost, it presented a picturesque and even fantastic spectacle. Kutcherov, the engineer who was building the bridge, a stout, broad-shouldered, bearded man in a soft crumpled cap drove through the village in his racing droshky or his open carriage. Now and then on holidays navvies working on the bridge would come to the village; they begged for alms, laughed at the women, and sometimes carried off something. But that was rare; as a rule the days passed quietly and peacefully as though no bridge-building were going on, and only in the evening, when camp fires gleamed near the bridge, the wind faintly wafted the songs of the navvies. And by day there was sometimes the mournful clang of metal, don-don-don.

It happened that the engineer's wife came to see him. She was pleased with the river-banks and the gorgeous view over the green valley with trees, churches, flocks, and she began begging her husband to buy a small piece of ground and to build them a cottage on it. Her husband agreed. They bought sixty acres of land, and on the high bank in a field, where in earlier days the cows of Obrutchanovo used to wander, they built a pretty house of two storeys with a terrace and a verandah, with a tower and a flagstaff on which a flag fluttered on Sundays – they built it in about three months, and then all the winter they were planting big trees, and when spring came and everything began to be green there were already avenues to the new house, a gardener and two labourers in white aprons were digging near it, there was a little fountain, and a globe of looking-glass flashed so brilliantly that it was painful to look at. The house had already been named the New Villa.

On a bright, warm morning at the end of May two horses were brought to Obrutchanovo to the village blacksmith, Rodion Petrov. They came from the New Villa. The horses were sleek, graceful beasts, as white as snow, and strikingly alike.

“Perfect swans!” said Rodion, gazing at them with reverent admiration.

His wife Stepanida, his children and grandchildren came out into the street to look at them. By degrees a crowd collected. The Lytchkovs, father and son, both men with swollen faces and entirely beardless, came up bareheaded. Kozov, a tall, thin old man with a long, narrow beard, came up leaning on a stick with a crook handle: he kept winking with his crafty eyes and smiling ironically as though he knew something.

“It's only that they are white; what is there in them?” he said. “Put mine on oats, and they will be just as sleek. They ought to be in a plough and with a whip, too...”

The coachman simply looked at him with disdain, but did not utter a word. And afterwards, while they were blowing up the fire at the forge, the coachman talked while he smoked cigarettes. The peasants learned from him various details: his employers were wealthy people; his mistress, Elena Ivanovna, had till her marriage lived in Moscow in a poor way as a governess; she was kind-hearted, compassionate, and fond of helping the poor. On the new estate, he told them, they were not going to plough or to sow, but simply to live for their pleasure, live only to breathe the fresh air. When he had finished and led the horses back a crowd of boys followed him, the dogs barked, and Kozov, looking after him, winked sarcastically.

“Landowners, too-oo!” he said. “They have built a house and set up horses, but I bet they are nobodies – landowners, too-oo.”

Kozov for some reason took a dislike from the first to the new house, to the white horses, and to the handsome, well-fed coachman. Kozov was a solitary man, a widower; he had a dreary life (he was prevented from working by a disease which he sometimes called a rupture and sometimes worms) he was maintained by his son, who worked at a confectioner's in Harkov and sent him money; and from early morning till evening he sauntered at leisure about the river or about the village; if he saw, for instance, a peasant carting a log, or fishing, he would say: "That log's dry wood – it is rotten," or, "They won't bite in weather like this." In times of drought he would declare that there would not be a drop of rain till the frost came; and when the rains came he would say that everything would rot in the fields, that everything was ruined. And as he said these things he would wink as though he knew something.

At the New Villa they burned Bengal lights and sent up fireworks in the evenings, and a sailing-boat with red lanterns floated by Obrutchanovo. One morning the engineer's wife, Elena Ivanovna, and her little daughter drove to the village in a carriage with yellow wheels and a pair of dark bay ponies; both mother and daughter were wearing broad-brimmed straw hats, bent down over their ears.

This was exactly at the time when they were carting manure, and the blacksmith Rodion, a tall, gaunt old man, bareheaded and barefooted, was standing near his dirty and repulsive-looking cart and, flustered, looked at the ponies, and it was evident by his face that he had never seen such little horses before.

"The Kutcherov lady has come!" was whispered around. "Look, the Kutcherov lady has come!"

Elena Ivanovna looked at the huts as though she were selecting one, and then stopped at the very poorest, at the windows of which there were so many children's heads – flaxen, red, and dark. Stepanida, Rodion's wife, a stout woman, came running out of the hut; her kerchief slipped off her grey head; she looked at the carriage facing the sun, and her face smiled and wrinkled up as though she were blind.

"This is for your children," said Elena Ivanovna, and she gave her three roubles.

Stepanida suddenly burst into tears and bowed down to the ground. Rodion, too, flopped to the ground, displaying his brownish bald head, and as he did so he almost caught his wife in the ribs with the fork. Elena Ivanovna was overcome with confusion and drove back.

II

The Lytchkovs, father and son, caught in their meadows two cart-horses, a pony, and a broad-faced Aalhaus bull-calf, and with the help of red-headed Volodka, son of the blacksmith Rodion, drove them to the village. They called the village elder, collected witnesses, and went to look at the damage.

"All right, let 'em!" said Kozov, winking, "le-et em! Let them get out of it if they can, the engineers! Do you think there is no such thing as law? All right! Send for the police inspector, draw up a statement!.."

"Draw up a statement," repeated Volodka.

"I don't want to let this pass!" shouted the younger Lytchkov. He shouted louder and louder, and his beardless face seemed to be more and more swollen. "They've set up a nice fashion! Leave them free, and they will ruin all the meadows! You've no sort of right to ill-treat people! We are not serfs now!"

"We are not serfs now!" repeated Volodka.

"We got on all right without a bridge," said the elder Lytchkov gloomily; "we did not ask for it. What do we want a bridge for? We don't want it!"

"Brothers, good Christians, we cannot leave it like this!"

"All right, let 'em!" said Kozov, winking. "Let them get out of it if they can! Landowners, indeed!"

They went back to the village, and as they walked the younger Lytchkov beat himself on the breast with his fist and shouted all the way, and Volodka shouted, too, repeating his words. And meanwhile quite a crowd had gathered in the village round the thoroughbred bull-calf and the horses. The bullcalf was embarrassed and looked up from under his brows, but suddenly lowered his muzzle to the ground and took to his heels, kicking up his hind legs; Kozov was frightened and waved his stick at him, and they all burst out laughing. Then they locked up the beasts and waited.

In the evening the engineer sent five roubles for the damage, and the two horses, the pony and the bull-calf, without being fed or given water, returned home, their heads hanging with a guilty air as though they were convicted criminals.

On getting the five roubles the Lytchkovs, father and son, the village elder and Volodka, punted over the river in a boat and went to a hamlet on the other side where there was a tavern, and there had a long carousal. Their singing and the shouting of the younger Lytchkov could be heard from the village. Their women were uneasy and did not sleep all night. Rodion did not sleep either.

“It’s a bad business,” he said, sighing and turning from side to side. “The gentleman will be angry, and then there will be trouble... They have insulted the gentleman... Oh, they’ve insulted him. It’s a bad business...”

It happened that the peasants, Rodion amongst them, went into their forest to divide the clearings for mowing, and as they were returning home they were met by the engineer. He was wearing a red cotton shirt and high boots; a setter dog with its long tongue hanging out, followed behind him.

“Good-day, brothers,” he said.

The peasants stopped and took off their hats.

“I have long wanted to have a talk with you, friends,” he went on. “This is what it is. Ever since the early spring your cattle have been in my copse and garden every day. Everything is trampled down; the pigs have rooted up the meadow, are ruining everything in the kitchen garden, and all the undergrowth in the copse is destroyed. There is no getting on with your herdsmen; one asks them civilly, and they are rude. Damage is done on my estate every day and I do nothing – I don’t fine you or make a complaint; meanwhile you impounded my horses and my bull calf and exacted five roubles. Was that right? Is that neighbourly?” he went on, and his face was so soft and persuasive, and his expression was not forbidding. “Is that the way decent people behave? A week ago one of your people cut down two oak saplings in my copse. You have dug up the road to Eresnevo, and now I have to go two miles round. Why do you injure me at every step? What harm have I done you? For God’s sake, tell me! My wife and I do our utmost to live with you in peace and harmony; we help the peasants as we can. My wife is a kind, warm-hearted woman; she never refuses you help. That is her dream – to be of use to you and your children. You reward us with evil for our good. You are unjust, my friends. Think of that. I ask you earnestly to think it over. We treat you humanely; repay us in the same coin.”

He turned and went away. The peasants stood a little longer, put on their caps and walked away. Rodion, who always understood everything that was said to him in some peculiar way of his own, heaved a sigh and said:

“We must pay. ‘Repay in coin, my friends’... he said.”

They walked to the village in silence. On reaching home Rodion said his prayer, took off his boots, and sat down on the bench beside his wife. Stepanida and he always sat side by side when they were at home, and always walked side by side in the street; they ate and they drank and they slept always together, and the older they grew the more they loved one another. It was hot and crowded in their hut, and there were children everywhere – on the floors, in the windows, on the stove... In spite of her advanced years Stepanida was still bearing children, and now, looking at the crowd of children, it was hard to distinguish which were Rodion’s and which were Volodka’s. Volodka’s wife, Lukerya, a plain young woman with prominent eyes and a nose like the beak of a bird, was kneading dough in a tub; Volodka was sitting on the stove with his legs hanging.

“On the road near Nikita’s buckwheat... the engineer with his dog...” Rodion began, after a rest, scratching his ribs and his elbow. ““You must pay,’ says he... ‘coin,’ says he... Coin or no coin, we shall have to collect ten kopecks from every hut. We’ve offended the gentleman very much. I am sorry for him...”

“We’ve lived without a bridge,” said Volodka, not looking at anyone, “and we don’t want one.”

“What next; the bridge is a government business.”

“We don’t want it.”

“Your opinion is not asked. What is it to you?”

“Your opinion is not asked,” Volodka mimicked him. “We don’t want to drive anywhere; what do we want with a bridge? If we have to, we can cross by the boat.”

Someone from the yard outside knocked at the window so violently that it seemed to shake the whole hut.

“Is Volodka at home?” he heard the voice of the younger Lytchkov. “Volodka, come out, come along.”

Volodka jumped down off the stove and began looking for his cap.

“Don’t go, Volodka,” said Rodion diffidently. “Don’t go with them, son. You are foolish, like a little child; they will teach you no good; don’t go!”

“Don’t go, son,” said Stepanida, and she blinked as though about to shed tears. “I bet they are calling you to the tavern.”

“To the tavern,” Volodka mimicked.

“You’ll come back drunk again, you currish Herod,” said Lukerya, looking at him angrily. “Go along, go along, and may you burn up with vodka, you tailless Satan!”

“You hold your tongue,” shouted Volodka.

“They’ve married me to a fool, they’ve ruined me, a luckless orphan, you red-headed drunkard...” wailed Lukerya, wiping her face with a hand covered with dough. “I wish I had never set eyes on you.”

Volodka gave her a blow on the ear and went off.

III

Elena Ivanovna and her little daughter visited the village on foot. They were out for a walk. It was a Sunday, and the peasant women and girls were walking up and down the street in their brightly-coloured dresses. Rodion and Stepanida, sitting side by side at their door, bowed and smiled to Elena Ivanovna and her little daughter as to acquaintances. From the windows more than a dozen children stared at them; their faces expressed amazement and curiosity, and they could be heard whispering:

“The Kutcherov lady has come! The Kutcherov lady!”

“Good-morning,” said Elena Ivanovna, and she stopped; she paused, and then asked: “Well, how are you getting on?”

“We get along all right, thank God,” answered Rodion, speaking rapidly. “To be sure we get along.”

“The life we lead!” smiled Stepanida. “You can see our poverty yourself, dear lady! The family is fourteen souls in all, and only two bread-winners. We are supposed to be blacksmiths, but when they bring us a horse to shoe we have no coal, nothing to buy it with. We are worried to death, lady,” she went on, and laughed. “Oh, oh, we are worried to death.”

Elena Ivanovna sat down at the entrance and, putting her arm round her little girl, pondered something, and judging from the little girl’s expression, melancholy thoughts were straying through her mind, too; as she brooded she played with the sumptuous lace on the parasol she had taken out of her mother’s hands.

“Poverty,” said Rodion, “a great deal of anxiety – you see no end to it. Here, God sends no rain... our life is not easy, there is no denying it.”

“You have a hard time in this life,” said Elena Ivanovna, “but in the other world you will be happy.”

Rodion did not understand her, and simply coughed into his clenched hand by way of reply. Stepanida said:

“Dear lady, the rich men will be all right in the next world, too. The rich put up candles, pay for services; the rich give to beggars, but what can the poor man do? He has no time to make the sign of the cross. He is the beggar of beggars himself; how can he think of his soul? And many sins come from poverty; from trouble we snarl at one another like dogs, we haven’t a good word to say to one another, and all sorts of things happen, dear lady – God forbid! It seems we have no luck in this world nor the next. All the luck has fallen to the rich.”

She spoke gaily; she was evidently used to talking of her hard life. And Rodion smiled, too; he was pleased that his old woman was so clever, so ready of speech.

“It is only on the surface that the rich seem to be happy,” said Elena Ivanovna. “Every man has his sorrow. Here my husband and I do not live poorly, we have means, but are we happy? I am young, but I have had four children; my children are always being ill. I am ill, too, and constantly being doctored.”

“And what is your illness?” asked Rodion.

“A woman’s complaint. I get no sleep; a continual headache gives me no peace. Here I am sitting and talking, but my head is bad, I am weak all over, and I should prefer the hardest labour to such a condition. My soul, too, is troubled; I am in continual fear for my children, my husband. Every family has its own trouble of some sort; we have ours. I am not of noble birth. My grandfather was a simple peasant, my father was a tradesman in Moscow; he was a plain, uneducated man, too, while my husband’s parents were wealthy and distinguished. They did not want him to marry me, but he disobeyed them, quarrelled with them, and they have not forgiven us to this day. That worries my husband; it troubles him and keeps him in constant agitation; he loves his mother, loves her dearly. So I am uneasy, too, my soul is in pain.”

Peasants, men and women, were by now standing round Rodion’s hut and listening. Kozov came up, too, and stood twitching his long, narrow beard. The Lytchkovs, father and son, drew near.

“And say what you like, one cannot be happy and satisfied if one does not feel in one’s proper place.” Elena Ivanovna went on. “Each of you has his strip of land, each of you works and knows what he is working for; my husband builds bridges – in short, everyone has his place, while I, I simply walk about. I have not my bit to work. I don’t work, and feel as though I were an outsider. I am saying all this that you may not judge from outward appearances; if a man is expensively dressed and has means it does not prove that he is satisfied with his life.”

She got up to go away and took her daughter by the hand.

“I like your place here very much,” she said, and smiled, and from that faint, diffident smile one could tell how unwell she really was, how young and how pretty; she had a pale, thinnish face with dark eyebrows and fair hair. And the little girl was just such another as her mother: thin, fair, and slender. There was a fragrance of scent about them.

“I like the river and the forest and the village,” Elena Ivanovna went on; “I could live here all my life, and I feel as though here I should get strong and find my place. I want to help you – I want to dreadfully – to be of use, to be a real friend to you. I know your need, and what I don’t know I feel, my heart guesses. I am sick, feeble, and for me perhaps it is not possible to change my life as I would. But I have children. I will try to bring them up that they may be of use to you, may love you. I shall impress upon them continually that their life does not belong to them, but to you. Only I beg you earnestly, I beseech you, trust us, live in friendship with us. My husband is a kind, good man. Don’t worry him, don’t irritate him. He is sensitive to every trifle, and yesterday, for instance, your cattle

were in our vegetable garden, and one of your people broke down the fence to the bee-hives, and such an attitude to us drives my husband to despair. I beg you,” she went on in an imploring voice, and she clasped her hands on her bosom – “I beg you to treat us as good neighbours; let us live in peace! There is a saying, you know, that even a bad peace is better than a good quarrel, and, ‘Don’t buy property, but buy neighbours.’ I repeat my husband is a kind man and good; if all goes well we promise to do everything in our power for you; we will mend the roads, we will build a school for your children. I promise you.”

“Of course we thank you humbly, lady,” said Lytchkov the father, looking at the ground; “you are educated people; it is for you to know best. Only, you see, Voronov, a rich peasant at Eresnevo, promised to build a school; he, too, said, ‘I will do this for you,’ ‘I will do that for you,’ and he only put up the framework and refused to go on. And then they made the peasants put the roof on and finish it; it cost them a thousand roubles. Voronov did not care; he only stroked his beard, but the peasants felt it a bit hard.”

“That was a crow, but now there’s a rook, too,” said Kozov, and he winked.

There was the sound of laughter.

“We don’t want a school,” said Volodka sullenly. “Our children go to Petrovskoe, and they can go on going there; we don’t want it.”

Elena Ivanovna seemed suddenly intimidated; her face looked paler and thinner, she shrank into herself as though she had been touched with something coarse, and walked away without uttering another word. And she walked more and more quickly, without looking round.

“Lady,” said Rodion, walking after her, “lady, wait a bit; hear what I would say to you.”

He followed her without his cap, and spoke softly as though begging.

“Lady, wait and hear what I will say to you.”

They had walked out of the village, and Elena Ivanovna stopped beside a cart in the shade of an old mountain ash.

“Don’t be offended, lady,” said Rodion. “What does it mean? Have patience. Have patience for a couple of years. You will live here, you will have patience, and it will all come round. Our folks are good and peaceable; there’s no harm in them; it’s God’s truth I’m telling you. Don’t mind Kozov and the Lytchkovs, and don’t mind Volodka. He’s a fool; he listens to the first that speaks. The others are quiet folks; they are silent. Some would be glad, you know, to say a word from the heart and to stand up for themselves, but cannot. They have a heart and a conscience, but no tongue. Don’t be offended... have patience... What does it matter?”

Elena Ivanovna looked at the broad, tranquil river, pondering, and tears flowed down her cheeks. And Rodion was troubled by those tears; he almost cried himself.

“Never mind...” he muttered. “Have patience for a couple of years. You can have the school, you can have the roads, only not all at once. If you went, let us say, to sow corn on that mound you would first have to weed it out, to pick out all the stones, and then to plough, and work and work... and with the people, you see, it is the same... you must work and work until you overcome them.”

The crowd had moved away from Rodion’s hut, and was coming along the street towards the mountain ash. They began singing songs and playing the concertina, and they kept coming closer and closer...

“Mamma, let us go away from here,” said the little girl, huddling up to her mother, pale and shaking all over; “let us go away, mamma!”

“Where?”

“To Moscow... Let us go, mamma.”

The child began crying.

Rodion was utterly overcome; his face broke into profuse perspiration; he took out of his pocket a little crooked cucumber, like a half-moon, covered with crumbs of rye bread, and began thrusting it into the little girl’s hands.

“Come, come,” he muttered, scowling severely; “take the little cucumber, eat it up... You mustn’t cry. Mamma will whip you... She’ll tell your father of you when you get home. Come, come...”

They walked on, and he still followed behind them, wanting to say something friendly and persuasive to them. And seeing that they were both absorbed in their own thoughts and their own griefs, and not noticing him, he stopped and, shading his eyes from the sun, looked after them for a long time till they disappeared into their copse.

IV

The engineer seemed to grow irritable and petty, and in every trivial incident saw an act of robbery or outrage. His gate was kept bolted even by day, and at night two watchmen walked up and down the garden beating a board; and they gave up employing anyone from Obrutchanovo as a labourer. As ill-luck would have it someone (either a peasant or one of the workmen) took the new wheels off the cart and replaced them by old ones, then soon afterwards two bridles and a pair of pincers were carried off, and murmurs arose even in the village. People began to say that a search should be made at the Lytchkovs’ and at Volodka’s, and then the bridles and the pincers were found under the hedge in the engineer’s garden; someone had thrown them down there.

It happened that the peasants were coming in a crowd out of the forest, and again they met the engineer on the road. He stopped, and without wishing them good-day he began, looking angrily first at one, then at another:

“I have begged you not to gather mushrooms in the park and near the yard, but to leave them for my wife and children, but your girls come before daybreak and there is not a mushroom left... Whether one asks you or not it makes no difference. Entreaties, and friendliness, and persuasion I see are all useless.”

He fixed his indignant eyes on Rodion and went on:

“My wife and I behaved to you as human beings, as to our equals, and you? But what’s the use of talking! It will end by our looking down upon you. There is nothing left!”

And making an effort to restrain his anger, not to say too much, he turned and went on.

On getting home Rodion said his prayer, took off his boots, and sat down beside his wife.

“Yes...” he began with a sigh. “We were walking along just now, and Mr. Kutcherov met us... Yes... He saw the girls at daybreak... ‘Why don’t they bring mushrooms,’... he said ‘to my wife and children?’ he said... And then he looked at me and he said: ‘I and my wife will look after you,’ he said. I wanted to fall down at his feet, but I hadn’t the courage... God give him health... God bless him!...”

Stephania crossed herself and sighed.

“They are kind, simple-hearted people,” Rodion went on. “‘We shall look after you.’... He promised me that before everyone. In our old age... it wouldn’t be a bad thing... I should always pray for them... Holy Mother, bless them...”

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, the fourteenth of September, was the festival of the village church. The Lytchkovs, father and son, went across the river early in the morning and returned to dinner drunk; they spent a long time going about the village, alternately singing and swearing; then they had a fight and went to the New Villa to complain. First Lytchkov the father went into the yard with a long ashen stick in his hands. He stopped irresolutely and took off his hat. Just at that moment the engineer and his family were sitting on the verandah, drinking tea.

“What do you want?” shouted the engineer.

“Your honour...” Lytchkov began, and burst into tears. “Show the Divine mercy, protect me... my son makes my life a misery... your honour...”

Lytchkov the son walked up, too; he, too, was bareheaded and had a stick in his hand; he stopped and fixed his drunken senseless eyes on the verandah.

“It is not my business to settle your affairs,” said the engineer. “Go to the rural captain or the police officer.”

“I have been everywhere... I have lodged a petition...” said Lytchkov the father, and he sobbed. “Where can I go now? He can kill me now, it seems. He can do anything. Is that the way to treat a father? A father?”

He raised his stick and hit his son on the head; the son raised his stick and struck his father just on his bald patch such a blow that the stick bounced back. The father did not even flinch, but hit his son again and again on the head. And so they stood and kept hitting one another on the head, and it looked not so much like a fight as some sort of a game. And peasants, men and women, stood in a crowd at the gate and looked into the garden, and the faces of all were grave. They were the peasants who had come to greet them for the holiday, but seeing the Lytchkovs, they were ashamed and did not go in.

The next morning Elena Ivanovna went with the children to Moscow. And there was a rumour that the engineer was selling his house...

V

The peasants had long ago grown used to the sight of the bridge, and it was difficult to imagine the river at that place without a bridge. The heap of rubble left from the building of it had long been overgrown with grass, the navvies were forgotten, and instead of the strains of the “Dubinushka” that they used to sing, the peasants heard almost every hour the sounds of a passing train.

The New Villa has long ago been sold; now it belongs to a government clerk who comes here from the town for the holidays with his family, drinks tea on the terrace, and then goes back to the town again. He wears a cockade on his cap; he talks and clears his throat as though he were a very important official, though he is only of the rank of a collegiate secretary, and when the peasants bow he makes no response.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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