

# The Three

(1900)

by Maxim Gorky



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Socialist Stories*

Many solitary graves are scattered through the woods of Kerzhenetz. The bones of old hermits, devotees of ancient sects, rot within these graves, and about one such hermit, Antippa by name, the village folk of the Kerzhenetz region recount the following story.

Antippa Lunyev, a rich peasant of stern disposition, having enjoyed the iniquitous life of this world to the age of fifty, suddenly gave himself up to meditation, grew melancholic, left his family, and took to the woods. There, on the edge of a ravine, he felled logs for a cell in which he lived for eight years, summer and winter, allowing no one to enter it, neither friend nor kinsman. Occasionally people who lost their way in the woods came upon Antippa's cell and caught sight of him there kneeling at prayer in the doorway. He was a fearful sight to behold: he had withered away with fasting and praying and was as overgrown with hair as the beasts of the field. When-

ever he laid eyes on a human being he would rise to his feet and make a low bow. If he were asked the way out of the woods, he would point to the path without a word, bow to the earth once again, retire into his cell, and lock the door. Many had seen him in the course of those eight years, but none had heard his voice. His wife and children visited him; he accepted the food and clothes they brought, bowed low to them as to all others, but uttered not a word.

He died in the year when all hermitages were destroyed, and his death took place in the following manner.

Into the woods came a police officer and his men, and there they saw Antippa on his knees in his cell praying silently.

“Hey, you!” cried the police officer. “Come out! We’re going to tear down your den.” But Antippa did not hear him.

Shout as the police officer might, the recluse answered not a word. The police officer ordered his men to drag Antippa out, but his men, seeing that the old man went on praying fervently, oblivious of their presence, were confounded by his strength of spirit and refused to obey the police officer. The latter then ordered them to tear down the hut. Cautiously, lest they do the old man harm, they began to take apart the roof.

Hatchets hacked away over his head, boards split as they were thrown down on the ground, the dull sound of

the blows carried into the woods, sending the birds circling in alarm above the cell and making the leaves tremble on the trees. The old man went on praying as if he neither heard nor saw. The workmen began to remove the logs of the walls; still the hermit knelt there motionless. When the last log had been hauled away the police officer came up to the old man and seized him by the hair.

“Father, forgive them!” said Antippa in a low voice, rolling his eyes up to heaven. And, falling on his face, he gave up the ghost.

At the time when this happened Antippa's elder son, Yakov, was twenty-three years old, and his younger son, Terenty, was eighteen. While still in his teens, Yakov, a strong and handsome lad, won for himself the nickname of Harum-scarum and by the time of his father's death he was known as the most dissolute and incorrigible youth in the region. Everyone complained of him—his mother, the neighbours, even the elder of the village. They kept him in solitary confinement, thrashed him in public, beat him without so much as a trial, but none of these things curbed his wild spirits and it grew more and more difficult for him to live in this village, among the *Raskolniki*, people as industrious as beavers, abhorrent of anything new, fanatically devoted to the precepts of an ancient faith.



Yakov smoked tobacco, drank vodka, and wore clothes of a foreign cut. He did not attend mass, and when the village elders remonstrated with him and reminded him of his father, he only laughed contemptuously.

"Wait, good folk," said he. "Everything in good time. When I've had my fill of sinning, I, too, will repent. But the time hasn't come yet. Don't hold my father up to me—he lived a life of sin for fifty years and repented for only eight. My sins are as the down on a fledgling; when they become black as a raven's feathers it will be time enough for this young blood to repent."

"Heretic!" the villagers called him, and they feared and hated him.

Some two years after Antippa's death Yakov got married. No one in his native village (where everyone knew he had squandered all the means it had taken his father thirty years of hard labour to acquire) would give his daughter to him in marriage. And so he took to wife a pretty orphan from a far-off village, selling his father's apiary to pay for the wedding celebration. His brother Terenty, a weak, taciturn hunchback with dangling arms, did nothing to oppose his way of life; his ailing mother spent most of her time lying on the stove-bunk, from where she would call down to him in hoarse, menacing tones:

"Wretch! You might at least spare your own soul! Think what you're doing!"

“That’s all right, Mother. Father will intercede for me in heaven.”

For almost a year Yakov lived with his wife in peace and quiet. He even began to work, but then his bestial nature got the better of him again and for whole months he would disappear from home, returning to his wife ragged and bruised and hungry. His mother died. At the funeral feast the drunken Yakov pummelled his old enemy, the village elder, and for this he was put into a prisoners’ company in the army. When he had served his term he came back sullen, vengeful, and with a shaved head. The villagers hated him more than ever and their hatred carried over to the members of his family, especially to the meek hunchback Terenty, whom the young folk had made the butt of their jokes from earliest childhood. They called Yakov a bandit and a jail-bird, Terenty—a cripple and a wizard. Terenty accepted their jokes and imprecations in silence; Yakov hurled threats at them.

“Just you wait!” he would say. “I’ll show you yet!”

He was about forty years old when a dreadful fire broke out in the village. He was accused of having started it and deported to Siberia.

Terenty was left to take care of Yakov’s wife, who had gone mad during the fire, and his son Ilya, a grave, sturdy, black-eyed lad of ten. Whenever Ilya appeared

out of doors the little boys would chase him and throw stones at him, and the grown-ups would call out:

“You little demon! May you dry up and blow away, you son of a convict!”

Before the fire, Terenty, who was incapable of physical work, had sold tar, thread, needles, and other trifles. But the fire, which destroyed half the village, burned down the Lunyevs' hut along with all Terenty's stock-in-trade, so that when the fire was put out the only thing he had in all the world was a horse and forty-three rubles. He knew he would never again be able to make a living here, so great was the hostility of the villagers, and so he turned over his brother's wife to the care of a lone woman for a ruble and a half a month, bought himself an old cart, put his nephew in it, and set out for the biggest town in the district to seek aid from a distant relative named Petrukha Filimonov, who worked as barman in a public house.

Terenty drove away from the smoking remains of his home secretly, after dark, like a thief in the night. As he drove he kept glancing back with his big black calf-like eyes. The horse moved at a slow pace, the cart jerked over the ruts, and soon Ilya, who was lying behind in the straw, fell into the fast sleep of childhood.

He was awakened in the middle of the night by a hair-raising cry that resembled the howling of a wolf. It was

a bright night, the cart was standing at the edge of the forest and the horse was snorting as it munched the dewy grass. In the middle of the fields stood one lone pine that looked as if it had been driven out of the forest. As Ilya's sharp eyes roved anxiously in search of his uncle, the occasional stamping of the horse's hoofs came to him with a distinctness heightened by the silence of the night; the animal's snorting sounded like deep sighs, and the strange and desolate howling vibrated in the child's ears, filling him with fear.

"Uncle," he said softly.

"Eh?" replied Terenty, and the howling suddenly stopped.

"Where are you?"

"Here. Go back to sleep."

Ilya saw his uncle, a black shadow that might have been an uprooted stump, sitting on a little mound at the edge of the woods.

"I'm afraid," said the boy.

"What are you afraid of? There's nobody here but us."

"Somebody was howling."

"You dreamt it."

"Honest-to-goodness!"

"Maybe it was a wolf. Far away. Go to sleep."

But Ilya could not sleep. The silence was terrifying and the howl kept sounding in his ears. He gazed intently about

him and noticed that his uncle was staring in the direction of a five-domed white church that stood on a hill deep in the forest with a big round moon shining brightly above it. The boy knew this was the Romodanovsky church, and that, two versts on the other side of it, their native village of Kitezhnaya stood on the edge of a gully in the midst of the forest.

"We haven't gone far," he said pensively.

"What?" said his uncle.

"I said we'd better be on our way. Somebody might come from there."

Ilya nodded apprehensively in the direction of the village.

"We'll be going in just a minute," murmured his uncle.

Again everything was quiet. Ilya leaned on the dashboard of the cart and gazed in the same direction as his uncle. The village was indistinguishable in the deep dark shadows of the forest, but Ilya fancied he could see it, with all its huts and people and the old willow-tree beside the well in the middle of the road. Under the willow lay his father in a torn shirt, his hands and feet bound with ropes. His arms were twisted behind him, his naked breast arched forward, his head seemed to have grown fast to the trunk of the willow. He lay as motionless as if dead, staring wild-eyed at the muzhiks gathered round

him. There were many of them and they all shouted and swore at him. The memory of this saddened the child, making a lump rise in his throat. He felt he was about to cry, but, fearing to disturb his uncle, he stiffened all his muscles to hold back the tears.

Suddenly the soft howling began again. First there was a long-drawn sigh, then a whimpering that turned into this unspeakably plaintive howl:

“O-o-o-o!”

The child gave a shudder of fear and grew utterly still. The sound quivered and grew stronger.

“Uncle! Is it you howling?” cried Ilya.

Terenty did not answer, did not stir. The boy jumped out of the cart, ran over to him, fell at his feet, and began to cry. Between sobs he could hear his uncle saying:

“They squeezed us out. Dear God in heaven, where are we to go now?”

“Just you wait, when I get big I’ll show them!” said the boy, choking back his tears.

When he had cried himself out he fell into a doze. His uncle picked him up in his arms and put him in the cart, then went back and began to howl again—a prolonged, plaintive howl, like that of a puppy.

...Ilya remembered well his arrival in the town. Early in the morning he woke up to see a broad and turbid

river, on the other side of which rose a steep hill dotted with houses having red and green roofs and surrounded by orchards. The houses scrambled up the hill in picturesque clusters, and on reaching the top marshalled themselves into a straight line to gaze proudly out over the river. Above the roofs rose the golden domes and crosses of the churches thrusting deep into the sky. The sun was just coming up; its slanting rays were reflected in the windows of the houses, and the whole town was ablaze with colour and aglitter with gold.

“Ai-yi! Look at that!” exclaimed the lad, and fell to gazing at the marvellous sight in silent ecstasy. But soon a disturbing thought came into his mind: Where would they live here—he, a little shock-headed boy in trousers of sacking, and his clumsy, humpbacked uncle? Would they let them into that rich, clean, enormous town sparkling with gold? He supposed it was just because they would not allow poor people into the town that their cart was standing here on the bank of the river. His uncle must have gone to ask permission.

With a sinking heart Ilya looked about in search of his uncle. He was surrounded by other carts. Some of them were loaded with wooden milk casks, others with sacks of potatoes and baskets of cucumbers, onions, berries, and fowl. Muzhiks and their wives were sitting in the carts or standing beside them. They were not like the

people Ilya was accustomed to: when they spoke they enunciated every word loudly and distinctly, and they were dressed in bright gingham and red calico rather than in the blue sacking Ilya was accustomed to seeing. Almost all of them had boots on their feet, and they did not so much as bow to the man with the sabre at his side who walked among them, let alone show fear of him. Ilya liked that. As he sat there in the cart looking at the lively, sunny scene, he dreamt of a time when he, too, would wear boots and a red calico shirt.

Among the muzhiks in the distance he caught sight of Uncle Terenty. He was striding with firm steps through the deep sand, his head thrown back and a cheerful look on his face. While yet some distance away he smiled at Ilya and held out his hand to show him something.

"The Lord's with us, Ilya," he said. "I found Petrukha without the least-trouble. Here, chew on this for the time being," and he held out a biscuit.

With a feeling almost of awe the boy took it and thrust it inside his shirt.

"Won't they let anyone into the town?" he asked anxiously.

"They will soon. Soon as the ferry comes."

"What about us?"

"Us too."



“Oh,” said Ilya in relief. “I thought they wouldn’t let us in. Where are we going to live?”

“I don’t know.”

“I wish it was in that big red house.”

“That’s the barracks. Soldiers live there.”

“Then in that one—see? Way up yonder.”

“So that’s what you’d like, eh? That’s too high up for us.”

“Never fear,” said Ilya reassuringly, “we’d climb up to it.”

“Silly monkey,” sighed Terenty, and turned and walked off again.

They went to live near the market at the edge of town in a big grey house. Its four walls had innumerable sheds and additions built on to them—some of them new, others as dirty-grey as the house itself. All the windows and doors were warped and all the boards creaked. The sheds, the fence, and the gates sagged, leaning on each other, forming one big heap of rotting timber. The glass of the windows was dim with age, some of the joists of the façade had come bulging out, making the house resemble its owner, who kept a pub there. He, too, was old and grey; the eyes in his flabby face were as dim as the glass in the windows, and he supported himself with a thick stick when he walked, as if it were hard for him to carry his bulging belly about.

When Ilya first came to live in this house he climbed

all over it and inspected everything. He was struck by its amazing capacity; so many people were crammed into it that Ilya was sure that there must be more of them here than in the whole village of Kitezhnaya. The pub, which was always crowded, took up both floors. Some drunken women lived up in the attic. One of them, an enormous black-haired creature with a bass voice and the nickname of Matitza, struck terror in his soul when her angry black eyes met his. The basement was occupied by: cobbler Perfishka with his invalid wife and seven-year-old daughter; Grandad Yeremei, a rag-picker; a skinny and loud-mouthed beggar-woman who was called Polorotaya; a cabby, very timid and taciturn, named Makar Stepanich. In one corner of the courtyard was a blacksmith's shop with a fire burning in it from morning to night. Carriage-wheels were tyred and horses shod at the smithy. Savel, the tall brawny smith, sang songs in a rich but cheerless voice as he swung his hammer. Sometimes his wife, a plump little woman with fair hair and blue eyes, would come to see him at work. She always wore a white shawl on her head, and it was strange to see that white head against the black hole of the smithy. She had a silvery laugh, and sometimes Savel would echo it in peals like hammer blows. But more often he replied by roaring at her.

A human being was to be found in every chink of this old house, and from early morning to late at night it

fairly rocked with the noise and the shouting, as if something were bubbling and boiling in an old rusty pot. In the evening all the people crawled out of their chinks to sit in the courtyard or on the bench beside the gate. Cobbler Perfishka played the accordion, Savel hummed a song, and Matitza, if drunk, would sing a sad tune with words nobody could understand, crying bitterly the while.

In one corner of the courtyard all the children would gather in a ring round Grandad Yeremei.

"Tell us a story, Grandad!" they would coax him. "Please, oh pl-e-a-se!"

For a moment the old man would look at them with his sore red eyes, out of which murky tears kept rolling down his shrivelled cheeks; then, clapping his old and faded hat on to his head, would begin in a high, trembling, singsong voice:

"In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, an impious scamp was born of unknown parents, who were punished for their sins in this way by an all-knowing God...."

Grandad Yeremei's long grey beard shook as he opened and closed his toothless mouth, and his head shook too, and the tears kept rolling down his cheeks, one by one.

"A bold bad fellow this son turned out to be," he went on. "He had no belief in Christ our Lord, nor did he love the Holy Virgin; past the church he would go

without so much as baring his head and he never obeyed his father and mother. . . .”

The children listened with rapt attention to the old man's thin voice and sat staring up into his face without a word. But none of them listened as attentively as Yakov, son of Petrukha the barman. He was a frail little fellow with a pointed nose and a big head supported by a scrawny neck. When he ran, his head bounced from side to side as if about to break off its stem. His eyes were big and restless. They slid hurriedly over objects as if afraid to become fixed on them, and if they did become fixed, they protruded in an odd way that lent his face a sheepish look. His bloodless face and clean, decent clothes set him apart from the other boys. Ilya immediately made friends with him.

“Are there many wizards in your village?” Yakov asked his new friend on the first day of their acquaintance.

“Quite a few,” answered Ilya. “Our neighbour was a wizard.”

“A red-head?”

“No, he was grey-headed. They all are.”

“The grey-heads aren't so bad. They're kind-hearted. But the red-heads—phew!—they suck blood.”

They were sitting under a bush that grew under an old lime-tree on the other side of the rubbish heap—the most cosy and attractive spot in the courtyard. It was

reached by squeezing through a narrow opening between the shed and the house. In this quiet corner nothing could be seen but the sky overhead and a wall of the house with three windows in it, two of which were boarded up. Sparrows chirped up in the branches of the lime, and the boys talked in low voices down below, seated on its gnarled roots.

During the first few days of life in this house Ilya felt as if someone were shrieking and shaking many-coloured rags in his face, blinding and deafening him. He was so dazed that he seemed to have lost his wits. He would stand for hours in the pub beside the table on which his sweating Uncle Terenty would be washing dishes, and watch the people coming and going, eating, drinking, singing, shouting, kissing, fighting, and milling about in the smoky air like lunatics.

“Get out,” his uncle would say, shaking his head and making a great clatter with the glasses. “What are you doing here? Get out before the owner catches you. He’ll give it to you.”

“Ai-yi!” was Ilya’s favourite exclamation, and he made it mentally as he went outside, his head reeling from the clamour of the pub. At one end of the yard Savel was hammering away and railing at his apprentice; out of a basement window trailed a cheery song sung by cobbler Perfishka; from the attic came the cries and

scolding of drunken women. Pavel, the blacksmith's son, was riding a stick and shouting angrily:

"Whoa, you bloody nag!"

His round and impish face was smudged with soot, there was a lump on his forehead, and his shirt was torn, giving glimpses of his sturdy little body. Pavel was the most mischievous boy in the house. He had already given the awkward Ilya two beatings, and when Ilya had run crying to his uncle, the latter had merely shrugged his shoulders:

"Can't be helped. Grin and bear it."

"I'll show him!" wailed Ilya through his tears.

"Don't you dare!" admonished his uncle sternly. "Don't even think of doing such a thing!"

"Then why does *he*?"

"He? He belongs here. You don't."

Ilya went on threatening to get even with Pavel and this made his uncle so angry that, contrary to his custom, he shouted at him. Ilya was thereby made to know, if hazily, that he must not try to put himself on an equal footing with the boys who "belonged here." And so, concealing his dislike for Pavel, he grew more friendly than ever with Yakov.

Yakov was a dignified little chap. He never fought and rarely raised his voice. Nor did he take part in games, though he was fond of describing the games rich children

played in their gardens and in the public squares. The only other person with whom Yakov made friends was seven-year-old Masha, daughter of cobbler Perfishka. She was a thin, besmudged little girl whose dark curls were to be seen bobbing about the courtyard from morning to night. Her mother, too, was always there, sitting in the entrance to the basement. She was a tall woman with a thick braid hanging down her back, and she was constantly bent low over some sewing. When she lifted her head to catch sight of her little girl, Ilya got a glimpse of her face. It was a puffy, immobile face tinged with blue, like that of a corpse, and her dark and kindly eyes were also immobile. She never spoke to anybody. She even called her little girl to her by making signs, but on rare occasions she would cry in a hoarse, choked voice:

“Masha!”

At first Ilya liked her, but when he heard that for two years she had been unable to walk and would soon die, he became afraid of her.

One day when he was walking past she caught him by the sleeve and drew him, trembling, to her.

“Please be good to Masha,” she said. She could hardly speak, her breath came in such gasps. “Be good to her, dear boy,” and with a piteous glance into his face she let him go. From that day on Ilya and Yakov took the greatest care of the cobbler’s little girl, doing their best to protect

her from harm. Ilya was struck by the fact that a grown-up had asked a favour of him, for most grown-ups did nothing but hit little boys and order them about. Makar, the cabby, kicked them and struck them in the face with a wet rag if they happened to come close to him while he was washing his trap. Savel lost his temper with anyone who came into the smithy out of curiosity, and he threw charcoal bags at little boys. Perfishka hurled the first thing that came to hand at anyone who cut off his light by standing in front of his window. Sometimes grown-ups struck children for no better reason than that they had nothing else to do. But Grandad Yeremei never struck them.

Very soon Ilya came to think that life in the village was better than life in town. In the village you could go wandering off wherever you liked, but here his uncle forbade him to leave the courtyard. It was quieter in the village, there was more space there, and the people were all engaged in doing work he understood. Here they did whatever they chose, but they depended upon others for their daily bread, and were always half-starved.

One day during dinner Terenty drew a deep sigh.

"Autumn's coming, Ilya," he said. "We'll feel the turn of the screw worse than ever then. Ah, me!" and he sat staring into his bowl of cabbage soup. The boy, too, fell to thinking. They were eating at the same table on which Terenty washed dishes.



“Petrukha says you ought to go to school along of Yakov. I know you ought. A person can no more get on without learning than without eyes in this place. But you’ve got to have shoes and clothes if you’re to go to school. Ah, dear God, our only hope!”

His uncle’s sighs and the melancholy look in his eyes caused Ilya a pang.

“Let’s go away from here,” he said softly.

“Where to?” asked the hunchback drearily.

“We could go to—to the woods!” said Ilya, suddenly growing lively. “Remember you told me how Grandad lived in the woods all by himself for years and years? And there’s two of us. We’d bark the trees. We’d kill foxes and squirrels. You’d have a gun and I’d have traps. I’d catch birds—honest I would. And there’d be berries and mushrooms. Let’s go, shall we?”

His uncle looked at him affectionately.

“And what about the wolves and the bears?” he said with a smile.

“You’d have a gun,” said Ilya with spirit. “I won’t be afraid of wild animals when I grow up. I’ll kill them with my bare hands. I’m not afraid of them now. This is no way to live—I’m little, but even I can see that. You get hit harder here than in the village. When the smith lams you over the head it hums for a whole day afterwards.”

“Your poor little beggar,” and Terenty threw down his spoon and hurried away.

That evening, when Ilya was tired of hanging about the yard, he came in and sat down on the floor beside his uncle’s table. As he dozed off he heard Terenty talking to Grandad Yeremei, who had come to the pub for tea. The rag-picker had struck up a friendship with the hunchback and always chose a seat near his table.

“Never you mind,” Ilya heard Yeremei say in his squeaky voice, “there’s only one thing that counts, and that’s God. We’re all servants of God, as it’s writ in the Good Book. God sees your sufferings, be sure of that, and there’ll come a happy day when he’ll call his angel and say, ‘Go down, heavenly messenger, and ease the life of my humble servant Terenty.’”

“I put my trust in the Lord, Grandad. What else can I do?” said Terenty softly.

“I’ll scrape together enough money to fit Ilya out for school,” said Yeremei in a voice that sounded like Petrukha the barman’s when he was angry. “I’ll lend it to you. You can give it back when you’re rich.”

“Grandad!” exclaimed Terenty under his breath.

“That’s all right, don’t say nothing. And for the present let me have that boy of yours. This is no place for him. He can be bringing me an interest on my money—find me a bone or a rag—save me from bending my back.”

"May the Lord reward you!" cried out the hunchback in a ringing voice.

"The Lord'll reward me and I'll reward you and you'll reward the boy and the boy'll reward the Lord and that's how the wheel goes round. And nobody'll owe nobody nothing, bless you. Ah, brother, it's many a year I've lived and many a thing I've seen, but there's nothing worth seeing but the good Lord God. All things come from Him and all things go to Him—His, back to Him."

Ilya fell asleep to the murmur of their talking. Early the next morning Grandad Yeremei woke him up.

"Come for an outing with me, Ilya! Lively, lad!"

Ilya was happy in the gentle care of rag-picker Yeremei. Early every morning the old man woke him up and they went off collecting rags, bones, paper, old iron, and bits of leather. The town was large and held countless things of interest. For the first few days Ilya was so busy studying the people and houses, wondering at and about everything, and asking the old man so many questions, that he had no time to help. Yeremei was a willing talker. He walked from house to house with bent head, eyes on the ground, tapping his way with the metal tip of his stick, wiping his running eyes on his ragged sleeve or the end of his dirty sack, and explaining unceasingly to his little helper in a monotonous, singsong voice:

“This house belongs to merchant Pchelin, Savva Petrovich. He’s a rich man, Savva Petrovich is.”

“Grandad,” said Ilya, “how do people get rich?”

“By the sweat of their brow; that is, by working. They work all day and they work all night and they save their money and when they’ve saved a lot they build themselves a house and buy horses and dishes and all sorts of things. All of them new. And they hire clerks and porters and such like to do their work for them and they have a good rest and don’t do nothing. That’s what’s called enjoying the fruits of honest labour. But there’s others as get rich by sin. They say this merchant Pchelin killed a man when he was young. Maybe it’s just said out of envy, and maybe it’s the truth. He’s a wicked man, Pchelin is, and his eyes have got a scared look in them. They keep darting about and hiding themselves. Maybe it’s lies they tell about Pchelin. It can happen that a man gets rich all of a sudden. A stroke of good luck. The Lord God’s the only one as knows the truth. We don’t know nothing. We’re just humans. Humans are God’s seed. Seed, my lad—that’s all us humans are. God scatters us over the earth and says, ‘Grow, humans, and let me see what you’ll turn out to be.’ True, sonny. And this house belongs to Sabaneyev, Mitry Pavlovich. He’s even richer than Pchelin. He’s the wickedest man as ever was, I can tell you that, though God’s the one to judge and not me. But I know it for a fact. He was the

headman in our village and how he did thieve! He stole the very skins off our backs. The Lord God was very patient with Mitry Pavlovich, but at last his patience give out. First he went deaf, Mitry Pavlovich did, then his son was killed by horses, and not long ago his daughter ran away.”

Ilya studied the house attentively as he drank in the old man's every word.

“If I could only get one little peep inside!” he breathed from time to time.

“You will. Study hard, and when you grow up you'll see everything. Maybe you'll even get rich yourself. The thing is to live. Take me, now—I've lived so long and looked at things so hard I've wore my eyes out. See? I just can't stop these tears from running and that's why I'm so thin and feeble. Everything runs out of me with the tears.”

Ilya enjoyed hearing the old man speak about God, he did it so lovingly and with such conviction. His gentle words evoked in the child a bright hope that there was something better ahead, and this made him more cheerful and less like a grown-up than he had been when he first came to live in town.

He eagerly helped the old man dig into rubbish piles. There was something fascinating about searching through the litter; and his efforts were richly rewarded by the joy on the old man's face whenever something of particular

value was unearthed. One day Ilya found a big silver spoon. For this the old man bought him a pound of peppermint cakes. Another time he dug up a mouldy purse which turned out to have over a ruble in it. Sometimes they found knives and forks, bolts and screws, and once Ilya pulled a heavy brass candlestick out of the gully at the edge of the town dump. The old man made him some little present every time he added anything of value to the day's pickings.

"Look, Grandad!" Ilya would cry out in joy. "See this? Ai-yi!"

"Don't shout. Don't shout, I tell you," the old man would say, glancing uneasily about him.

The finding of anything extraordinary always frightened him, and he would snatch it quickly out of the child's hands and thrust it into his enormous sack.

"Learn how to keep your mouth shut," he would say mildly, the tears pouring out of his inflamed eyes.

He gave Ilya a smaller sack and a stick with a metal tip. The boy was proud of this professional equipment. In his own sack he collected boxes, broken toys, colourful bits of broken pottery; he liked to feel the weight of them on his back and hear them rattle as he walked. Grandad Yeremei taught him what to select.

"Choose this and that and bring them home and give them to the children. That'll make them happy. It's a good thing to make people happy. God wants us to do that.

Everybody wants happiness, and there's so little of it in this world! So very little that some people live on and on without ever once getting a taste of it! Never once—think of that!”

Ilya preferred rummaging in the town dump to going from house to house. There was never anyone at the dump but a few other rag-pickers, so that there was no need to glance furtively about in expectation of being chased away by a yard porter.

After rummaging in the dump for two hours or so, Yeremei would be sure to say:

“That's enough, Ilya. Let's have a rest and something to eat.”

And he would take a piece of bread out of his shirt, cross himself, and break it in two. When they had eaten they would stretch themselves out on the edge of the gully and rest for half an hour or so. The gully ended in a river, which they could see from where they lay. It went billowing slowly past, broad and silvery-blue, and as Ilya watched it he longed to float upon its waters. Beyond the river stretched broad meadowlands, with hayricks rising like grey towers upon them, and far away, at the very edge of the earth, the dark, serrated wall of the forest cut into the sky. The meadowlands slept quietly, gently, and one had the feeling that the air there must be clear and pure and fragrant. Here there was the stifling odour of rotting refuse;

it bore down upon Ilya's chest, irritated his nose, and made his eyes water like Grandad Yeremei's.

He lay on his back and gazed up into the blue dome of the sky, vainly searching for the apex. A feeling of sadness and drowsiness overcame him and hazy visions passed through his mind. He fancied that some enormous being whose contours escaped the eye was floating there in the blue, a being stern yet kindly, shedding a translucent radiance, and it seemed as if he and Grandad Yeremei and the whole world were streaming towards this being, up and up into the illimitable spaces, into the blue shimmer, into the pureness and light. And a sweet quiet joy fell upon his heart.

On returning home in the evening he entered the courtyard with the important air of one who had come home to rest after a hard day's work and had no time to waste on the nonsense other children indulge in. His grave mien and the sack on his back inspired respect in the other children.

Grandad Yeremei would smile at the children and be sure to make some jocular remark, such as:

"Here comes the camels with packs on their backs and bursting sacks. Ilya, go and wash your mug and join me in the pub for tea."

Ilya would swagger over to the basement entrance followed by a flock of children who timidly felt his sack.



But Pavel would be sure to plant himself in his way.

"Well, scavenger, show us what you've brought!" he would cry mockingly.

"Wait," Ilya would cut him short. "I'll show you when I've had my tea."

In the pub his uncle would greet him with a warm smile.

"So the workingman's home, is he? You're an energetic little duffer! Tired?"

It was pleasant for Ilya to have his uncle call him a workingman, but it was not only his uncle who called him this. One day when Pavel had been up to mischief as usual, Savel caught him and held his head between his knees while he gave him a licking with a rope.

"None of your tricks, you little monkey, none of your tricks," he cried. "Take this... and this... and this! Other boys of your age earn their bread, but all you do is stuff your belly and wear out clothes."

Pavel kicked and squirmed and howled at the top of his lungs, but the rope kept coming down remorselessly. Ilya took a strange satisfaction in hearing the wild shrieks of his enemy, and the words of the smith filled him with a consciousness that he was better than Pavel. This made him pity his playmate.

"Don't, Uncle Savel!" he called out suddenly.

The smith delivered one last blow before turning to Ilya and saying testily:

"You keep out of it. What are you standing up for him for? Want me to give it to you, too?" and, flinging his son aside, he strode out of the smithy. Pavel got up and staggered off to a dark corner of the yard. Ilya followed him, his heart bursting with compassion. Pavel knelt down in the corner, pressed his head against the fence, put his hands on his haunches, and howled louder than ever. Ilya wanted to say something comforting to his defeated enemy, but the only words that came were:

"Does it hurt?"

"Go away!"

It was unpleasant to be rebuffed so.

"You're always licking others; now you see—" he began sententiously, but before he could finish Pavel had thrown himself upon him and knocked him down. This infuriated Ilya, and the two of them went rolling over the ground in a ball. Pavel bit and scratched and Ilya seized him by the hair and banged his head against the ground until he cried out for mercy.

"Let go!"

"See?" said Ilya, getting up triumphantly. "I'm stronger than you are. Don't ever touch me again."

And he walked off, wiping his bleeding face on his sleeve. The smith was standing glowering in the middle of the yard. Ilya gave a little start of fear when he saw him, certain that Savel would give him a beating for having

touched his son. But the smith only shrugged his shoulders and said:

“What are you staring at? Never seen me before? Be off with you!”

That evening Savel caught Ilya outside the gate and gave him the lightest of fillips on the back of his head.

“How’s business, scavenger?” he asked with a gloomy smile.

Ilya laughed gleefully: this was happiness. The dread smith, the strongest man in the yard, feared and respected by everyone, was joking with him. Savel gripped Ilya’s shoulders in iron fingers and added to his happiness by saying:

“Ho, ho! You’re a strong little shaver! You’ll not wear out in a hurry—not you! When you grow up I’ll take you to work in my smithy.”

Ilya seized the smith’s enormous leg and hugged it tightly. Savel must have felt the ecstatic fluttering of the little boy’s heart, for he laid a heavy hand on his head and, after a moment’s pause, said sadly:

“Poor little orphan. Here, let go.”

It was a beaming Ilya who undertook his usual task that evening—the task of distributing the prizes collected during the day. His playmates sat themselves on the ground and fixed greedy eyes on the dirty sack. One by one Ilya took out a scrap of calico, a wooden soldier faded with wear,

an empty shoe-polish tin, an empty hair-oil tin, and a cracked tea-cup without a handle.

"This is mine!" "No, mine!" cried eager voices, and dirty little hands reached up for the precious objects.

"Wait! Don't snatch!" ordered Ilya. "What fun is it if you snatch everything all at once? . . . Well, the shop's open. Who wants to buy a bit of calico? The best calico. Fifty kopeks. Buy it, Masha."

"It's bought for her," said Yakov, taking out of his pocket the bit of broken pottery he had got ready for the occasion and pushing it into the seller's hand.

"That's no fun," said Ilya, giving it back. "You've got to bargain with me. You never bargain. Who buys things like that?"

"I forgot," apologized Yakov.

And so a brisk bargaining began. While buyer and seller were engrossed in their task, Pavel stole whatever struck his fancy.

"Look what I've got!" he called out in teasing tones, leaping and dancing about. "Look what I've got! And nobody saw me take it! Sillies! Blindies!"

His teasing drove them mad. The smaller children cried and Yakov and Ilya chased him round the courtyard, but they could not catch him. They rarely could. In time they grew used to his cheating and did not expect anything else of him. They all came to dislike him heartily and nobody

would play with him. Pavel kept aloof, but he was always looking for a chance to do someone harm.

Yakov was as solicitous as a nursemaid of the cobblers curly-headed little girl. She accepted his services as her due and often slapped and scratched him, though on occasion she showed him affection. He became more friendly than ever with Ilya and was always recounting some strange dream to him:

“...like as if I had lots and lots of money, all in rubles—a great big sackful! And here I am hauling it through the woods. All of a sudden—robbers! With knives! Wasn’t I scared, just? I start running, and all of a sudden I feel something stirring inside the sack. I throw it away and what should fly out of it but a lot of birds—whirr, whirr!—more’n you can count! They snatch me up and carry me away—far, far up into the sky...”

He broke off and sat staring with that sheepish look on his face.

“Well?” urged Ilya, eager to hear the end.

“I flew away for good,” concluded Yakov dreamily.

“Where to?”

“For good.”

“Pish!” said Ilya with contemptuous disappointment.

“You can’t even remember where!”

Out of the pub came Grandad Yeremei, who raised a hand to shield his eyes as he looked about.

"Ilya! You here? Time to go to bed!" he called out.

Ilya dutifully followed the old man and lay down on the sack of hay which served as his bed. Sweet were his dreams on that sack, and pleasant his life with the rag-picker. But it was not to last long.

Grandad Yeremei bought Ilya boots, a greatcoat, and a cap, and sent him to school. Ilya set out in fear and curiosity; he came back sullen, injured, his eyes brimming with tears. The boys had instantly recognized him as Grandad Yeremei's helpmate and had greeted him with cries of:

"Rag-picker! Stinking scavenger!"

Some of them pinched him, others stuck their tongues out at him, and one boy came close, sniffed him, and turned away with a grimace.

"Whew, what a smell!" he cried.

"Why should they tease me?" Ilya asked his uncle. "Is there anything shameful about collecting rags?"

"Nothing, lad," said Terenty, patting him on the head and hiding his face from his nephew's searching glance. "They're just being naughty. Don't you pay any attention to them—you'll get used to them after a while!"

"And they make fun of my boots and my coat, too. They say they're not really mine, that they came out of the rubbish heap."

Grandad Yeremei, too, spoke words of comfort.

“Patience, sonny,” he said, his eyes twinkling cheerily. “God will make it up to you. He will. Nobody counts but Him.”

It was as if the old man knew all of God’s thoughts and was aware of all His intentions, so complete was his faith and joy in Him. His words temporarily dispelled the child’s sense of injury, but on the next day it came back with renewed force. Ilya had grown accustomed to looking upon himself as a workman, a person of importance; even Savel, the smith, was well disposed towards him, and here were these schoolboys making fun of him. He could not reconcile himself to such a thing. The bitterness of his first impression of school increased, making deeper inroads into his heart with every day. Attendance at school came to be a painful duty. The teacher immediately became aware of his gifts and held him up as an example to the others. This made them dislike him the more. From where he sat on the front bench he was conscious of the enmity of the boys behind him, and they, having him always before their eyes, tried to find things in him to laugh at. And they did.

Yakov attended the same school and was just as unpopular with the boys. They called him The Sheep. He was perpetually being punished, for he was a dull and absent-minded child, but he seemed not to mind the punishment. Indeed, he was oblivious of most of what went

on about him. Both at home and at school he lived a life apart, and hardly a day went by but he astonished Ilya by asking some preposterous question.

"Ilya," he would say, "how can people see everything with such little eyes? They can see a whole town. Or take this street—how can the whole of it get into your eyes?"

At first Ilya gave due attention to these questions, but in time they came to annoy him, distracting his attention from matters that rankled in his breast. There were many such matters, and the child soon learned to give a nice appraisal of what he saw.

"The teacher? Humph! He knows what he's about, he does," he said to Yeremei with a grin. "Yesterday the son of shopkeeper Malafeyev broke a window, and all he does is give him a little talking to, and today he puts a new pane in with his own money."

"Just see how kind-hearted he is," said Yeremei.

"Kind-hearted!" scoffed Ilya. "When Vanka Klucharev broke a window he made him go without his dinner and sent for his father and says, 'Forty kopeks for the glass.' Vanka's father gave him a licking besides."

"Shut your eyes to such things, Ilya," advised the old man, blinking uneasily. "Tell yourself it's none of your business. It's up to God to say what's fair and unfair, not us. We don't know anything. But He knows the measure of all things. All the years I've lived in this world, and all



the injustice I've seen! And not a drop of justice. Yet here am I, going on eighty years old; surely in all that long time justice must have rubbed up against me somewhere. But I never saw it, never got to know what it tastes like."

"What's there to know?" said Ilya. "If you take forty kopeks from this one, take it from that one, too. That's justice."

But the old man disagreed. He spoke at length of the blindness of human beings and their inability to pass fair judgment on one another. Only God can judge fairly. Ilya listened attentively, but his face grew more and more sullen and his eyes darkened.

"When's God going to judge?" he asked the old man suddenly.

"Nobody knows. The hour will strike and He will come down out of the clouds to judge the living and the dead. But nobody knows when. Come to vespers with me some time, lad."

And so on the next Saturday Ilya went to church with Grandad Yeremei. They stood among the beggars in the vestibule, between two doors. Whenever the street door was opened Ilya was caught in a cold draught. His feet froze and he stamped them on the stone floor to warm them. Through the glass door he saw the flames of many candles flickering among gold in a luminous pattern,

tremblingly alive, that lighted up the priest's chasubles, the bowed heads of the worshippers, the faces of the icons, and the beautiful carving of the iconostasis.

Here in the church people seemed more benevolent and submissive than they were outside. They even looked more comely in the golden glitter that touched their dark and silent forms. Whenever the door into the church was opened a warm and fragrant wave of song was borne out to him. Gently it washed over the child, and he delighted in it. It was good to be standing here next to Grandad Yeremei, listening to him whisper his prayers. And lovely sounds were being wafted through the church, and Ilya waited impatiently for the door to be opened again, so that their warm fragrance would flow over him. He knew that Grisha Bubnov, one of the most malicious fun-makers in the school, and Fedya Dolganov, a strong lad who was always starting a fight, were singing in the choir, but at the moment he did not dislike or resent them. He envied them a little. He himself would have loved to be up there in the choir, looking down on the congregation. It must be glorious to stand so high above everybody else, next to the very gates of the Kingdom! When he went out of the church he felt that he was a better boy, and he was willing to make his peace with Bubnov, Dolganov, and all the other rude fellows.

But on Monday he came home from school as hurt and sullen as ever.

In every crowd there is one who feels out of place, and that does not mean he is necessarily better or worse than the others. A person does not have to have a brilliant mind or an absurd nose to attract ridicule. In singling someone out to laugh at, the crowd is moved solely by the desire to be amused. In the given instance, the one singled out was Ilya Lunyev. Things might have ended lamentably for him had not something occurred in his life at this very moment that robbed him of all interest in school and made him feel above it.

It all began with seeing an excited crowd outside the gate of his house one day on returning home from school with Yakov.

“Look!” he cried, “there must be another fight on. Let’s run and see.”

They rushed forward and saw strangers dashing about the yard and shouting:

“Call the police! Tie him!”

A particularly dense crowd was gathered outside the smithy. The boys pushed their way into the centre of it, but quickly withdrew. A woman was lying face-down in the snow. The back of her head was covered with blood and a doughy substance, and the snow about her head was stained a deep red. Beside her lay a crumpled

white shawl and the smith's tongs. In the door of the smithy sat Savel, all hunched over and staring at the woman's hands, which were stretched out in front of her clutching the snow. The smith was frowning hard and his face looked drawn; his teeth were clenched so tightly that two round knobs could be seen at the hinging of his jaws. He was holding on to the door-jamb with his right hand, the stained fingers of which kept wriggling. Everything else about him was utterly still.

The people stared at him in silence, with stern faces, and although there was much noise and movement at the gate, everyone stood quiet outside the smithy. Grandad Yeremei, sweaty and dishevelled, made his way through the crowd.

"Here, take a drink, Savel," he said, holding out a dipper of water in a trembling hand.

"It's not water, but a noose he wants," muttered someone in the crowd.

Savel took the dipper in his left hand and drank for a long, long time. When all the water was drunk up he stared into the empty dipper and said in his husky voice:

"I warned her, 'Stop it, you bitch,' I said. 'I'll kill you if you don't,' I said. I forgave her. Time and again. But she wouldn't listen. So there you are. Pavel's an orphan now. Take care of him, Grandad. You stand in good with God."

"Ah, me!" said Grandad pathetically, laying a trembling hand on the smith's shoulder.

"The wretch! Daring to speak about God!" came the same voice from the crowd.

With that the smith snapped up his eyebrows.

"What are you doing here?" he roared. "Get out!"

His words were like a whip-lash sending the crowd cringing away with a low mutter. The smith got up and walked over to his dead wife, but he instantly whirled round and went, tall and straight, into the smithy. Everyone saw him sit down on his anvil and rock back and forth, clutching his head as if it hurt him unspeakably. Ilya felt sorry for him. He walked away and began pacing the courtyard as if in a dream, moving from one group to another, hearing people's voices but understanding nothing they said.

The police came and dispersed the crowd, then they led the smith away.

"Good-bye, Grandad," called out Savel as he went out of the gate.

"Good-bye, Savel Ivanich. Good-bye, dear man," cried Yeremei quickly in his high voice, darting after him.

Nobody else said good-bye to the smith.

Little clusters of people remained in the courtyard talking and casting furtive glances at the body of the murdered woman, and somebody covered her head with

a charcoal bag. A policeman with a pipe between his teeth was sitting in the doorway of the smithy where Savel had been wont to sit. He smoked and spat and listened dull-eyed to what Grandad Yeremei was saying.

“Do you think it was him as killed her?” said Yeremei in low mysterious tones. “Not him, but the dark powers—that’s what killed her. One man can’t kill another. It’s not him as did it, good people.”

As he explained to his listeners the mystery of what had happened, he coughed and pressed his hands to his breast and waved them as if shooing something away.

“It was him as swung them tongs—no devil,” observed the policeman, spitting complacently.

“But who set him on to it?” cried the old man. “That’s what you’ve got to see—who set him on?”

“Look here, who’ll he be to you? Your son?” said the policeman.

“Oh, no!”

“A relation?”

“Of course not. I haven’t got no relations.”

“Then what do you care about him?”

“Ah, Lord A’mighty!”

“Here’s what I have to say to you,” admonished the policeman sternly. “It’s your old age makes you jabber like that. You’d better get out of here.”

The policeman ejected a thick stream of smoke through

one corner of his mouth and turned his back on the old man. But Yeremei went on talking in his shrill voice, gesticulating wildly as he spoke.

Ilya, pale and wide-eyed, walked off to join a group consisting of Makar, Perfishka, Matitza, and some other women from the attic.

"She was a loose one before she ever got married, dears," one of the women was saying. "Maybe Pavel ain't the smith's son at all, but the teacher's, as lodged at shopman Malafeyev's."

"Him who shot himself?" asked Perfishka.

"Him. He's the one she began with."

The crippled wife of Perfishka crawled upstairs and took her place at the entrance to the basement, where she sat all bundled up in her rags. Her hands lay motionless in her lap, her black eyes were fixed on the sky, her lips were tight and drooped at the corners. Ilya's glance travelled back and forth between her eyes and the sky, and the thought struck him that Perfishka's wife might be seeing God and silently petitioning Him.

Soon the rest of the children from the yard gathered at the basement entrance. They pulled their clothes tightly round their shivering shoulders as they sat on the stairs and listened in awe as Savel's son recounted what had happened. Pavel's face was drawn and his cunning eyes had a perplexed and uneasy look in them. He felt himself

to be the hero of the day; never before had people paid him such attention. But he had told his tale at least a dozen times, and now he spoke with an air of indifference, even reluctance.

“Papa set his teeth when she went away three days ago, and he’s been roaring mad ever since. He kept pulling me by the hair. I could see something was up. Then she comes home. The flat was locked—we were in the smithy. I was standing by the bellows. I saw her come up. She called to us from the doorway. ‘Give me the key,’ she said. Papa picked up the tongs and went after her. He went slow-like, creeping up on her, and I shut my eyes, it was so fearful. I wanted to shout, ‘Run, Mummy!’ but I couldn’t. When I opened my eyes he was still going after her. You ought to have seen the fire in his eyes! She started backing away, then she turned to run, but. . . .”

Pavel’s face was suddenly convulsed and a shudder went through his thin bony body. He drew in a great breath, and said as he let it out slowly:

“That’s when he caught her with the tongs. Ugh!”

The children began to stir.

“She threw up her hands and fell down like as if she had jumped into a lake.”

He picked up a shaving, studied it carefully, and tossed it over the heads of the children. Again they sat motionless,



waiting for him to go on, but he sat with hanging head and said nothing.

"Did he kill her quite dead?" asked Masha in a thin, trembling voice.

"Idiot," said Pavel without lifting his head.

Yakov put his arm about Masha and drew her to him and Ilya moved closer to Pavel.

"Are you sorry for her?" he asked softly.

"What business is it of yours?" asked Pavel crossly.

Everyone looked at him in silence.

"She was a loose woman," said Masha in a ringing voice, but Yakov interrupted hastily:

"Anyone would be, with a husband like that! Always dirty and grumbling—enough to scare you to death. And she was bright and cheery—like Perfishka."

Pavel glanced at him, then went on with his narrative in the weighty tones of a grown-up, "Once I said to her, 'Look out, Mum, or he'll kill you.' But she didn't pay no attention to me. She just asked me not to tell him and bought me presents to make me keep my mouth shut. And the man she went with gave me five-kopek pieces. Whenever I brought him a note he'd give me a five-kopek piece. He was good-natured. And terrible strong. And had a great big moustache."

"And a sword?" asked Masha.

"You'd ought to have seen it!" Pavel exclaimed, adding

proudly, "Once I took it out of the scabbard. It was heavy as heavy."

"Now you're an orphan like Ilya," mused Yakov.

"What of it?" retorted the orphan. "Do you think I'll be a rag-picker like him? Not on your life!"

"That wasn't what I meant."

"And now I'll do whatever I like," boasted Pavel, raising his head and looking about him with flashing eyes. "I'm no orphan, I'm just ... just ... I'll just live all by myself. Papa didn't want to send me to school. Now they've put him in jail and I'll go to school and study better'n any of you!"

"Where are you going to get the clothes to go in?" said Ilya with a triumphant little laugh. "They don't want ragamuffins in that school of ours."

"Clothes? I'll sell the smithy."

All the children turned deferential looks upon him, making Ilya feel defeated. Aware of the impression his last words had made, Pavel grew more boastful than ever.

"And I'll buy myself a horse—a real live horse. I'll go to school on horseback."

The idea of this pleased him so much that he gave a smile, albeit a timid fleeting one.

"There's nobody to lick you now," said Masha, gazing at him enviously.

"Have no fear, somebody'll be found to do *that*," asserted Ilya.

Pavel darted a black look at him and spat defiantly.

"Who's it to be, you? Just try it."

Again Yakov interrupted.

"A funny thing, fellows," he said, "just a little while ago she was walking about and talking and doing things—a live person like us—and then she got lammed over the head with the tongs and—where is she now?"

The other children—all three of them—looked at Yakov intently, while his eyes grew bigger and bigger and started comically out of his head.

"Ye-es," said Ilya, "I've been thinking about that, too."

"They say she died, but what does that mean?"

"Her soul flew away," explained Pavel glumly.

"To heaven," added Masha, staring up at the sky and pressing closer to Yakov. The stars had come out by this time, and one of them—a big bright one that did not twinkle—seemed closer to the earth than the others and gazed down like a cold, unwinking eye. Following Masha's example the three boys lifted their eyes. Pavel took one brief glance, got up, and hurried away; Ilya gazed long and intently, with fear in his eyes; Yakov's enormous eyes roved the blue firmament as if searching for something.

"Yakov," said his friend, dropping his head.

"Well?"

"I keep thinking..." Ilya's voice broke off.

"What about?" asked Yakov softly.

"About how they ... how they killed her ... and now ... now they rush about talking and making a lot of noise ... and nobody cries ... nobody's sorry...."

"Yeremei cried."

"He always does. But Pavel? He told us the story like he tells fairy-tales."

"He just lets on. He's sorry, but he's ashamed to admit it. He ran away, and now I'll bet he's crying his eyes out."

They sat for a few minutes huddled together without speaking. Masha fell asleep on Yakov's knees, her face still uplifted to the sky.

"Are you scared?" whispered Yakov.

"Yes," Ilya whispered back.

"Her ghost will come back to haunt us."

"Ye-es. Masha's asleep."

"We ought to take her home. But I'm afraid to move."

"I'll go with you."

Yakov put the girl's head on his shoulder, locked his arms round her frail body, and struggled to his feet.

"Wait, Ilya, I'll go first," he whispered.

He went ahead, staggering under the weight of his burden, and Ilya followed so closely on his heels that his nose almost touched the back of his friend's head. Ilya

fancied that some invisible creature was following him and breathing coldly upon his neck and would seize him at any moment.

“Hurry up,” he whispered, pushing his friend in the back.

Shortly after this Grandad Yeremei's health began to fail. Instead of going rag-picking, he stayed at home and roamed disconsolately about the yard or lay on the bed in his dark hole. Spring was coming, and whenever the sun shone the old man would sit and bask in its rays, moving his lips soundlessly as he counted on his fingers. He rarely told the children stories any more, and the ones he told were less interesting. His cough kept interrupting him. From deep down in his chest came a hoarse whine, as if someone or something were asking to be let out. The cough irritated Masha, who loved his stories more than anyone else.

“Oh, stop it,” she would say.

“Wait,” the old man would gasp. “It'll let up . . . in a minute.”

But it did not let up. It grew worse and worse, shaking the life out of his emaciated body. Sometimes the children would go away without waiting to hear the end of the story, and then the old man would gaze after them with a pained expression.

Ilya noticed that Petrukha the barman and his uncle Terenty were perturbed by the old man's illness. Several times a day Petrukha would appear in the back entrance of the pub and look round for Grandad Yeremei.

"Well, how're things, Grandad?" he would ask when he caught sight of him. "Feeling better?"

He would strut about, a sturdy figure in a pink cotton blouse, his hands thrust into the pockets of his wide broadcloth trousers, whose ends were pushed into the tops of shiny boots. The clink of coin always came from his pockets. His hair was receding from his forehead, but the back of his round head was covered with fair curly locks that he had a habit of tossing back in a breezy way. Ilya had never liked him, but now his dislike grew. He knew that Petrukha was not fond of Grandad Yeremei and once he had heard him say to Uncle Terenty:

"Keep an eye on him, Terenty. He's a miser. I'll bet he's got a nice sum tucked away in that pillow of his. Don't let it slip through your fingers. There's not much life left in the old dog; you're on friendly terms with him and he hasn't got a soul in the world. Use your head, handsome!"

Grandad Yeremei still spent his evenings in the pub talking to Terenty about God and the affairs of this world. Life in town had made the hunchback uglier than ever. He seemed to have grown sodden with dish-washing;

his eyes were filmy and had a frightened look and it was as if his body had melted in the heat of the pub. His dirty shirt kept creeping up his hump, exposing the small of his back. While talking to people he would hold his hands behind his back and keep jerking at his shirt, giving the impression that he was hiding things in his hump.

Whenever Grandad Yeremei sat in the yard Terenty would come out on the porch and stare narrowly at him, shielding his eyes with his hand and wagging the stringy yellow beard at the end of his pinched face.

"Anything you need, Grandad Yeremei?" he would ask guiltily.

"Nothing, thanks. Nothing ... nothing...."

And the hunchback would turn slowly on his skinny legs and go back into the pub.

"I'll never get better," Yeremei repeated with increasing frequency. "It's clear my time's come."

One day he had a particularly bad fit of coughing as he was going to bed in his basement hole.

"It's too soon, Lord," he muttered. "My task ain't done yet. The money ... all the years I've been saving it ... for a church ... in our village. People need God's temples. They're a retreat for us sinners. But I haven't saved enough yet. Ah, me! There's a buzzard flying about ... smells a catch. Ilya, I've got money—remember that, but don't tell nobody, hear?"

Ilya felt he had been let in on a great secret, and he knew very well who the "buzzard" was.

One afternoon a few days later, as Ilya was taking off his school clothes in his corner, he heard Yeremei wheezing and whining as if someone were choking him to death.

"Shoo ... shoo ... go away!" the old man gasped.

The boy pushed timidly at the door. It was locked. From the other side of it came the old man's anxious whispering:

"Shoo! ... Mercy, dear Father! Have mercy!"

Ilya put his eyes to a crack in the door and saw the old man lying flat on his back and waving his arms.

"Grandad!" cried the boy in horror.

The old man gave a start and lifted his head.

"Petrukha ... watch out ... it's the Lord's. It's for Him. For His temple. Ah-h, you buzzard! It's Thine, Lord! Protect it ... take pity on an old man ... take pity...."

Ilya trembled with fear but could not take his eyes off the old man's dark and shrivelled hand that kept waving feebly in the air, threatening someone with a crooked finger.

"Watch out! It's the Lord's! Take care!"

The old man's body suddenly drew into a knot, then he sat up in bed, his white beard fluttering like the wing



of a dove in flight. Stretching out his arms in front of him, he gave a great push and fell on the floor.

Ilya let out a little shriek and rushed away, pursued by the old man's "Shoo . . . shoo!"

All out of breath he ran into the pub and called out: "He's dead!"

Terenty gasped, shifted from one foot to the other, pulled fitfully at his shirt as he stared at Petrukha, who was standing behind the counter.

"May his soul rest in peace," said the barman in a solemn voice. "He was a good old man. I'll go and have a look. You stay here, Ilya, and call me if anything's needed. Take over, Yakov."

Petrukha strode out unhurriedly, striking his heels loudly against the floor. As soon as the door closed behind him the boys heard him say to the hunchback:

"Come along, come along, you old fool!"

Ilya was badly frightened, but this did not keep him from noticing all that went on about him.

"Did you see him die?" asked Yakov from behind the bar. Ilya looked at him.

"What are they going there for?" he asked, ignoring Yakov's question.

"To have a look. You came for them, didn't you?" Ilya squeezed his eyes shut.

"What a push he gave him!"

"Who gave who?" asked Yakov, thrusting out his chin inquisitively.

"Grandad gave the devil," replied Ilya after a pause.

"Did you see the devil?" Yakov asked, running up to him.

Ilya closed his eyes again without answering.

"Were you scared?" asked Yakov, tugging at Ilya's sleeve.

"Wait!" said Ilya suddenly. "I'm going out for a minute. Don't tell your father, will you?"

Driven on by his suspicions, he reached the basement in a trice and crept as silently as a mouse to the chink in the door. The old man was still alive. He was lying on the floor breathing hoarsely and two figures could be seen at his feet.

In the darkness their two bodies merged into one big misshapen form. At last Ilya made out his uncle kneeling beside the old man's bed and hurriedly sewing up the pillow. He could distinctly hear the sound of thread being drawn through stuff. Petrukha was standing behind Terenty and bending over him.

"Hurry up," he whispered. "I told you to have a needle and thread ready. A fine thing, having to thread it here!"

Petrukha's whispering, the sighs of the dying man, the sound of the sewing, and the plaintive gurgle of water flowing into a hole outside the window merged into a

single nondescript murmur that dulled the boy's senses. Quietly he pushed away from the wall and climbed out of the basement. A big blotch spun like a wheel in front of his eyes with a shoo-ing sound. He clutched the rail tightly as he went up the steps, scarcely able to lift his feet, and when he reached the door of the pub he stopped and cried softly. He was aware of Yakov hopping about in front of him and saying something. Then he felt a push in the back and heard Perfishka's voice:

"What's that?—who? How's that?—dead? The devil you say!" And, giving Ilya another push, the cobbler ran down the steps so fast that they shook.

"Ah-h-h!" he wailed plaintively on reaching the bottom.

Ilya heard his uncle and Petrukha coming up the steps. He did not want them to see him crying but he could not hold back the tears.

"For shame!" cried Perfishka. "You don't lose no time, do you?"

Terenty walked past his nephew without so much as looking at him, but Petrukha stopped and put his hand on Ilya's shoulder.

"Crying?" he said. "That's right. That means you're a grateful boy and appreciate what's done for you. The old man was good to you." Then, pushing Ilya aside, he added, "But don't let me catch you standing outside doors."

Ilya wiped his face on the sleeve of his shirt and looked about him. Petrukha was standing behind the bar again, shaking back his curly locks. In front of him stood Perfishka with a smirk on his lips. Despite the smirk, his face had the look of one who has just lost his last kopek in a card game.

“What’s on your mind, Perfishka?” asked Petrukha crisply, with a lift of his eyebrows.

“Ain’t there to be no hush-money?” said Perfishka.

“Why should there be?” said the barman blandly.

“Damn it all!” cried the cobbler, stamping his foot. “So I don’t get a sniff of it, eh? Very well, so I don’t. I wish you joy and happiness, Pyotr Yakimich!”

“What are you raving about?” asked the unperturbed Petrukha.

“Oh, nothing in particular. Just my foolishness.”

“I guess it’s a treat you want. Is that what you were hinting at? Heh-heh!”

“Ha-ha!” came the cobbler’s resounding laugh.

Ilya tossed his head as if to shake something out of it and went away.

He did not sleep in his own bed that night; he slept in the pub, under the table on which Terenty washed the dishes. The hunchback put him to bed and then began to wipe the tables. A lamp over the bar lighted up the bloated bellies of the teapots and bottles in the cupboard.

It was dark in the pub. A fine rain was falling outside and the wind blew in little gusts. Terenty, who looked like an enormous hedgehog, kept sighing as he shifted the tables about. Whenever he came near the lamp a big black shadow was cast upon the floor, and Ilya fancied it was Grandad Yeremei's spirit come back to say to Terenty:

"Shoo . . . shoo!"

The boy was cold and frightened and suffocated by a nasty smell: it was Saturday and the freshly-scrubbed floor gave off an odour of decay. He wanted to ask his uncle to come quickly and lie down beside him, but a feeling of pain and resentment kept him from speaking to him. He kept seeing the bent, white-bearded form of Grandad Yeremei and hearing him say in gentle, husky tones:

"The Lord knows the measure of all things, have no fear."

At last he could stand it no longer.

"Do come and lie down!" he whined.

The hunchback gave a start and did not reply immediately.

"Just a minute, just a minute," he said meekly at last, and began bouncing in haste from one table to another. Ilya realized his uncle was frightened too. Serves you right, he said to himself.

The rain tapped monotonously on the window-pane, the lamp flickered, the bottles and teapots grinned in the lamplight. Ilya pulled his uncle's sheepskin over his head and lay holding his breath. Suddenly he was aware of a rustle beside him. He went cold all over. Uncovering his head, he saw Terenty on his knees with his chin on his chest.

"Dear God," he was whispering. "Dear God...."

The whisper reminded Ilya of Grandad Yereimei's hoarse breathing. The darkness of the room seemed to give a shudder and the floor to heave as the wind howled down the chimney.

"Don't pray!" cried Ilya in a loud voice.

"Good gracious!" said the hunchback under his breath.

"Go to sleep, for the love of Christ."

"Don't pray," repeated the boy insistently.

"Very well, I won't."

The darkness and dampness bore down on Ilya with increasing pressure. He could not breathe. Different emotions warred within him: fear, pity for Grandad Yereimei, anger with his uncle. He tossed about for some time, then sat up and groaned.

"What's the matter?" whispered his uncle in fright, taking hold of him. Ilya pushed him away.

"Oh Lord! If only I could hide away somewhere!" he breathed tearfully, in horror and despair. "If only I could!"

Tears choked him. He drew in a great breath of the foul air and threw himself sobbing on the pillow.

The boy changed completely after that. Formerly he had held aloof only from the boys at school, with whom he had no desire to become friendly. But at home he had been sociable and enjoyed the attention paid to him by his elders. Now he held aloof from everybody and grew much too serious for his years. His face wore a cold expression, his lips were compressed, he kept a sharp eye on the grown-ups and listened to their talk with a mocking glint in his eye. He was haunted by memories of what he had seen on the day Grandad Yeremei had died, and he could not rid himself of the thought that he shared the guilt of Petrukha and his uncle. Perhaps on seeing himself being robbed, the dying man had thought it was he, Ilya, who had told Petrukha about the money. This idea grew on him imperceptibly, filling him with despair and making him suspicious of the people about him. He found relief in discovering wickedness in others, as if their guilt lessened his own.

And he saw much that was wicked. Everyone who lived in the house called Petrukha a swindler and a receiver of stolen goods, yet they all bowed and fawned before him and addressed him respectfully as Pyotr Yakimich. They had an indecent nickname for the old

woman Matitza and they pushed her about and struck her when she was drunk; one day the cook even poured a pail of slops over her as she sprawled in her cups under the kitchen window. Yet all of them accepted her services, giving her nothing in return but cuffings and curses. Perfishka always asked her to wash his invalid wife; Petrukha made her clean up the pub before every holiday without paying her a kopek; Terenty accepted the shirts she made him. She worked for everybody and did it well and without complaint. She loved to take care of the sick and to look after children.

Ilya saw that cobbler Perfishka, the most industrious man in the house, was not taken seriously. The only time anyone paid him any attention was when, tipsy, he sat with his accordion in the pub or staggered through the courtyard playing and singing comical songs. No one ever noticed with what tenderness he carried his invalid wife up to the basement entrance or put his little girl to bed, showering her with kisses and making funny faces for her amusement. No one was aware of how he laughed and joked as he taught her to cook dinner and tidy up the room, after which he would sit down, bent double over some filthy boot, to stitch and pound long into the night.

When the smith was taken to jail, the cobbler was the only one who showed the least concern for his son. He



immediately took Pavel to live with him. The boy twisted the waxed thread, swept the floor, fetched water, and went to the shop for bread, kvass, and onions. Everyone saw the cobbler drunk on Sundays and holidays, but nobody heard what he said to his wife on the following day when he was sober:

"I'm sorry, Dunya. Do you think I want to drink? It's not because I'm a born drunk, it's just for the change. All week I sit and pound away. Gets tiresome. And so I—well, take a swig."

"Do I blame you for it? God in heaven! I pity you so!" Her voice was hoarse and a gurgling sound came from her throat. "Do you think I don't see how you work? The Lord has made me a burden to you. If only I could die! If only I could set you free!"

"Don't dare talk like that! I won't have you saying such things! It's me as does you wrong. But it's not because I'm bad at heart—I'm just weak. One of these days we'll go to live on another street and everything'll be different. Windows, doors—anything you like. The windows'll look out on the street and we'll cut a boot out of paper and paste it on the window as a trade sign. Won't the folk come flocking, just! Things'll hum! 'Feed the fire, blow the bellows; it's money we're forging, my merry fellows!'"

Perfishka's life held no secrets for Ilya. He knew the

cobbler could hardly make ends meet, yet he was always cheerful and played the accordion marvellously well. For this Ilya deeply admired him.

Petrukha, on the other hand, sat behind the bar playing draughts from morning to night, drinking tea and scolding the waiters. Soon after the death of Yeremei he put Terenty to work at the bar and did nothing but wander up and down the courtyard whistling, studying the house from all angles, and testing the strength of the walls with his fists.

Ilya noticed many things, all of them bad and depressing and tending to make him dislike his fellowmen more than ever. He longed to talk to somebody about his impressions, but he did not want to talk to his uncle. Ever since the death of Yeremei a barrier, strong but invisible, had sprung up between them, making it impossible for Ilya to communicate with his uncle with ease and intimacy as of old. He could not hope to have Yakov explain anything to him, for Yakov, too, lived a life apart, though in quite a different way.

And Yakov, too, missed the rag-picker. He often spoke of him, always in mournful tones and with a mournful face.

"Life's so dull now! If Grandad Yeremei was alive he'd tell us a story. There's nothing like a good story."

One day he said to Ilya mysteriously:

“Want me to show you something? Only first swear you won’t tell nobody. Say, ‘May I be damned for ever if . . . .’”

When Ilya had repeated the oath Yakov led him over to the old lime-tree in a corner of the yard and removed a piece of bark that had been skilfully fitted into the trunk to cover a hollow. The edges of the hollow had been whittled away to enlarge the opening, which was prettily decorated inside with bright bits of rag and paper, tin foil, and tea wrappers. In the very depths stood a little brass image with a candle end in front of it.

“How do you like that?” said Yakov as he fitted back the bark.

“What’s it for?”

“It’s a shrine,” said Yakov. “I’ll be coming out here to pray at night when nobody sees me.”

Ilya liked the idea, but he thought it dangerous.

“What if somebody sees the light? Your father’ll give you a licking.”

“Who’ll see it at night? Everybody’s asleep, everything’s quiet. I’m little—God can’t hear me if I pray in the daytime, but He’ll hear me at night. He will, won’t He?”

“I don’t know, maybe He will,” mused Ilya, gazing into his friend’s pale face.

“Will you come and pray with me?” asked Yakov.

"What will you pray for?"

"I'd ask God to make me bright and give me everything I wanted. And you?"

"Me, too."

But after a moment's consideration Yakov said:

"I didn't want to pray for anything special. Just pray, that's all. It's up to Him. Let Him give me whatever He wants."

They agreed to pray that very night, and went to bed with the firm determination to wake up at midnight. But they did not wake up that night, nor the next, nor the next, and so many new impressions came crowding into Ilya's head that he forgot all about the shrine.

On the very lime-tree in which Yakov had his shrine Pavel hung a trap for catching siskins and titmice. Pavel's new life was a hard one. He grew thin and pale. He was too busy working for Perfishka to play in the yard; his playmates saw him only on Sundays when the cobbler was drunk. Pavel asked them what they were taught in school and frowned enviously as he listened to things that made his friends seem superior.

"You needn't get stuck-up. I'm going to study too."

"Perfishka won't let you."

"I'll run away," said Pavel determinedly.

And, true enough, a few days later the cobbler announced with a little laugh:

“That ’prentice of mine has run away, the little devil!”

It was a rainy day. Ilya glanced at the unkempt Perfishka and at the grey and sullen sky, and his heart filled with pity for Pavel. From where Ilya stood leaning against the wall of the shed protected by the overhanging roof, he stared at the house. It seemed to be dwindling and sinking into the ground. The old joists were bulging more than ever, as if the dirt accumulated inside the house in the course of dozens of years were pushing hard against them. So saturated was the house with misery, with the drunken cries and the bitter songs it had sucked up all its life; so trampled and shaken were its boards by the feet of its innumerable occupants, that it could live no longer, and was slowly collapsing, turning the mournful gaze of its dull window-panes upon the world.

“Ho-hum,” sighed the cobbler. “Soon the pod will burst and the seeds will come tumbling out. Us lodgers will go scurrying in all four directions hunting for new chinks to crawl into. Next time we’ll live different. Everything’ll be different—windows, and doors, and even the bugs that bite us. The sooner the better. I’m fed up with this place.”

But the cobbler’s dreams did not come true. The house did not burst; it was bought by Petrukha the barman. After the sale he spent two days thumping and poking the old timbers. Then bricks and boards were brought

and scaffolding was erected and for the next two months the house shook and groaned under hammer blows. It was sawed and hacked at, nails were driven into it, rotten boards were ripped away with a screech, new ones were put in their place, and when the house had been enlarged by the addition of a new wing, the whole thing was weather-boarded. Low and broad, it now rose straight out of the earth, as if it had put down new roots. Petrukha hung up a big new sign—gold letters on a blue background:

## THE GAY RETREAT OF THE FRIENDS OF PYOTR YAKIMICH FILIMONOV

“But it’s still rotten inside,” observed Perfishka.

Ilya smiled his acquiescence. He, too, felt that the reconstructed house was a mere sham. His thoughts turned to Pavel, who now lived somewhere else and was seeing other things. Ilya, like the cobbler, dreamed of new doors, new windows, new people.

Life in the house grew worse than before. The old lime-tree was cut down and the cosy nook where it had grown was taken up by a new outhouse. Other places where the children had loved to sit and talk disappeared. The only convenient gathering-place was behind a pile

of chips and rotting lumber where the smithy had stood, but it was frightening to sit there: the children fancied that under the rubbish lay Savel's murdered wife with her bleeding head.

Petrukha removed Uncle Terenty into a tiny room behind the bar. Through the thin partition covered with green wallpaper seeped tobacco smoke, the sounds of the pub, the smell of vodka. The room was clean and dry, but worse than the basement one, for its only window looked out upon the grey wall of a shed; the wall cut off a view of sun, stars, and sky, whereas in the basement room all of these could be seen by kneeling in front of the window.

Uncle Terenty donned a lavender shirt, over which he wore a jacket that hung on him as it would on a packing-case, and stood behind the bar from morning to night. He addressed people in a barking voice and peered at them across the counter as if he were a hound guarding its master's property. He bought Ilya a grey woollen jacket, boots, a coat, and cap, and when Ilya put them on he could not help remembering the old rag-picker. He rarely spoke to his uncle and his days dragged on with slow monotony. More and more often he recalled the village where he had once lived; more than ever was he convinced that life had been better there—quieter, simpler, more comprehensible. He remembered the forests of

Kerzhenetz and the stories Uncle Terenty had told him about Antippa the hermit. Thoughts of Antippa brought thoughts of Pavel. Where was he now? Perhaps, he, too, had fled to the woods and was living in a cave. The woods were filled with the wailing of the wind and the howling of wolves—sweet sounds, however terrifying. In winter, when the weather was fine, the trees shone like silver, and not a sound was to be heard but the crunching of the snow underfoot, and if you stood perfectly still you could hear nothing but your own heartbeats.

In town there was always a lot of noise and commotion, even at night. People sang, shouted, groaned; carts and carriages clattered down the roads, making the glass shake in the window-panes. The schoolboys were always up to mischief; the grown-ups always cursing, quarrelling, and getting drunk. No one was to be relied upon. They were either swindlers like Petrukha, savages like Savel, or nobodies like Perfishka, Uncle Terenty, and Matitza. Ilya was struck most of all by the cobbler.

One morning as Ilya was getting ready to go to school Perfishka came into the pub dishevelled and looking as if he had spent a sleepless night. Without a word he stood at the bar and stared at Terenty. His left eye twitched and was half closed, his lower lip hung down comically. Uncle Terenty glanced at him, smiled, and poured the cobbler out three kopeks' worth of vodka—his usual



morning portion. Perfishka took the glass in a shaking hand, tossed the contents into his mouth, but did not grunt and curse as he usually did. Once more he stared at the barman with a twitching left eye and a glassy right one that seemed to see nothing.

“What’s wrong with your eye?” asked Terenty.

Perfishka rubbed his eye, stared at his hand, and then said very loudly and distinctly:

“My good wife, Avdotya Petrovna, is dead.”

Terenty turned to the icon and crossed himself.

“May her soul rest in peace,” he murmured.

“Eh?” said Perfishka, staring hard at him.

“I said, ‘May her soul rest in peace.’”

“Hm. Dead.” And the cobbler turned sharply on his heel and went out.

“Queer bird!” said Terenty with a sad shake of his head. Ilya agreed that the cobbler was a queer bird. On his way to school he had stepped into the basement to have a look at the corpse. The room was dark and filled with people. The women from the attic had gathered round the bed in the corner and were talking in hushed voices. Matitza was trying a dress on Masha.

“Tight under the arms?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Masha fretfully, holding out her arms.

The cobbler was sitting watching his daughter. His left eye was still twitching. As Ilya stared at the puffy

white face of the deceased he remembered the dark eyes that were closed for ever. He went out feeling depressed and horrified.

But when he came home from school and went into the pub he heard Perfishka playing the accordion and singing lustily:

*My heart is broken  
From harsh words spoken.  
Why, dear, were they spoken?  
Art glad it is broken?*

“Br-r-r! The dames in there threwed me out. ‘Get out!’ they shouted. ‘Get out, you monster, you drunk, you snout-face!’ I don’t mind. I can bear it. Curse me, hit me—all the same. All I want’s a little taste of life. The least little taste! Damn it all, brothers, everybody wants a little taste of life. We’re all the same—Vanya, Manya. We’re all the same.”

*Who’s weeping? Who’s crying?  
What’s the sense of useless sighing?  
Shut your mouth. Don’t complain.  
Chew a crust to stop the pain.*

Perfishka’s face was beaming; Ilya watched him with fear and repugnance. He was sure God would punish

the cobbler for behaving like this on the day of his wife's death. Perfishka was drunk the next day, too, and staggered after the coffin blinking his eyes and grinning. Everyone upbraided him and someone even struck him on the back of the neck.

"Ai-yi! Think of that!" said Ilya to Yakov on the evening of the funeral. "He's a devil, that Perfishka."

"I don't care what he is," said Yakov.

For some time Ilya had been aware of a change in Yakov. Instead of coming out to play, he sat at home as if avoiding Ilya. At first Ilya thought that his friend, jealous of his success at school, was working hard at his lessons.

But Yakov's results grew worse instead of better; the teacher was always scolding him for his absent-mindedness and for failing to grasp the simplest things. Ilya was not surprised by Yakov's attitude towards Perfishka, for his friend took no interest in what went on in the house. But he was curious to know the cause of the change.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked him one day. "Don't you want to be my friend any more?"

"Not want to be your friend?" Yakov exclaimed in surprise; then, quickly, "Listen, go home—do go, and I'll come in a minute. Just wait till you see what I have to show you!"

He turned and ran off, and Ilya went to his room bursting with curiosity. Presently Yakov ran in, locked the door, went to the window, and took a red book out of his shirt.

"Come here," he said softly, sitting down on Terenty's bed and motioning Ilya to sit down beside him. He opened the book and put it on his knee, bending low over it.

"In the distance the brave knight saw a mountain as high as . . . as high as the sky," he read. "And in the middle of it there was an iron gate. The knight's . . . in-tre-pid heart was filled with courage. He levelled his lance, put spur to his horse, and, rushing forward . . . rushing forward with a loud cry, struck the gate with all his strength. With a noise like thunder the iron gate flew into a thousand pieces. Smoke and flames . . . smoke and flames . . . were belched forth out of the mountain and a voice which made the earth tremble and sent rocks crashing down from the heights cried out, "So thou hast come at last, mad adventurer! Long have death and I awaited you!" Blinded by smoke, the valiant knight. . . ."

"Who was he?" asked Ilya, who had been listening in astonishment to the fervid voice of his friend.

"Who?" said Yakov, lifting a white face.

"What's a knight?"

"A knight's a . . . a . . . on horseback . . . with a lance . . . Raoul the Fearless. . . . A dragon stole the girl he

loved ... the Lovely Louisa. But shut up and listen," cried Yakov impatiently.

"All right. But wait—what's a dragon?"

"A snake with wings ... and steel claws ... and three heads ... fire-spitting."

"Phew!" said Ilya, wide-eyed. "He'll give it to that ... er ... that ... won't he, just?"

The two boys huddled together over the book, which led them, breathless with curiosity and filled with a unique and exhilarating joy, into a new and magic world where evil monsters fell under the blows of valiant knights; where all was vast and wonderful and there was nothing that bore the least resemblance to this dull, drab life. In that world there were no drunkards or worthless ragamuffins, and instead of rickety wooden houses there were palaces glittering with gold and impregnable castles with their towers rising into the sky. The children entered the marvellous world of fancy, while on the other side of the partition the accordion was playing and boisterous cobbler Perfishka was singing:

*When death has beset me  
The devil won't get me.  
I'll go to the devil while still alive,  
I'll chum with him here in this very dive.*

"Lay it on! God loves a jolly good fellow!"

The accordion stuttered in the effort to keep up with the cobbler's piercing voice:

*Poor old feller, blue with cold,  
Ain't he lucky to be old?  
Soon he'll die and go to hell—  
He'll get warm there!*

Every verse called forth a burst of laughter and a roar of approval.

And in the little room separated from this storm of sound by the thinnest of boards, the two boys bent over the book, and one of them whispered softly:

“...Then the knight seized the monster in an iron grasp, causing it to roar like thunder with pain and terror....”

The book about the knight and the dragon was followed by *Guak, or True to the Death*, and *The Tale of Valiant Prince Franzil and Beautiful Queen Rentzivena*.

Knights and Ladies now filled the place in Ilya's mind so recently held by impressions of reality. The friends took turns filching ten kopeks from the cash drawer to keep them in books. They learned of the adventures of Yashka Smertensky, and were entranced by *Yapancha, the Tatar Horseman*. Further and further did they withdraw

from the ugly life about them into a world where the heroes always broke the chains of an evil fate and achieved happiness.

One day Perfishka was summoned to the police-station. He set out with some misgivings but returned in a gay mood, bringing with him Pavel Grachov, whom he held tightly by the hand. Pavel was as sharp-eyed as ever but had become exceedingly thin and sallow and his look had lost some of its defiance. The cobbler dragged him into the pub.

“Well, good folk, here you see Pavel Grachov, who has just arrived from the town of Penza, having made the journey on foot in the prisoners’ column,” he said, his left eye twitching. “Just see what the young folk are like. They don’t lie up on the stove-bunk waiting for happiness to come to them; soon’s they can stand up on their hind legs, off they go in search of it.”

Pavel stood beside him hiding one hand in the pocket of his ragged trousers and trying to free the other from the grasp of the cobbler, at whom he looked sullenly out of the corner of his eye. Somebody advised the cobbler to give the boy a thrashing.

“What for?” said Perfishka seriously. “Let him roam where he likes. Maybe he really will find happiness.”

“He must be hungry,” said Terenty. “Here, Pavel,” and he held out a hunk of bread.

The boy took it calmly and made for the door.

"Phweet!" whistled the cobbler after him. "Farewell, sweet creature!"

Ilya, who had been observing this scene from the door of his room, beckoned to Pavel. Pavel went over to him with some hesitation and stopped to cast a suspicious look round the room before he went in.

"What d'ye want?" he asked brusquely.

"Hullo."

"Hullo."

"Sit down."

"What for?"

"Nothing. Just to talk."

Ilya was taken aback by Pavel's curt questions and husky voice. He was anxious to ask him where he had been and what he had seen, but Pavel, seating himself on a chair and munching the bread, began the interrogation himself.

"Finished school?"

"Not yet. In the spring."

"I've finished already."

"You have?" There was a dubious note in Ilya's voice

"Didn't take me long."

"Where did you study?"

"In jail. The prisoners taught me."

Ilya moved closer.



"Was it very bad in there?" he asked, gazing in awe at his companion's drawn face.

"Oh, no. I've been in lots of jails in all sorts of towns. I stuck to the gents there—there was gentlefolk in jail too. Honest-to-goodness ones. Could talk different languages. I swept their cells out for them. They were a jolly lot and didn't mind being in jail at all."

"Robbers?"

"Dyed-in-the-wool robbers," said Pavel proudly.

Ilya blinked and his awe increased.

"Russians?" he asked.

"Jews too. Best folk in the world, prisoners. What they didn't do! Stole from everybody, right and left. But they got caught, and that means—Siberia!"

"How did you study in jail?"

"Simple enough. I just said, 'Teach me,' and they taught me."

"To read and write?"

"I'm not much good at writing, but I can read as much as you like. I've read lots of books."

Ilya warmed to the subject of books.

"Yakov and I read books too," he said.

They interrupted one another in their eagerness to name the books they had read. Soon Pavel stopped and gave a sigh.

"Looks like you fellows have read more'n me," he

said. "I read mostly poetry. There were all sorts of books there, but the only good ones were poetry."

Yakov came in; his eyes popped open in surprise and he began to laugh.

"The Sheep," said Pavel, "what're you laughing at?"

"Where've you been?"

"A place you'll never get to."

"What do you think?" said Ilya to Yakov. "He reads books too."

"Does he?" and Yakov instantly adopted a more amiable tone. The three boys sat down and fell to talking quickly and disconnectedly, and what they said was of extraordinary interest.

"The things I've seen! I could never tell you half of them!" boasted Pavel excitedly. "Once I didn't eat for two days—not a crumb. And I spent the night in the woods—all by myself."

"Were you scared?" asked Yakov.

"Go and try it, then you'll know. Some dogs almost chewed me up. That was in Kazan. There's a big statue of some poet there. That's why they put it up—because he was a poet. You'd ought to see how big he was! Feet this big! And a fist the size of your head, Yakov. I'm going to write poetry too. I've already learned to do it a little."

Suddenly he grew taut, drew his feet under the bed,

fixed his eyes on one spot, frowned importantly, and rattled off:

*Down the street come the people,  
Handsomely dressed and fat,  
Ask one of them for a copper—  
He'll chase you away like a cat—  
Scat!*

When he finished he glanced at the boys and slowly dropped his head. There followed a moment of strained silence.

"Do you call that poetry?" Ilya ventured at last.

"Can't you hear?" retorted Pashka crossly. "'Fat' and 'cat.' That means it's poetry."

"Of course it's poetry," Yakov hastened to put in. "You're always finding fault, Ilya."

"I've made up some more," Pavel said eagerly, turning to Yakov and rattling off the new verse at the same speed.

*The sky is grey, the earth is chill,  
Autumn is creeping over the hill,  
I've nothing to eat but sticks and stones  
And nothing but rags to cover my bones.*

"Ph-e-w!" exclaimed Yakov, opening wide his eyes.

"There now, *that's* what I call poetry," said Ilya with as much admiration as Yakov showed.

A faint blush spread over Pavel's cheeks and he screwed up his eyes as if he had got smoke in them.

"I'm going to make up long poems," he boasted. "It's not so hard. You see a lake and think of 'drake,' see a field and think of 'yield.' The words just come of themselves."

"What are you going to do now?" Ilya asked him.

Pavel blinked, glanced round him, and was silent for a while; then, softly and hesitantly:

"Oh, something or other."

A second later he added very determinedly:

"But I'll run away again soon."

He lived with the cobbler, and every evening the boys went to see him. It was quieter and more pleasant in the basement than in Terenty's tiny room. Perfishka was hardly ever at home. He had drunk up everything he owned and spent his evenings doing piece-work for other cobblers, or, if there was no work, sitting in the pub. He went about barefoot and half naked, with his old accordion under his arm. It seemed to have grown fast to him. Part of his gay self was lodged in the instrument, and the two of them had come to resemble each other: both were angular, disreputable in appearance, and full of roistering tunes and trills. Perfishka was known to all the workingmen as an indefatigable inventor of saucy jingles, and there

was not a workshop in which he was not welcome. They loved him for bringing brightness into the drab life of the working folk with his songs and comic stories.

Whenever he earned a few kopeks, he gave half of them to his daughter, and that was the beginning and end of his solicitude for her welfare. She was complete mistress of her fate. She had grown tall, her black curls hung down to her shoulders, and her dark eyes had grown larger and more serious. Slender and lithe, she was a most efficient housekeeper in their little basement room. She gathered chips for firewood, concocted soup out of nothing, and went about until noon with her skirts tucked up—grimy, sweaty, absorbed in her labours. When dinner was ready she tidied up the room, washed herself, changed her dress, and sat down at the table by the window to mend her clothes.

Matitza often came to see her, bringing tea, sugar, and buns. Once she even made Masha a gift of a blue dress. In her presence Masha behaved like a grown housewife. She would heat their little tin samovar, and as the two sipped the delicious hot tea they would exchange gossip and scold Perfishka. Matitza went after him ferociously; Masha seconded her in a high, thin voice, but without enthusiasm—merely to be polite. She always spoke of her father condescendingly.

“May his gizzard dry up!” boomed Matitza, drawing

her eyebrows together fiercely. "Has he forgotten, the drunken sot, that he was left with a little girl to take care of? It'd serve him right if he got squashed like a beetle, the old pig-face!"

"He knows I'm big and can take care of myself," said Masha.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy!" sighed Matitza. "What's the world coming to? Whatever will become of the girl? I once had a little girl like you. I left her at home, in the town of Khorol. It's so far away I'd never find my way if they let me go back. Just look what can happen to a body! Live on so long you even forget where your home is!"

Masha loved to listen to the deep voice of this woman with the cow-like eyes. And the smell of vodka that inevitably hung about her did not keep Masha from climbing into her lap, nestling against her enormous bosom, and kissing the full lips of her well-modelled mouth. Matitza came to see Masha in the morning, and the boys visited her in the evening. The children played cards if they had no book, but this rarely happened. Masha enjoyed listening to the reading, and she would let out a little squeal when they came to the most exciting places.

Yakov grew more solicitous of Masha than ever. He was always bringing her tea, sugar, pieces of bread and meat, and beer-bottles filled with kerosene. Occasionally he gave her the change left over from the purchase of books. This

became a habit with him and he did it unnoticeably, as a matter of course, and Masha accepted it as a matter of course, without noticing it.

"Yakov," she would say, "I'm out of coal."

And in due time he would bring her either coal or money, saying in the latter case:

"Here, go and buy some. I couldn't steal any this time."

Ilya, too, grew used to their relationship; indeed, no one in the yard seemed to think anything of it. Sometimes at Yakov's request Ilya himself would filch something from the kitchen or the bar and bring it to the cobbler's room. He was fond of the slender dark-haired little girl who, like himself, was motherless, and he admired her for being able to live alone and do everything for herself as if she were a grown-up. He loved to hear her laugh and was always trying to amuse her. When he did not succeed he grew cross and called her names.

"Woolly-headed black-face!" he would say.

"Tow-headed flat-face!" she would retort, screwing up her eyes.

One word would lead to another until they quarrelled in earnest. Masha easily became furious and would throw herself at Ilya and try to scratch his face, but he would always escape and laugh delightedly.

Once when they were playing cards he caught her cheating.

"Yakov's sweetheart!" he shouted at her fiercely, and added an indecent epithet that he had recently learned the meaning of. Yakov was sitting beside him. At first he laughed, but on seeing Masha's face change and tears fill her eyes he turned white and said nothing. Suddenly he jumped up, threw himself at Ilya, punched him in the nose, seized him by the hair, and dragged him down to the floor. All this happened so quickly that Ilya had no time to defend himself. The next minute, blinded by pain and anger, he jumped up and went after Yakov with his head lowered like a bull, shouting, "I'll show you!" but he saw that Yakov was sitting at the table with his head on his arms weeping, and Masha was standing over him.

"Don't be friends with him," she urged him tearfully. "He's a beast, a rotter! They're all like that—his father's a convict and his uncle's a hunchback. He'll get a hump too. You stinker, you!" she shouted, turning on Ilya fearlessly. "You swine! You lily-livered polecat! Come on, fight with me! I'll scratch your eyes out! Come on!"

But he did not. It distressed him to see Yakov, whom he had not meant to hurt, sitting there crying, and he was ashamed to fight with a girl. She was only too willing to fight with him—that he knew very well. Without a word he turned and climbed out of the basement, and for some time he walked up and down the yard feeling miserable. At last he went up to Perfishka's window and stealthily



glanced down into the room. Yakov and Masha were playing cards again. Masha had half covered her face with her cards and seemed to be laughing, and Yakov was studying his hand, touching now one card, now another, uncertainly. The sight made Ilya feel unspeakably lonely. He took another turn or two about the yard, then went resolutely down the basement steps.

"Let me play again," he said, going over to the table.

His heart was thumping, his cheeks were burning, and he stood with lowered eyes. Neither Masha nor Yakov said a word.

"I won't quarrel any more—honest to goodness I won't," said Ilya, stealing a glance at them.

"Very well, sit down," said Masha. "Humph, you!"

"You dunce!" said Yakov severely. "You're not little any more—you ought to know what you're saying."

"And what did you do to me?" said Ilya reproachfully.

"You deserved it," said Masha sternly.

"Just as you say. I'm not mad. It was my fault," admitted Ilya, giving Yakov a crooked little smile. "And don't you be mad either, all right?"

"All right. Here, hold the cards."

"You're a crazy devil," said Masha, and with that everything was over.

A minute later Ilya was frowning intently over his cards. He always sat on Masha's right so that he could

force her hand. He liked to see her lose, but she was a skilful player. Yakov was the one who usually lost.

"There, you silly!" she would say with affectionate vexation. "You've lost again!"

"To hell with these cards! I'm sick of them. Let's read!"

They would take out a smudged, dog-eared book and begin to read about the sufferings endured and the heroic feats achieved in the name of love.

Pavel Grachov was very much impressed by their way of life.

"You devils have it fine," he once said with the air of a person who had been about and seen things. With a glance at Yakov and Masha, he added with a little laugh, yet in all seriousness, "One of these days you'll be marrying Masha, Yakov."

"Idiot!" said Masha with a smile, and all four of them burst out laughing.

When they finished a book or grew tired of reading Pavel would tell them about his adventures, and they were as interesting to listen to as the books.

"Soon as I saw I couldn't get anywhere without a passport I began using tricks. If I saw a policeman I'd walk fast, as if I was off on some errand, or else I'd stick close to some man as if he was my master or my father or something. The policeman would look me over but he

never pulled me in. It was best in the villages—no policemen there—nothing but old men and women and kids. The men are always out in the fields. They'd say, 'Who are you?' 'A beggar.' 'Who do you belong to?' 'Nobody.' 'Where you from?' 'The town.' That's all. They gave me plenty to eat and drink. I could do what I liked there—crawl or run—made no difference. Nothing but fields and woods all around . . . and larks singing . . . made you want to fly up and join them. All I wanted was to have my belly full, then I could walk on and on to the ends of the earth. It was as if somebody was pulling me along, or my mother was carrying me in her arms. But, oh! how hungry I got at times! My guts all dried up inside me. I felt like eating dirt or anything. Made my head go round. But then, when I finally *did* sink my teeth into a hunk of bread—oh, wasn't that a grand feeling, just! I could have gone on eating day and night. Wonderful! But still I was glad when I got put in jail. At first I was scared, but then I was glad. I was awful scared of the policeman—thought when he caught me he'd thrash me to a pulp. But he gave it to me easy—just came up behind me and took me by the nape of the neck. I'm standing looking at some watches in a shop-window—lots of them, gold and all kinds—and all of a sudden—there I am, caught. What a roar I let out! But he just says to me gentle-like, 'Who are you? Where d'ye come from?' I told him—they'd have found out anyway;

they find out everything. So he takes me to the police-station. There's a lot of different types there. 'Where you going?' they ask me. 'Going on a pilgrimage,' I says. Did they laugh! Well, then they put me in jail. They laughed at me in there, too. Then those gents had me work for them. What blokes they were! Oho!"

When he spoke about the "gents" it was mostly in exclamations. Evidently they had struck him greatly, but impressions of individuals had merged in his memory into one big formless blotch.

In a month or so Pavel disappeared again. Perfishka later found out that he was working in a print-shop and living at the edge of town, quite a distance away. On hearing this Ilya breathed a little sigh of envy.

"Looks as if you and I would go on rotting away here all our lives," he said to Yakov.

Ilya missed Pavel for a little while, but soon he became immersed once more in the strange and wonderful world of fancy. He and Yakov began reading books again and Ilya went about in the sweet state of one who hangs between sleeping and waking.

He was brought back to earth roughly and unexpectedly. One morning his uncle woke him up with the words: "Give yourself an extra wash and be quick about it!" "Why? Where am I going?" he asked drowsily.

"To work. Thank God you've got work at last! At a fishmonger's."

Ilya's heart was heavy with presentiment. He suddenly lost all desire to go away from this house that he knew so well and had become so accustomed to; and this room, once so hated, now seemed wonderfully light and clean. He sat on the edge of the bed staring at the floor without the energy to put on his clothes. Yakov came in, pouting and uncombed, with his head drooping over one shoulder.

"Hurry up, Father's waiting for you," he said with a quick glance at his friend. "Will you come back sometime?"

"Uh-huh."

"Don't forget. Go and say good-bye to Masha."

"Why? I'm not going away for good," said Ilya crossly.

Masha came herself. When she reached the door she stopped and stood gazing at Ilya.

"So it's good-bye?" she said sadly. Ilya pulled on his jacket viciously and swore under his breath. Masha and Yakov both sighed.

"Be sure to come back," said Yakov.

"Oh, shut up," grunted Ilya.

"You do think you're grand, don't you?—going to work in a shop," said Masha.

"You little fool," murmured Ilya.

A few minutes later he was walking down the street

beside Petrukha, who was decked out in a frock-coat and squeaky boots.

"I'm taking you to work for Kirill Ivanovich Strogany, a man everybody respects," he said weightily. "He got a medal for his charity and good works—think of that. He's a member of the Town Council and may even get elected Mayor. If you're a good and faithful servant to him, he'll help you get on in the world. You're a serious youngster. See you don't waste no time. It's as easy for him to do a fellow a good turn as to spit through his teeth."

As Ilya listened he tried to form a mental picture of Strogany. For some reason he had the impression he must resemble Grandad Yeremei—thin, amiable, and kind-hearted. But on entering the fish-shop he saw a tall man with an enormous belly standing behind the counting-desk. There was not a hair on his head, but his face, from eyes to chin, was covered with thick red beard. His eyebrows, too, were thick and red, and little green eyes darted about angrily under his brows.

"Bow to him," whispered Petrukha to Ilya. Ilya dropped his head in disappointment.

"What's your name?" came a booming voice. "Well, Ilya, keep your eyes peeled. You've got nobody in the world now but your master. No friends, no relations. I'm mother and father to you from now on, and this is the last speech I'll be making to you."

Ilya stole a furtive glance about the shop. Enormous sheat-fish and sturgeon lay on ice in big baskets, dried pike and carp were piled up on the shelves, and glittering tins could be seen everywhere. The shop was small and stuffy and stank of fish-brine. Live fish—sturgeon, burbot, perch, and carp—swam in wooden tubs on the floor. One smallish pike rushed boldly about, pushing the other fish aside and splashing water on the floor with its tail. Ilya felt sorry for it.

One of the salesmen—a fat little man with round eyes and a hooked nose that made him look like an owl—told Ilya to take the dead fish out of the tubs. The boy rolled up his sleeves and snatched them out at random.

“Catch them by the head, you idiot!” said the salesman under his breath.

Sometimes Ilya made the mistake of catching a live fish, which would slip through his fingers, twisting frantically and banging its head against the side of the tub.

Once Ilya pricked his finger on a fin and began to suck the wound.

“Take your finger out of your mouth!” roared the owner.

After that Ilya was given a big axe and sent down into the basement to chop ice, and chop it so fine it would fit compactly into the tubs. Chips sprang up and hit him in the face or slipped under his collar; the basement was cold

and dark and had such a low ceiling that Ilya was sure to strike it on the up-swing of the axe if he was not careful. After working for a few minutes, he climbed back upstairs all in a sweat.

"I broke a jar," he said to the owner.

Strogany looked at him in silence for a moment.

"I'll forgive you this time," he said. "I'll forgive you because you told me. But I'll tweak your ear the next time."

Ilya's life went round and round in a monotonous circle, as uneventful as the revolving of a screw in a big and noisy machine. He got up at five o'clock in the morning and polished the boots of the whole household, which included his master, his master's family, and the salesmen. Then he went to the shop, swept the floor, and washed the tables and scales. When the shop was opened he waited on customers and carried their purchases out to their carriages. In the middle of the day he went home for dinner. There was nothing for him to do after dinner, and so if he was not sent on errands he stood in the doorway watching the busy market-place and marvelling at how many people there were in the world and at how much fish, meat, and vegetables they consumed.

"Mikhail Ignatich," he once said to the owl-like salesman.

"Well?"



“What will people eat when they’ve caught all the fish and killed all the cattle?”

“Idiot!” said the salesman.

Another time he picked up a newspaper lying on the counter and began to read it as he stood in the doorway. The salesman snatched it out of his hand and gave him a fillip on the nose.

“Who gave you permission?” he said. “Idiot!”

Ilya heartily disliked this salesman, who bowed obsequiously whenever he spoke to the owner but called him a red-headed cheat behind his back. On Saturdays and the days before holidays the owner would leave the shop early to go to mass, and then the wife or sister of this salesman would come to the shop and he would give them parcels of fresh and tinned fish and caviar to take home. He took pleasure in bullying beggars, many of whom were old and reminded Ilya of Grandad Yeremei. Whenever an old man would stop in the doorway and softly beg for alms, the salesman would pick up a little fish by the head and thrust it so hard into the outstretched palm that the bones of the fins would pierce the flesh. When the beggar pulled back his hand with a little gasp of pain the salesman would call out with harsh mockery:

“Don’t want it? Not enough for you? Be off!”

One day an old beggar-woman picked up a dried pike and slipped it inside her rags. The salesman saw her. He

seized her by the collar, took away the fish, pushed down her head with his left hand, and gave her a punch with his right. She neither cried out nor said a word; she simply walked out with bent head, and Ilya saw two streams of dark blood flowing from her nose.

“Got what’s coming to you,” shouted the salesman after her, adding to Karp, the other salesman, “I can’t stand beggars. Parasites, that’s what they are. Go about begging when they’re stuffed to the gills. They live fine. Folk call them ‘Christ’s little brothers.’ Well, I’d like to know what relation *I* am to Christ—none at all? All my life I’ve been squirming and wriggling like a worm in the sun, and what do I get for it? No rest, no peace, no respect.”

Karp was a pious man. He was always talking about church, choir singers, and the bishop’s services, and every Saturday he was afraid he would be late for mass. He was also interested in sleight-of-hand and whenever a “magician” came to town Karp would be sure to go and see his performances. Karp was tall and thin and agile. When the shop was crowded he would glide among the customers like a snake, smiling and talking to everybody and throwing frequent glances at the towering figure of the owner as if seeking praise for his commercial gifts. He was contemptuous of Ilya, who did not like him. But Ilya did like the owner. From morning to night Strogany stood at the cash drawer, tossing money into it. Ilya saw that he did it coolly,

without greed, and this pleased him. He was also pleased to notice that Strogany spoke to him more often and in a more kindly tone than he did to the salesmen. Once when there was a lull in business and Ilya was standing in the doorway with drooping head, Strogany called out:

“Hey there, Ilya—going to sleep?”

“No.”

“What makes you so serious all the time?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bored?”

“Rather.”

“That’s all right. I was bored in my time, too. Bored with working for other people from the age of nine to thirty-two. But for the last twenty-three years I’ve been making others bored with me.” And he wagged his head as if to say, can’t be helped—it’s all in the course of things.

After Strogany had spoken to him in this way two or three times, Ilya began to wonder why this rich and prominent man should spend all his time in a dirty shop filled with the loathsome stench of salt fish when he had such a fine big airy house to live in? It was a strange house: very plain and quiet and subjected to the strictest routine. And it was crowded even though nobody except the owner and his wife and three daughters with a cook, parlour maid, and the porter, who was also the coachman, lived in its two storeys.

The occupants all spoke in lowered tones and hugged the fence as they walked through the big and immaculate courtyard as if afraid to find themselves in an open space. To his own surprise Ilya decided, on comparing this quiet, imposing house with Petrukha's, that he preferred Petrukha's, even if it was dirty and noisy and squalid. The boy longed to ask the merchant why he spent all his time in the noise and confusion of the market-place when he could live in the peace and quiet of his own home.

Once when Karp was out and Mikhail was down in the cellar sorting out tainted fish to donate to the almshouse, Strogany began a conversation with Ilya, and the boy said to him:

"Why don't you give up the shop, Kirill Ivanovich? You're rich and you've got a fine house to live in. Why should you stay in this dull, smelly place?"

Strogany, his red eyebrows twitching, leaned on the counting-desk and stared hard at the boy.

"Well?" he said when Ilya finished. "Have you said all you wanted to?"

"Yes," said the boy uneasily.

"Come here."

Ilya went over. The merchant took him by the chin, tilted back his head, and narrowed his eyes on him.

"Did somebody prompt you to say that or did you think of it yourself?"

"Myself, really...."

"Very well, if you're telling the truth. But here's what I have to say to you: don't ever dare talk to your master—your *master*, mind you—like that again. Remember. Now go back where you belong."

And when Karp came in he said to him, without any apparent reason, addressing the salesman but glancing out of the corner of his eye at Ilya:

"A person ought to keep busy to the end of his days. It's only a fool who don't know that. A man can't live without working. He's got no worth to him if he don't throw himself into some job."

"Quite right, Kirill Ivanovich," said the salesman, and at once glanced anxiously about the shop for a task to busy himself with. As Ilya gazed at Strogany he fell to thinking. Life with these people was becoming more and more tiresome. The days dragged on one after another like long grey threads unwinding off an invisible ball, and the boy felt they would never come to an end, that he would go on standing in this doorway listening to the noise of the marketplace as long as he lived. But his mind, stimulated by all he had seen and read, was not paralyzed by the monotony of his life; it went on working slowly but ceaselessly. Sometimes this grave quiet child found it so insufferable to watch the people about him that he wanted to close his eyes and be transported to some place far away—farther away than

any place Pavel Grachov had reached in his wanderings; to go away and never come back to this drab boredom and incomprehensible bustle.

On Sundays he was sent to church. He always came home feeling that his spirit had been laved in warm and fragrant water. Only twice in six months was he allowed to go and see his uncle. He found everything more or less as usual there. The hunchback was thinner, Petrukha whistled louder and his face had gone from pink to red—that was all. Yakov complained that his father gave him no peace.

“He’s always harping on one and the same thing, ‘Get down to business,’ he says. ‘I don’t want any book-worms in my house.’ But is it my fault if I can’t bear the pub? The noise, the shouting and singing—a person can’t even hear himself think. I asked him to find me a job in an icon shop—there aren’t many customers there and I love icons.”

Yakov blinked sadly and the sallow skin of his forehead glistened like the bald spot on his father’s head.

“Do you still read books?” asked Ilya.

“Of course. That’s my only joy in life. It’s as if you lived in another world when you read a book, and as if you had fallen off the belfry when you finish.”

Ilya studied his friend’s face. “How old you’ve grown!” he said. “Where’s Masha?”

“She’s gone to the almshouse to beg. I can’t give her much help any more—father keeps a sharp eye on me.

Perfishka is ailing all the time. So Masha took to going to the almshouse. They give her soup and things. Matitza does whatever she can for her. Masha's having a hard time of it."

"I see it's a dreary sort of life you live, too," mused Ilya.

"Is it dreary where you come from?"

"Something dreadful. At least you have books. The only book we have is *The Latest Tricks and Sleight-of-Hand*. One of the salesmen keeps it locked up in his trunk. I'll never have a chance to read it—he won't give it to me, the old skinflint. Life keeps playing shabby tricks on you and me, Yakov."

"That it does, pal."

They talked a little longer, then parted, both of them feeling dejected.

The next few weeks went by without change, and then suddenly fate smiled mercifully, if grimly, on Ilya. One morning when business was brisk, the owner began rummaging hastily through the things on top of his counting-desk. The blood rushed to his face and the veins stood out on his neck.

"Ilya!" he called. "Look on the floor. Do you see a ten-ruble note?"

Ilya darted a swift glance at his master, then swept the floor with his eyes.

"No," he said calmly.

"Take a good look I tell you!" roared Strogany in his thundering voice.

"I did."

"I'll show you, you obstinate little brat!" threatened his master, and when all the customers had left the shop he called Ilya to him, seized him by the ear with strong fat fingers, and began shaking him.

"When you're told to look, look! When you're told to look, look!" he kept repeating hoarsely.

Ilya put his two hands on the man's belly and freed himself by giving a great push.

"What are you shaking me for?" he shouted viciously, his whole body trembling with indignation. "Mikhail Ignatich stole the money. It's in the left-hand pocket of his vest."

The owl-like face of the salesman first dropped in astonishment, then twitched convulsively. All of a sudden he struck Ilya a blow on the head that knocked the boy down and sent him crawling into a corner with the tears running down his cheeks.

"Stop! What are you doing?" came the merchant's voice as if in a dream. "Hand over the money!"

"He lied," whined the salesman.

"Look out or you'll get this weight at your head!"

"It's my money, Kirill Ivanovich! I swear."

"Shut your mouth!"



Everything grew quiet. The owner went into his office, and presently they heard the click of the beads on the abacus. Ilya held his head in his hands as he sat on the floor glaring at the salesman, who returned the glare from where he was standing in the opposite corner.

"Well, you rat, do you like what you got?"

Ilya hunched his shoulders and said nothing.

"I'll give you another for good measure."

And he stole towards the boy, his round, evil eyes fixed on his face. Ilya sprang up and seized a long thin knife that was lying on the counter.

"Come on!" he said.

The salesman stopped and ran an appraising eye over the strong stocky lad with the knife in his hand.

"Hm, convict stock."

"Come on, come on," repeated the boy, taking a step towards him. Spots danced and leapt in front of his eyes and he was conscious of some great force rising up within him and egging him on.

"Put down that knife," came the voice of Strogany.

Ilya gave a start and glanced up at the red beard and flushed face, but he did not budge.

"Put down that knife, I tell you," said the owner more softly.

Ilya put the knife on the counter and, whimpering loudly, sat down on the floor again. He was dizzy, his ear ached,

and he could hardly breathe from the weight that bore down on his chest and rose as a lump in his throat, making it impossible to speak.

"Here's your pay; you're sacked, Mikhail."

"But—"

"Get out before I call the police."

"Very well, I'll get out, but you keep a sharp eye on that boy—and the knife—heh, heh!"

"Get out!"

Once more it was quiet in the shop. Ilya shuddered from the odd sensation of something crawling over his face. He ran a hand over his cheek to wipe the tears away. From behind the counting-desk his master was staring at him sharply. He got up and staggered over to his place at the door.

"Wait," said Strogany. "Would you have struck him with that knife?"

"I would," said the boy quietly but firmly.

"Hm. What was your father arrested for? Murder?"

"Setting fire to the village."

"Not bad either."

Karp came in, sat down meekly on a stool beside the door, and stared into the street.

"Karp, my good man," said Strogany mockingly, "I've given Mikhail the sack."

"That's your right, Kirill Ivanovich."

"He stole some money. What do you think of that?"

"Tsck, tsck! You don't mean it!" said Karp uneasily. Strogany's red beard shook with laughter and he rocked from side to side behind the desk.

"Ah, Karp, Karp! You trickster, you!"

Suddenly he stopped laughing, drew a deep breath, and said pensively:

"Human—all too human. You all want to live, you've all got to eat. Tell me this, Ilya; have you known that Mikhail stole for a long time?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me before? Afraid?"

"No, I wasn't afraid."

"In other words, you told me this time just because you were mad?"

"Yes," said Ilya frankly.

"Look at that, now!" exclaimed the owner.

For some time he stood stroking his red beard and gazing at Ilya without a word.

"What about you yourself, Ilya—do you steal?"

"No."

"I believe you. You don't steal. And what about Karp: Karp, here—does he steal?"

"He does."

Karp blinked at the boy in astonishment for a moment before turning away. The owner frowned and began to

stroke his beard again. Ilya was conscious that something unusual was afoot and waited anxiously to see how things would end. Flies buzzed in the smelly air and the live fish splashed in the tubs.

"Karp!" cried the merchant to the salesman who was staring motionless into the street.

"What is it?" said Karp, hurrying over to the owner and gazing fawningly up into his face.

"Did you hear what he said?" asked Strogany with a little laugh.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Can't be helped," said Karp with a shrug of his shoulders.

"What do you mean, 'Can't be helped'?"

"Just that, Kirill Ivanovich. I'm a person as knows his own worth, Kirill Ivanovich, and I wouldn't stoop to take offence from a mere child like him. You can see for yourself, Kirill Ivanovich, the boy's dull—he don't grasp things easy. He's...."

"Don't try to change the subject. Was it true what he said?"

"What is truth, Kirill Ivanovich?" said Karp, shrugging his shoulders again and tipping his head on one side. "Of course you can accept his words as the truth if you want to—that's your right."

Karp sighed and assumed an injured air.

"Everything's my right in my own shop," agreed the owner. "So you think the boy's stupid, do you?"

"Very stupid," said Karp with conviction.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," said Strogany vaguely. Suddenly he burst out laughing. "To think of him coming out with it like that—throwing it straight in your teeth, ha-ha! 'Does Karp steal?' 'He does.' Ha-ha!"

Ilya was filled with the joy of revenge on hearing his master's laughter; he looked gloatingly at Karp, gratefully at Strogany. Karp responded by laughing himself.

"Heh-heh!" he peeped cautiously.

"Close the shop!" snapped Strogany.

As Ilya was going home for dinner Karp shook his head and said to him:

"Oh, what a fool you are! What a blessed fool! What did you do it for? As if that's the way to get in your master's good graces! You dunce! Do you think he don't know Mikhail and I steal from him? He got his start in life the same way. As for his giving Mikhail the sack—I thank you for that with all my heart. But I'll never forgive you for what you said about me. Stupid insolence—that's what it was! To say such a thing about me to my very face! Oh, no, I'll never forgive you that! It shows you have no respect for me."

Ilya was nonplussed. Karp, he felt, ought to give vent

to his anger in quite another way. Ilya had been afraid to go home, so sure was he that the salesman would go for him the minute he was out of the shop. But there was more contempt than anger in Karp's words, and his threats did not frighten Ilya. That evening the owner summoned the boy to his house.

"Aha!" said Karp venomously when he heard of it. "Well, run along, run along."

When Ilya had been let in, he was shown upstairs and found himself standing in the doorway of a big room with a heavy lamp hanging over a round table with an enormous samovar on it. Round the table sat the master with his wife and three daughters. Each of the younger girls was a head shorter than her elder sister and they all had red hair, long faces and a pale skin thickly sprinkled with freckles. When Ilya came into the room they huddled together and fixed three pairs of frightened blue eyes on him.

"That's him," said Strogany.

"Think of that, now!" cried his wife, shrinking away and looking at Ilya as if she had never seen him before. Strogany gave a little laugh, stroked his beard, and drummed on the table with his fingers.

"Well, Ilya," he began impressively, "I've sent for you to say I don't need you any more; in a word, you can pack up your clap-trap and be on your way."

Ilya gave a start and his mouth fell open; then, turning on his heel, he made for the door.

"Wait," said the merchant, raising his hand. "Wait," he repeated in a lower tone, bringing his hand down on the table. "It wasn't just to tell you that, that I sent for you." He spoke slowly and distinctly, lifting an admonishing finger. "Oh, no! I want to give you a lesson. I want to explain to you why I don't need you any more. You've done me no harm—you're a lad as knows his letters, you're not lazy, and you're honest and able-bodied. Those are trumps in your hand. But even with these trumps I have no need of you. You don't fit in. Why not? That's the question."

Ilya was at a loss: here was the master praising him, and at the same time sending him away. He could not reconcile these two things, and feelings of pride and resentment warred within him. He felt that the owner himself did not know what he was doing. The boy took a step forward.

"Are you sending me away because I—because of the knife?" he asked in a deferential tone.

"Goodness gracious!" cried out the owner's wife in a fright. "What a bold fellow! Dear me!"

"That's it," said the owner, smiling and pointing his finger at Ilya. "You're too bold. Just that. Too bold. A shop-boy ought to be humble—'Blessed are the meek' as it's writ in the Scriptures. He lives on his master: his

master's food, his master's brain, his master's honesty. But you've got your own. For instance, you call a man a thief to his face. That's bad; that's impertinent. If you're honest, come and tell your tales on the quiet. I'm the one to decide everything; I'm the master. But you go blurting it out, 'A thief!' Don't be in such a rush. What do I care if one out of three is honest? It's all the same to me. It's a special sort of reckoning we need. If one is honest and nine are rascals, nobody's the better for it and the honest one'll come to a bad end. But if seven are honest and three are rascals, your side wins. Understand? The ones in the majority are the ones who are right. That's the way you've got to look at honesty."

Strogany wiped the sweat off his brow with the palm of his hand.

"And then there's that knife...."

"Oh, blessed saints!" shrieked his wife in horror, and the girls cringed.

"It's writ: He who takes up the knife shall die of the knife. That's why I have no more need of you. And that's that. Here's half a ruble for you, and good-bye. Be on your way. Remember—you've done me no harm, nor I you. I've even made you a present of half a ruble. And I've talked to you seriously, as if you weren't just a child and all that. Maybe I even feel sorry for you, but you just don't fit in. If the linchpin don't fit the axle there's



nothing to do but throw it away. So it's good-bye."

The matter looked more simple to Ilya: his master was getting rid of him because he dared not get rid of Karp and be left without a salesman. This made him feel light-hearted; his master, he thought, was a very pleasant and straightforward man.

"Good-bye," said Ilya, holding the coin in a tight fist. "Thank you very much."

"That's all right," said Strogany with a little nod.

"Tsck, tsck, tsck! He didn't so much as shed a tear," Ilya heard the owner's wife say when he was out of the room.

As Ilya, a pack on his back, passed through the sturdy gate of the merchant's house, he fancied he was leaving a desolate land he had read about in one of the books. In that land there were neither people nor trees—nothing but stones, with a kind wizard sitting among them to point out the way to all who were unfortunate enough to have strayed into that land.

It was the evening of a fine spring day. The sun was sinking, setting fire to the windows of the houses. It reminded Ilya of the day on which he had first laid eyes on this town. The weight of the pack on his back made him walk slowly. Passers-by knocked against his pack; carriages rumbled by; dust danced and whirled in the slanting rays of the sun; everything was lively and noisy and gay. The

boy went over in his mind all he had experienced in the few years he had lived in this town, and it made him feel like a grown-up. His heart beat proudly and boldly, and in his ears rang the merchant's words:

"...you're a lad as knows his letters, you're bright and able-bodied and not lazy ... those are trumps in your hand."

Ilya quickened his steps, urged on by a rush of joy and the knowledge that he did not have to go to the fish-monger's in the morning.

On returning to the house of Petrukha Filimonov Ilya realized with pride that he really had grown up while he was working in the fish-shop. Everyone was flatteringly attentive and inquisitive. Perfishka held out his hand to him.

"Greetings, shopkeeper! Had enough of it, eh? I heard about what a hero you turned out to be—ha, ha! They like you to lick their boots, not slap the truth in their faces."

"Oh, how big you've grown!" cried Masha delightedly on seeing him.

Yakov, too, was glad.

"Now we'll all be together again. I've got a book called *The Albigenses*. Wait till you read it! There's one fellow in it—Simon Monfort's his name—he's a wonder!"

And Yakov began hurriedly to tell Ilya the story. As Ilya watched him he thought with satisfaction that his

round-eyed friend had not changed in the least. Yakov found nothing extraordinary in Ilya's behaviour at the fish-shop.

"Just what you should have done," he said simply.

Petrukha, on the other hand, could not hide his astonishment.

"You gave it to them, sonny!" he said approvingly. "Of course Kirill Ivanovich couldn't keep you instead of Karp. Karp knows the business, he's a valuable man. You wanted to be honest and above-board. That's why Karp outweighed you."

But on the next day Terenty took his nephew aside and said to him quietly:

"Don't be too ... er ... outspoken with Petrukha. Watch your step with him. I heard him talking about you. 'Ain't he a saint, just!' he says."

"And last night he praised me," laughed Ilya.

Petrukha's attitude did not change the high opinion Ilya had of himself. He felt he was a hero; he knew that he had behaved better than another would have in his place.

Two months later, after much futile searching for a new situation, the following conversation took place between Ilya and his uncle:

"Hm-m," drawled the hunchback drearily, "no work for you. Too big, nobody wants you. Well, how are we to get on, lad?"

"I'm fifteen years old and I know how to read and write," said Ilya with dignity. "But I'm so bold I'll get thrown out of any job, no matter what it is."

"So what are we to do?" asked Terenty warily from where he sat holding on to the edge of the bed.

"Here's what: get the carpenter to make me a box and buy me some wares—soap, scent, needles, books—all sorts of things, and I'll go about town selling them."

"I don't quite understand you, Ilya—the pub's clattering inside my head—bang, clatter! I can't think clearly any more. And there's only one thing in my head and heart. . . only one thing . . . all the time. . . ."

There really was a fixed look in the hunchback's eyes, as if he were counting things he never came to the end of.

"Let's try. Do let me," begged Ilya, carried away by dreams of a way of life that would bring him freedom.

"No harm in trying, as they say."

"You'll see! Everything'll turn out all right!" cried Ilya happily.

The hunchback drew a deep sigh.

"If only you'd hurry and grow up!" he said with longing. "If you were bigger I'd leave this place. You're like an anchor holding me down in this cesspool. If it wasn't for you I'd go off to the holy men. 'Blessed saints,' I'd say to them. 'Blessed fathers, intercede for my soul, wretched sinner that I am!'"

The hunchback wept silently. Ilya knew what sin his uncle had committed; he remembered it only too well. His heart contracted with pity for Terenty, whose tears kept flowing more and more copiously.

“Don’t cry,” he said, adding consolingly after a moment’s pause, “you’ll be forgiven.”

And so Ilya began his life as a tradesman. From morning to night he walked up and down the streets of the town with a box on his chest and his nose in the air, gazing proudly at the people about him. He pulled his cap down over his ears, stuck out his Adam’s apple, and called out in the cracked voice of his years:

“Soap! Wax! Pins! Hairpins! Thread! Needles!”

The seething life around him was as a bright and rushing wave in which he swam freely and easily. Now he was being jostled by the crowds in the market-place; now he was stepping into a pub to order himself a pot of tea and a wheaten loaf which he consumed with slow dignity, as befitted one who knew his own worth. He found life simple, easy, and delightful. And his dreams became clear and simple. He imagined himself in a few years’ time owning a small clean shop in a respectable and secluded street. His shop would be a haberdashery stocked with clean goods that did not soil the hands or spoil the clothes. He, too, would be clean and healthy and handsome.

The neighbours would respect him, the girls would cast wistful glances at him. In the evening, when the shop was closed, he would sit in a clean bright room having tea and reading books. Cleanliness in all things was for him the main and indispensable factor of respectable living. Such was his dream when people were nice to him and did not hurt his feelings; he had become particularly sensitive to insult ever since he had launched on this independent life.

But when, after an unsuccessful day, he would sit down wearily in a pub or at the edge of the pavement, he would remember the rough shouts and pushes of the police, the suspicious attitude of his customers, the curses and jibes of rival pedlars; and then, deep down within him, stirred a great anxiety. His eyes dilated, he got a deeper glimpse into life, and his memory, teeming with countless impressions, marshalled them in orderly ranks within the mechanism of his reason. And he clearly perceived that all men were striving to reach one and the same goal: all of them were searching for the clean, comfortable, untroubled life he longed for. And none of them hesitated to knock aside anyone who happened to stand in his way; all of them were greedy and merciless, and they often hurt each other unnecessarily, merely for the satisfaction of inflicting pain. Sometimes they laughed as they delivered an insult, and it was a rare thing to find anyone showing compassion.

Such thoughts made him lose his taste for trade; under

their influence his dream of a clean little shop would fade away and he would feel a great emptiness of soul, a weariness and enervation of body. He was sure he would never make enough money to buy his own shop, that to the end of his days he would wander up and down the hot dusty streets with his box on his chest, his back and shoulders aching from the pull of the strap. But one day of lively trade was enough to lift his spirits and revive his dream.

One day Ilya caught sight of Pavel Grachov in one of the town's busy streets. The smith's son was sauntering along leisurely, his hands in the pockets of his ragged trousers, a long blue blouse that was much too big for him and as ragged and dirty as his trousers swinging from his shoulders, his big disreputable boots clattering noisily over the paving stones. A cap with a broken peak was tilted rakishly over his left ear, baring half of his head to the burning sun. His face and neck were covered with a greasy layer of dirt. He recognized Ilya while still a long way off and nodded to him cheerily without quickening his pace.

"A natty figure you cut," said Ilya.

Pavel gripped his friend's hand and laughed. From under the mask of dirt his eyes and teeth flashed out gayly.

"How are you getting on?" asked Ilya.

"As best I can. If there's anything to eat we eat it; if

there's not, we give a squeak and go to bed. Glad to meet you, you old squirt."

"Why don't you ever come and see us?" asked Ilya with a smile. He, too, was glad to see his old friend in such a gay and grimy state. He glanced down at Pavel's ragged boots and at his own new ones that had cost nine rubles, and gave a self-satisfied smile.

"How do I know where you live?" said Pavel.

"In the same old place—Petrukha's."

"Yakov told me you were selling fish somewhere."

Ilya recounted with pride his experiences at Strogany's.

"Good for you!" exclaimed Pavel approvingly. "Me too—when they threw me out of the print-shop for making mischief I went to work for some sign painters—mixing colours and things. Damned if I didn't plump myself down on a wet sign! Did they lick me! The owner and his wife and the head painter. Licked me till they couldn't lick any longer. Now I'm working for a plumber. Six rubles a month. Just had my dinner, now I'm going back."

"You're taking your time about it."

"To hell with them! All the work'll never get done anyway. You're right—I'll have to come and see you one of these days."

"Do," said Ilya warmly.

"Still reading books?"



"Of course. And you?"

"Take a peep sometimes."

"And do you write poetry?"

"Uh-huh."

Pavel laughed happily.

"Well, do come and see us. And bring your poems."

"I will. And I'll hook on to a bottle of vodka."

"Do you drink?"

"Guzzle. Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Ilya.

And he went on his way, thinking of Pavel. He could not understand why his friend, ragged as he was, had shown no sign of envy on seeing his sound boots and clean clothes—indeed, seemed not even to have noticed them. And when Ilya had told him about the independent life he was living, Pavel had seemed genuinely glad. Could it be that Pavel was indifferent to what everyone else was seeking: a calm, clean, independent life? The thought was disturbing.

Ilya always felt particularly depressed and disturbed after attending church. It was a rare thing for him to miss matins or vespers. He did not pray; he merely stood in the corner listening to the chanting of the litany, his mind a blank. The worshippers stood about him silent and motionless, and their silence was a bond uniting them. Waves of song and the smoke of incense were

wafted through the temple, and at times Ilya fancied that he, too, was caught up and went floating away in the warm and soothing emptiness, losing himself in it completely. A sense of exaltation filled him, bringing a peace that was out of harmony with the hurry and flurry of this world and incompatible with its aspirations. He tucked this opinion away in a separate corner of his soul, where it did not clash with his ordinary impressions and so did not disturb him. But in time he became aware of some presence that seemed always to be keeping an eye on him. It crouched timorously in the very depths of his soul and did not lift up its voice when Ilya was engrossed in the affairs of this world, but when he was in church it grew and asserted itself and evoked disturbing feelings that were at variance with his dreams of a clean and comfortable life. At such times he always recalled stories about Antippa the hermit and heard the voice of the rag-picker saying in loving tones:

“The Lord sees all things and knows the measure of all things. There is none but the Lord.”

Ilya would come home greatly perturbed, aware that his dreams of the future had lost their glamour and that there was another individual within him who did not wish to open a haberdashery. But the world was too strong for him, and this other individual remained hidden in the depths of his soul.

Ilya spoke to Yakov about everything except his dual personality. He himself avoided thinking about it, never of his own free will reflecting upon what was for him a bewildering experience.

He always looked forward to his evenings. On returning home from the centre of town he would go straight to Masha's basement room.

"Well, what about the samovar, Masha?" he would say in a proprietary tone.

The ready samovar was sure to be hissing and purring on the table. Ilya always brought some little treat with him—doughnuts, peppermint cakes, gingerbread, or perhaps jam. Masha loved to serve tea. She, too, had begun to earn money. Matitza had taught her to make paper flowers, and she enjoyed fashioning bright roses out of the thin paper that crackled so cheerily. Sometimes she earned as much as ten kopeks a day. Her father came down with typhus and was in the hospital for over two months, returning home thin and pale and with his head covered with fine dark ringlets. The shaving of his shaggy, unkempt beard made him look younger despite his pale and sunken cheeks. He was still working for other cobblers and rarely came home to spend the night, so that his daughter was left complete mistress of their humble home. She began to call him *Perfishka*, as everyone else did. The cobbler was amused by her attitude towards him and

clearly admired this curly-headed little girl who had his own gay manner of laughing.

The drinking of tea with Masha became a tradition with Yakov and Ilya. Every evening they drank a great deal and for a long time, sweating profusely and talking about everything that interested them. Ilya recounted what he had seen in the streets of the town; Yakov, who spent most of his time reading, told about his books and about fights in the pub, complained of his father, and more and more often expounded ideas that Ilya and Masha found incomprehensible and incongruous. The tea tasted extraordinarily good and the tarnished samovar beamed upon them as might a sly and affectionate old woman. But just as they would be getting into the swing of their tea-drinking, the samovar would be sure to begin rumbling and grumbling spitefully because it was out of water. Masha would seize it and carry it away to be refilled, an operation that was repeated several times in the course of an evening.

If there was a moon, its rays came through the window to join the children. There was never enough air and light in this hole hemmed in by damp and rotting walls and a low ceiling, but there was no end of good cheer, and every evening saw the birth of worthy feelings and youthful, if naïve, thoughts.

Sometimes Perfishka joined them. He would usually

sit on a trestle in a dark corner near the bulky lop-sided stove, or climb up on the stove-bunk and lie with his head hanging down, his small white teeth glistening in the darkness. His daughter would give him a big cup of sweet tea and a piece of bread.

“Many thanks to you, Maria Perfilyevna. I am touched to the quick,” he would say jocularly, adding with a sigh of envy, “Blast your buttons, youngsters! It’s a grand life you lead. Almost as if you was human beings.”

Then, with a smile, he would go on ruminatively, “Life? It’s getting better. Better and better every year. When I was your age the only friend I had to talk to was the strap. Whenever it began patting me on the back I’d throw up my head and roar at the top of my lungs with pleasure. When it stopped, my back would be so lonely for its only friend it would pout and puff and start gnawing at my vitals. But the friend didn’t stay away long—a very considerate strap it was! Well, and that’s the only pleasure I ever had in life. When you grow up you’ll have lots of things to remember—these talks, and the things you do, and all this grand life of yours. But me? Here am I, forty-five years old, and not a thing to remember. Not a crumb. Nothing at all—just nothing. As if I grew up deaf and dumb and blind. The only thing I remember is that my teeth was always chattering from cold and hunger and I always had a black eye.

How I ever kept my hair and ears and bones whole is more than I can tell. The only thing they never picked up to throw at me was the stove, but I got thrown against *it* more times than I can count. They twisted me into shape like a piece of hemp. They beat me and banged me and pounded me and drowned me, but I always come up smiling. The Russian's a tough article. There's no getting the better of him no matter what you do. Strong as a rock! Take me, for instance: they ground me to powder and hacked me to pieces, yet here I am, a gay popinjay, flitting from one pub to another, happy as the day is long. God loves me. Once He took a good look at me, gave a laugh and shook His head: 'Can't do nothing with *him*,' says He."

Yakov and Masha laughed as they listened to him. And Ilya laughed, but a thought crept into his mind that he could not get rid of.

Once he said to the cobbler with mocking incredulity, "You talk as if there was nothing in the world you wanted."

"Who says so? I always want a drink."

"But seriously—isn't there anything you really want?" insisted Ilya.

"Seriously? Well, then—I want a new accordion. A first-class one—one that costs twenty, twenty-five rubles. That's what I want."

He gave a quiet little laugh, but the next minute he was grave.

“No, sonny, I don’t even want a new accordion,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “No point in it. First of all, if it was worth anything I’d be sure to sell it for drink. Secondly, what if it should turn out to be worse’n the one I’ve got now? What’s the one I’ve got like? Priceless. My soul’s moved into that accordion of mine. A rare instrument—maybe the only one of its kind in the whole world. An accordion’s like your wife. A wonderful wife I had—a very angel. How could I ever get married again? I’d never find another like her, and I’d always be comparing the new one with the old. That wouldn’t be good for either of us. Ah, sonny, a thing’s good not because it’s good, but because it’s beloved.”

Ilya could not but agree with the cobbler’s estimate of his instrument: all who heard it were impressed by the richness of its tone. But he could not believe there was nothing the cobbler really wanted. The question formed itself definitely in his mind: was it possible for a man who had lived in squalor and dressed in rags all his life, who was drunk most of the time and could play the accordion, to wish for nothing better? The idea made Ilya look upon Perfishka as a sort of holy man, and he studied him with curiosity and incredulity, convinced

that he was the best of all those who lived in Petrukha's house, even if he was a worthless drunk.

Sometimes the young people would approach those deep and enormous problems that open up before the mind like bottomless pits, luring the inquisitive into their mysterious depths. Yakov was deeply stirred by such problems. He acquired the strange habit of clinging to solid objects as if he did not trust his muscles. When sitting down he would either lean against or hold on to whatever came to hand. As he walked down the street with his quick but uncertain step he would touch the posts he passed as if counting them, and push the fences as if testing their strength. At Masha's in the evening he always sat leaning against the wall under the window, clutching the table or a chair in his long fingers, his big head hanging over one shoulder, his blue eyes now narrowing, now dilating in his pale face as he gazed at his friends. He was still fond of relating his dreams, and when he retold the stories of the books he had read he could never resist adding odd inventions of his own. Ilya once caught him at this, but the exposure did not abash him.

"It's better the way I told it," he said. "It's only the Scriptures you daren't change; you can do whatever you like to ordinary books. After all, they were written by ordinary people like me. I can change whatever I don't



like. But tell me this: what happens to a person's soul when he's asleep?"

"How do I know?" said Ilya, who disliked such questions; they made him uneasy.

"I think it flies away," said Yakov.

"Of course it does," agreed Masha.

"How do you know?" asked Ilya severely.

"I just know."

"It flies away," mused Yakov with a smile. "It needs a rest too; that's why we have dreams."

Unable to refute this, Ilya held his tongue, although he always felt an urge to contradict his friend. There ensued a pause lasting several minutes, during which the darkness of the basement seemed to deepen. The lamp smoked, a smell of charcoal came from the samovar, and muffled sounds—the roar and whine of the pub overhead—were borne to the children's ears. Yakov began again:

"A person spends his time rushing about—working, and all that. Living, they call it. And then, all of a sudden—bang!—he's dead. What does that mean? What do you think, Ilya?"

"Doesn't mean anything. He just grew old and died."

"But young ones die too—even children. And healthy ones."

"They couldn't be healthy if they died."

"What do people live for?"

"Off again!" exclaimed Ilya with a disparaging laugh. "They live so's to live. They work and try to be a success. Everybody wants to be successful. Everybody's looking for a chance to get rich and be clean."

"That's the poor. But what about the rich? They've got everything. What's there for them to want?"

"Silly! The rich? If there wasn't any rich, who'd the poor work for?"

Yakov considered this a moment.

"So you think everybody lives just to work?"

"Um ... yes. That is, not all. Some work, and others ... they've done all their work and saved up their money and just ... er ... live."

"What for?"

"Oh, what do you think? Don't you s'pose they want to? Don't *you* want to?" cried Ilya impatiently. He was angry, but could not have said whether it was because Yakov asked such questions or because he put them foolishly.

"What do *you* live for?" he shouted.

"I don't know," answered Yakov meekly. "I wouldn't mind dying. I'd be scared to, of course, but it'd be interesting." A mild note of rebuke crept into his voice. "There's no reason why you should get so mad. Look, people are made for work, and work is made for people,

and . . . and then what? It's like a wheel—goes round and round without getting anywhere. What for? And where does God come in? He's the axle, God is. He said to Adam and Eve, grow and reproduce your kind, and populate the earth. But what for?" Yakov leaned towards his friends, his eyes round with awe as he whispered mysteriously, "I'm sure He gave the answer, but somebody must have stole it. Probably Satan. Who else? Satan. And that's why nobody knows what for."

Ilya was too struck by his friend's rambling speech to make any comment, and Yakov resumed, speaking more quickly and quietly as he went on. His eyes bulged, the muscles of his face twitched with fear, and the more he said, the more incoherent he became:

"What does God want of you—do you know that? Aha!" the interjection stood out with sudden stress in the stream of disconnected words that poured out of his mouth. Masha gaped in astonishment at her friend and benefactor. Ilya frowned in annoyance: it hurt his pride not to be able to understand. He considered himself smarter than Yakov, yet he was impressed by Yakov's memory and his ability to speak on all subjects. At last he grew tired of listening; his head felt as if it were stuffed with fog.

"Stop it," he interrupted crossly. "You've read a lot of stuff you don't understand."

"That's just what I'm saying: I don't understand," exclaimed Yakov in surprise.

"Then just say you don't understand. You go raving on like a madman and I have to sit here and listen to you."

"But wait," insisted Yakov. "Nothing *can* be understood. Take this lamp for instance. The fire in it: where does it come from? Here it is; here it isn't. Scratch a match: you get fire. So it must always be there. Where? Flying about in the air? Then why can't we see it?"

The question was so puzzling that Ilya's face lost its supercilious look.

"If it was in the air the air would always be warm," he said, staring at the lamp. "But you can light a match outdoors in the cold. It couldn't be in the air."

"Then where?" said Yakov, gazing hopefully at his friend.

"In the match," said Masha.

But Masha's opinions were always ignored when the boys were discussing the more serious matters of life. She had grown used to it and did not take offence.

"Where?" cried Ilya with fresh irritation. "I don't know and don't care. The only thing I know is you can warm yourself by it but mustn't poke your fingers into it."

"Aren't you the smart one, just!" broke in Yakov indignantly. "'Don't know and don't care!' I could say

the same thing, and so could any fool. What I want is an explanation. Where does the fire come from? I don't ask you about bread—anybody can see where bread comes from: the plant gives us grain, grain gives us flour, the flour gives us bread. There you are. But where does a person come from?"

Ilya glanced at his friend in wonder and envy.

Sometimes, when the questions got too much for him, he would jump up and harangue Yakov mercilessly. For some reason he always walked over and stood with his back against the stove on such occasions—a broad-shouldered, sturdy lad who kept tossing his curly head as he spoke his mind in clearly-accented syllables.

"A muddle-head, that's what you are. And it all comes from having nothing to do. How do you spend your time? Standing behind the bar. A fine job, that! And you'll probably go on standing there like a hitching-post all your life. If you walked the streets from morning to night every day like me looking for a chance to make some money you wouldn't have time to brood over all that tommyrot. You'd be too busy thinking about how to make your way in the world, how to snatch your opportunity. That's why your head's so big—stuffed full of foolishness. Sensible thoughts are little—they don't make your head swell up."

Yakov listened to him in silence, all bent over, clutching

whatever came to hand. Every once in a while he would move his lips noiselessly and blink his eyes.

But as soon as the harangue was over and Ilya came back to the table, Yakov would begin to philosophize again.

"They say there's a certain book—on science—black magic—that gives an explanation of everything. If only I could get hold of it and read it! It must be terrific."

Masha would get up and go and sit on her bed, from where her black eyes travelled from one of her friends to the other. Soon she would begin to yawn, then to doze, and at last her head would drop down on the pillow.

"Time to go to bed," Ilya would say.

"Wait, I'll cover Masha and put out the light."

Ilya would reach for the door-knob without waiting for him, and then Yakov would whine:

"Do wait for me. I'm afraid to go alone—it's dark."

"Pooh!" Ilya would exclaim contemptuously. "Sixteen years old, and still a baby! Why d'ye s'pose I'm not afraid? I wouldn't blink an eye if I met the devil himself."

Without answering, Yakov would pull the covers over Masha and hastily blow out the lamp. The light would go out with a sputter and darkness close in silently from all sides. Sometimes, however, a single ray of moonlight stole gently through the window and lay on the floor.

On a certain holiday Ilya came home with a white face and clenched teeth and threw himself on the bed without so much as taking off his clothes. Anger lay like a cold weight on his heart. A dull pain in his neck kept him from turning his head, and his whole body ached from the injury he had received.

That morning one of the policemen had given him permission, for the price of a cake of soap and a dozen hooks, to sell his wares outside the circus where a matinée was being held. Ilya had confidently taken up his stand at the circus entrance, but suddenly another policeman had come along, struck him over the head and kicked over the stand on which his box was resting, scattering his wares over the ground. Some of them were spoilt by the dirt, others were lost.

"You have no right, Sir..." murmured Ilya as he picked up his things.

"Wha-at?" said the policeman, stroking his red moustache.

"You have no right to touch me."

"Oh, haven't I? Migunov! Take him to the police-station!" said the officer calmly to the man under him.

And the very policeman who had given Ilya permission to stand at the circus hauled him off to the police-station, where he was held until evening.

Ilya had had encounters with the police before, but

never before had he been taken to the station or known such an access of anger and resentment.

As he lay on the bed he closed his eyes and concentrated all his attention on the weight of misery bearing down on his chest. A gurgle of sound, as if swift and turbid streams were descending a mountain side on a grey autumn day, came from the pub on the other side of the wall: the clash of tin trays, the clatter of dishes, separate voices calling for vodka, tea, and beer.

“Ri-i-ight away!” answered the waiters.

A singing voice cut through the noise like a quivering steel wire:

*Could I have fore-se-e-en such suffering. . . .*

Another voice, deep and resonant, joined in softly, forming lovely harmonies that were drowned out from time to time by the tumult of the pub.

*Ah, the tor-r-ment of my you-u-th.*

“You’re a liar!” shouted someone in a voice that seemed to issue from a dry, cracked throat. “It’s written: ‘Once thou hast kept my commandment to endure, I shall not forget thee in thine hour of temptation.’”

“You’re a liar yourself!” was the hot retort. “In the



same book it's written: 'Inasmuch as thou art tepid, being neither hot nor cold, I shall spit thee out of my mouth.' Hear that? Who's right?"

There was a burst of loud laughter followed by a piping voice:

"I give it to her in the face! I give it to her in the peeper! Then in the ear! Then in the teeth! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Another burst of laughter.

"Down she goes!" went on the piping voice. "So I slams her in that pretty little mug again! So I did. I was the first to kiss it, I was the first to slam it."

"Don't be so dogmatic," cried someone scathingly.

"Oh, no! Now my dander's up!"

"'As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.' Have you forgotten that? And then, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' And what King David said—have you forgotten that?"

Ilya heard the quarrel, the song, and the laughter, but they stirred no thoughts in him. The lean, hook-nosed face of the policeman floated in the darkness of the room, glaring at him with cruel little eyes, twitching its red moustache. Ilya clenched his teeth tighter as he looked at the face. But the song coming from the other side of the wall grew in volume as the singers warmed to the effort; their voices grew louder and bolder and the plaintive tune

found its way into Ilya's heart, melting the ice of his anger and resentment.

*The whole land have I roamed, my lad,  
From one end to the other....*

The two voices merged to utter their complaint:

*Siberia's wastes have I roamed, my lad,  
Ever seeking a road to home....*

Ilya breathed a deep sigh as he listened to the sad words, twinkling in the roar of the pub like stars among clouds, now shining forth, now disappearing as the clouds scudded across the sky.

*I have gnawed my own tongue with hunger, lad,  
As the cold gnawed at my bones....*

Ilya thought to himself that these men were singing well—so well that the song gripped his very soul. But in a minute they would get drunk and begin a fight.... Not for long is man able to give himself up to the finer things of life.

"Ah, my black and bitter fate!" wailed the tenor.

"Like an iron ball upon my leg," sang the bass.

From out of the past Ilya's memory called forth the image of Grandad Yeremei. The old man had said with a sad shake of his head, the tears rolling down his cheeks:

"Search as I might, never a bit of justice did I find."

Ilya reflected that Grandad Yeremei had loved the Lord, and had secretly saved up money; Uncle Terenty feared the Lord, yet he had stolen this money. People always had two sides to them. It was as if there was a scale inside their breasts, and their hearts, like the indicator of a scale, swung first to the left, then to the right, weighing the good and the bad.

"Aha!" roared someone in the pub. This was followed by so loud a crash that the bed shook under Ilya.

"Stop! Good God!"

"Hold him!"

"Help!"

The noise increased, everything was confusion, the air was full of a whirling and a whirring and a whining, as if a pack of hungry dogs were tearing one another to pieces.

Ilya listened with satisfaction: this was exactly what he had expected, and it confirmed his opinion of human nature. He clasped his hands under his head and went on with his ruminating:

... Old Antippa must have committed a great sin if it took him eight years of silence and prayer to atone for

it. Yet people forgave him and spoke of him with respect—even called him a holy man. But they took out their spite on his children. They sent one of them to Siberia and drove the other out of the village.

“It’s a special sort of reckoning we need,” was what merchant Strogany had said. “If one is honest and nine are rascals, nobody’s the better for it and the honest one’ll come to a bad end. The ones in the majority are the ones who are right.”

Ilya gave a little laugh. Hatred of people wriggled like a cold snake in his breast. Familiar images kept rising in his memory: here, for instance, was the clumsy Matitza wallowing in the mud of the courtyard.

“Mother, dear mother!” she groaned aloud. “If you should see me now!”

Perfishka stood gazing drunkenly down on her.

“Soaked,” he murmured reproachfully. “Soaked, you pig.”

Healthy, red-faced Petrukha watched them from the porch with a smile of contempt on his lips.

The commotion in the pub died down. Three voices—two women’s and one man’s—struck up a song, but soon it petered out. Someone took up an accordion, played it briefly and badly, put it down again.

Suddenly the voice of Perfishka drowned out all other sounds:

"Fill the cup, fill the cup, good my master, fill it up!" he jingled in his lilting way. "We'll bawl and we'll brawl and we'll pinch Anna's leg, and then we'll all go out to beg. We'll beg a rope and make a noose, and if anybody cuts us loose we'll use the guts from a dozen sluts. . . ."

This called forth a roar of laughter and shouts of approval.

Ilya got up and went out on the porch. He longed to go away but did not know where to go. It was late; Masha was asleep and Yakov was in bed with a headache. Ilya avoided visiting Yakov because Petrukha always raised his eyebrows disapprovingly at sight of him. A cold autumn wind was blowing. So dense was the darkness that the sky was blotted out. The outhouses looked like big clots of darkness coagulated by the wind. Something banged and swished and the damp air was filled with a strange low murmur, like the murmur of human grievances. The wind struck Ilya in the chest, blew in his face, and breathed coldly into his collar. He gave a shudder and said to himself that he could not go on living like this. He must go away from the filth and confusion and live alone—live a clean, quiet life all by himself.

"Who's there?" came a husky voice.

"Who wants to know?"

"Me. Matitza."

"Where are you?"

"Sitting on the wood-pile."

"What for?"

"Nothing."

A pause.

"Today's the day my mother died," came the voice out of the dark.

"Has she been dead long?" asked Ilya for the sake of saying something.

"Ever so long. Almost fifteen years. Maybe more. Is yours alive?"

"No, she's dead too. How old are you?"

Matitza did not answer immediately.

"S-somewheres round thirty," she said with a whistle. "Something's wrong with my leg. It's swollen up like a melon and it hurts. I rubbed it. Rubbed it with all sorts of stuff but it don't do no good."

Someone opened the door of the pub. A flock of sounds came rushing out; the wind caught them up and scattered them in the darkness.

"What're you standing here for?" asked Matitza.

"Just because. Got bored."

"Like me. My room's like a coffin."

Ilya heard her draw a deep breath.

"Come upstairs with me," she said.

Ilya glanced in the direction from which her voice came.

"Very well," he said indifferently.

Matitza climbed the stairs in front of him. First she put her right foot on the step, then she lifted her left foot slowly and with a grunt. Ilya's mind was a blank as he followed her just as slowly, as if the weight of his misery retarded him as the pain retarded Matitza.

Her room was long and narrow and the ceiling really did look like the lid of a coffin. A big stove was built into the wall near the door, a wide bed stood against the wall with its head to the stove, opposite the bed was a table with a chair on either side of it. Near the window, which formed a black square in the grey wall, another chair was placed. The din of the pub and the wailing of the wind were more noticeable up here. Ilya took the chair by the window and glanced about him.

"Whose image is that?" he asked as his eyes came to rest on a small icon in the corner.

"Saint Anna," said Matitza reverently.

"What's your name?"

"My name's Anna too. Didn't you know?"

"No."

"Nobody knows," and she let herself down heavily on the bed. Ilya watched her without the least desire to talk. She, too, was silent. And so for a long time, some three minutes, they sat there without speaking, as if each were unaware of the other's presence.

“Well, what’re we going to do?” asked the woman at last.

“I don’t know,” said Ilya.

“Oh, don’t you?” exclaimed the woman with an insinuating laugh. “What if you give me a treat? Buy a couple of bottles of beer—or, no: go and buy me something to eat. Don’t buy nothing but food.”

Her voice broke and she coughed.

“You see,” she said apologetically, “I ain’t been able to earn nothing since my leg took sore. Ain’t been able to go out. And I’ve ate everything up. Been cooped up here five days now. Yesterday I didn’t eat almost nothing, and today—just nothing. That’s God’s honest truth.”

And now for the first time Ilya remembered that Matitza was a street-walker. He stared intently into her big face and saw that her black eyes were smiling faintly and her lips moving as if she were sucking something. He suddenly felt uncomfortable in her presence, yet became vaguely interested in her.

“I’ll bring something.”

He jumped up, ran down the stairs to the pub, and stopped in front of the kitchen door. Suddenly he had no wish to go back to the attic. But the feeling was a fleeting one that flashed like a spark in the darkness of his soul and instantly went out. He entered the kitchen and bought ten kopeks’ worth of left-over meat, bread, and other edibles. The cook put them all in a greasy sieve, which



Ilya held in his two hands as if it were a platter. Once out in the entranceway he stopped again, wondering how he should get the beer. He could not buy it at the bar himself—Terenty would be sure to ask questions. So he called the dish-washer and asked him to buy it for him. The man ran into the pub, came back, pushed the bottles under his arms without a word, and was about to go into the kitchen.

“Wait,” said Ilya. “It’s not for me. It’s for a chap I know.”

“What?” said the dish-washer.

“A chap has come to see me.”

“What of it?”

Ilya realized that the lie was superfluous, and this made him feel uncomfortable. He climbed back the stairs un-hurriedly, listening hard, as if he expected someone to stop him. But he heard nothing except the howling of the wind; nobody stopped him, and he went back to the woman filled with a lust that was clearly, though diffidently, asserting itself.

Matitza put the sieve in her lap and pulled out the grey lumps of food with her thick fingers, pushing them into her big mouth and champing noisily. Her teeth were large and sharp and she examined every morsel that she pushed between them from all sides, as if looking for the juiciest spots to chew on.

Ilya gazed at her steadfastly, wondering how he was to embrace her. The fear that he would be unable to do so, and that she would laugh at him, made him grow hot and cold in turn.

The wind assaulted the door of the room, and every time the door shook Ilya started, terrified lest someone should come in and catch him there.

“Hadn’t I better lock the door?” he said.

Matitza nodded. Then she put the sieve on the stove and crossed herself.

“Thank the Lord for that—the lady’s full up. Is it much a person needs to make him happy?”

Ilya said nothing. The woman glanced at him and heaved a sigh.

“Those as need much, must give much,” she said.

“Give it to who?”

“To the Lord.”

Again Ilya said nothing. To hear this woman uttering the name of the Lord roused in him a strong but indefinable feeling that clashed with his desire to embrace her. Matitza pressed down on the bed with her hands as she climbed on to it and hitched her cumbersome body against the wall.

“All the while I was eating I kept thinking about that girl of Perfishka’s,” she began in a hollow, impassive voice. “There she is, living with you—you and Yakov—

and no good'll come of it, thinks I. You'll spoil the girl before her time, and she'll have to choose the path I've took. And a filthy, accursed path it is. We don't walk down it, us girls and women—we crawl down it on our bellies."

She paused and stared at the hands in her lap.

"Soon she'll be a big girl," she went on. "I've asked the cooks and others—ain't there no jobs for a girl like her? No jobs, they say. Sell her, they say. That's the best thing for her—she'll get clothes and money. And a house to live in. Such things happen; they do, I know. Sometimes when a rich old man gets feeble and rotten and no woman will have him for nothing, the slimy old snail goes and buys himself a girl. Maybe it's better for her. But it must be hard at first. Better if she could do without it. Better to live starved and clean than—"

She coughed as if a word had got stuck in her throat. But presently she resumed in the same impassive tone:

"... than starved and ... filthy."

The wind kept racing through the attic, beating boldly on the door.

The woman's impassive voice and her heavy, motionless body acted as a damp on the boy's feelings and robbed him of the courage necessary for the satisfying of his desire. Matitza seemed to be pushing him further and further away from her, and this annoyed him.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy!" breathed the woman softly. "Holy Mother of God!"

Ilya shifted irritably in his chair.

"You yourself say you're filthy, and still you keep calling on the Lord," he said petulantly. "What does He care for the likes of you?"

Matitza glanced at him without speaking.

"I don't understand you," she said at last with a shake of her head.

"It's easy enough to understand," said Ilya, getting up. "You're a whore, and yet you call on the Lord. If you believe in the Lord, don't be a whore."

"Oh, oh!" cried the woman uneasily. "What are you saying? Who's to call on the Lord if not us sinners?"

"I don't know who," muttered Ilya, filled with an irrepressible desire to insult this woman and the whole of mankind. "But I know it's not for you to speak of Him—not for you! You just hide yourself behind His name. I'm not a child any more, I can see for myself. Everybody groans and complains, but they go right on with their filthy business. Why do they fool each other, rob each other? They sin, then run and hide. 'Be merciful, oh Lord!' I can see it all. They're all fakers. Trying to deceive themselves and the Lord."

Matitza looked at him open-mouthed, her head thrust

forward, her eyes filled with dumb astonishment. Ilya went over to the door, snatched off the hook, and went out, slamming the door behind him. He knew he had deeply wounded Matitza, and he was glad of it; his heart was lighter and his head clearer. As he stalked down the stairs he whistled a tune between his teeth, and the venom in his heart dictated all sorts of hard, hurtful, iron-like words. And the words seemed to glow with a heat that lighted up the darkness within him, pointing out a path that led him away from the world of people. He addressed his words not only to Matitza, but to Uncle Terenty and Petrukha and merchant Strogany and everyone else.

I don't care, he said to himself as he issued into the courtyard. What if I do hurt your feelings? Scum, that's what you are—all of you!

Soon after this he began to visit the women. His first experience took place in the following way. As he was coming home one evening a woman said to him:

“Come along, lad?”

He glanced up and dropped into step beside her without a word. But he hung his head and kept glancing about, afraid someone he knew might see him. “It'll cost you a ruble,” she warned him when they had gone a little way.

“That's all right,” said Ilya. “Hurry up.”

And they walked in silence to the woman's door. That was all.

This new interest cost him a lot of money; he kept thinking that his peddling was a waste of time and would never give him a chance to live a clean respectable life. At one time he was tempted to fool his customers by selling his wares at a lottery as other pedlars did. But he decided it was not worth the trouble. He would have to hide from the police, or truckle to them and offer bribes. This he found beneath him. He liked to look people boldly in the eye, and he took a keen pleasure in knowing he was dressed better than other pedlars and did not drink or cheat. He walked the streets in a slow, dignified way; his lean face with its high cheek-bones wore a serious look; he spoke little, weighing his words, and he had a habit of screwing up his dark eyes when talking to anyone. He often thought how wonderful it would be if he could lay hand on a big sum of money—a thousand rubles or more. Accounts of robberies interested him greatly: he would buy the newspaper and read all the details of the latest robbery, then follow up the case to see whether the thieves were caught. If they were, he judged them harshly.

“Let themselves get caught, the fatheads!” he once said to Yakov. “Why try to do something that’s too much for you?”

On another occasion he said to his friend:

“Thieves live better than honest men.”

Yakov's face grew tense, his eyes narrowed.

"The day before yesterday your uncle was drinking tea in the pub with an old man—one of those pious old men," he said in the low mysterious tone he always adopted when speaking of serious things. "If what the old man says is true, it's written in the Scriptures: 'The tabernacles of robbers prosper, and they that provoke God are secure; into whose hands God bringeth abundantly. . . .'"

"Are you sure you got that right?" asked Ilya, who was listening attentively.

"They're not my words," said Yakov with a shrug of his shoulders. "They're written in the Bible. Maybe the old man made them up himself, but I asked him and he repeated them word for word." Leaning over, he added under his breath, "Take my father—he prospers. And he provokes God."

"Doesn't he just!" exclaimed Ilya.

"And he's been elected to the Town Council." Yakov dropped his head and drew a sigh. "Everything a man does ought to stand out in front of his conscience round and white as an egg, but here. . . . Oh, I'm sick of it all! I don't understand what's going on. I wasn't made for this life. I hate the pub. My father keeps hammering at me. 'Get down to business!' he says. 'Enough of your moping; start working!' Doing what? I serve behind the

bar when Terenty's away. I hate it, but I make myself do it. But there's nothing I really want to do."

"You ought to study," said Ilya.

"Life's so hard," murmured Yakov.

"Hard? For you? You're crazy!" exclaimed Ilya, jumping off the bed and going over to the window where Yakov was sitting. "It's hard for me, that's true. But for you? When your father gets old you'll be the master here. But me? I walk past the shop windows—see the trousers and vests and watches and things. I'll never be able to buy such trousers. I'll never have such watches. And I'd like to. I want people to look up to me. Why am I any worse than others? I'm *better* than they are. There's thieves all around, and they get elected to the Town Council. They own houses and pubs. Why should thieves get all the luck and me none? I want to have some, too."

Yakov glanced at his friend and then said softly and distinctly:

"I hope to God you never do."

"Why not?" said Ilya, stopping in the middle of the floor and looking at his friend excitedly.

"Because you're greedy. Nothing will satisfy you."

Ilya gave a dry, malicious little laugh.

"Nothing will satisfy me? Tell your father to give me half the money he and my uncle stole from Grandad Yeremei and I'll be satisfied."



Yakov got up and slunk over to the door. Ilya saw that his shoulders were shaking and his back was bent as if he had been struck.

"Wait," said Ilya uncomfortably, snatching at his friend's arm. "Where are you going?"

"Leave me alone," whispered Yakov, but he stopped and looked at Ilya. His face was white, his lips set, and his whole body had gone soft.

"Wait. Don't go," said Ilya apologetically, drawing him gently away from the door. "Don't be angry. After all, it's the truth."

"I know," said Yakov.

"You do? Who told you?"

"Everybody talks about it."

"Hm. Well, the ones who talk about it are no better."

Yakov gave him an imploring look and drew a deep breath.

"I didn't believe it. I thought they were just saying it out of envy. But then I began to believe it. And if you say so. . . ."

He gave a hopeless little wave of his hand, turned away, and sank down on a chair, his chin on his chest, his fingers gripping the seat. Ilya went over and sat down on the bed in the same attitude, unable to think of anything to say to comfort his friend.

"So you think my life's easy?" said Yakov softly.

"I know," said Ilya just as softly. "Of course it's not. The only comfort is: wherever you look it's the same."

"Do you know for certain about . . . about what you said?" asked Yakov timidly without raising his eyes.

"Yes. Remember when I ran out that day? I peeped through a crack in the door and saw them sewing up the pillow. He was still breathing."

Yakov hunched his shoulders, got up and went to the door.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye. Don't take it so hard. It can't be helped."

"I'm all right," said Yakov as he opened the door.

Ilya followed him with his eyes, then flung himself back on the bed. He was sorry for Yakov, and again he felt viciously resentful of his uncle, Petrukha, and people in general. A person like Yakov could not live among the likes of them. Yakov was good. He was clean and kind. As Ilya lay thinking about people, his memory supplied him with instances proving how cruel and false and malicious they were. He knew so many such instances that it was easy for him to drench the human race in the muck of his memories. And the more sullied the images that rose up in his mind's eye, the more stifling the emotions they roused, which were a mixture of grief and satisfaction and fear born of knowing he was all alone in the dark and tragic life whirling madly about him.

When he found it unbearable to go on lying there any longer with the blurred and smelly sounds of the pub coming through the wall, he got up and went out. For a long time he walked up and down the streets of the town, unable to free himself of his agonizing thoughts. On and on he walked in the darkness, fancying that some enemy was following him and imperceptibly directing his steps into the worst, the most dismal places, where he could see nothing but what filled his soul with misery and his heart with venom. Surely there must be something good in this world: good people, good deeds, and a joyous way of life. Why did he never come in contact with them? Why should he know nothing but what was bad and tiresome? Who was it that kept leading him always into the darkness, the dirt, and the evil?

In the grip of such thoughts he found himself in the fields outside of town, walking beside the stone wall of a monastery. He looked up and saw heavy clouds rolling towards him out of the darkness in the distance. Overhead there were rifts in the clouds, giving glimpses of blue spaces where little stars twinkled. From time to time the melodious brass tinkle of the bell on the monastery watchtower was poured into the silence of the night, but nothing else disturbed the death-like hush. Not even from the massed shadows of the town behind him did a single sound reach the fields, though the hour was

not late. It was a cold night. Ilya kept stumbling over clumps of frozen earth. The sense of fear and loneliness provoked by his thoughts made it impossible for him to go on. He stopped and leaned against the cold stone wall, insistently asking himself who it was that was guiding him through life, who it was that was leading him on, showing him only what was wicked and burdensome.

“Is it Thou, Lord?” The question flared up dazzlingly in the darkness of his soul.

Cold horror passed in a shudder over his body. Galvanized into action by a premonition of something dreadful to come, he tore himself away from the wall and hurried back to town, stumbling as he went, afraid to look back.



A few days later Ilya met Pavel Grachov. It was evening; tiny snow-flakes circled lazily in the air, sparkling in the light of the street lanterns. Despite the cold, Pavel was wearing nothing but a flannel blouse without so much as a belt. He walked along slowly, shoulders drooping, eyes on the ground, hands in his pockets, as if he were looking for something. When Ilya caught him up and spoke to him, he lifted his head and glanced into his face.

“Umph,” he grunted indifferently.

“How are you?” said Ilya, walking beside him.

"Couldn't be worse. How are you?"

"So-so."

"Nothing to boast of either, I see."

They were silent for a while as they walked along, elbows touching.

"Why don't you ever come and see us?" asked Ilya.

"No time. We don't have much spare time. You know that."

"You'd find the time if you wanted to," said Ilya reproachfully.

"Don't be angry. You want me to come and see you, but you never come and see me. Haven't even asked me where I live."

"That's true," said Ilya with a smile.

Pavel shot him a glance and said with a little more animation:

"I live by myself. Have no friends. Don't seem to meet anybody I like. I was sick—spent almost three months in hospital. Not a soul came to see me all that time."

"What was wrong with you?"

"Caught cold when I was drunk. Got typhoid. The worst was when I began to get well. When you lie there alone day and night you begin to think you're deaf, dumb, and blind. Thrown into a ditch, like an unwanted puppy. Thanks to the doctor I had books to read. I'd have died if it wasn't for them."

“Good books?”

“Uh-huh. Poetry—Lermontov, Nekrasov, Pushkin. Lapped it up like milk. Some poetry makes you feel as if you were being kissed by the girl you love. Other poetry chips hard into the stone of your heart, throwing off a spark that makes the whole of you burst into flame.”

“I’ve got out of the habit of reading,” said Ilya with a sigh. “What you read’s one thing, what you see’s another.”

“And a good thing it is. Here, shall we step into a pub? Have a little chat. I’ve got to go somewhere, but it’s too early yet.”

“Let’s,” said Ilya, taking Pavel’s arm.

Pavel shot him another look and smiled. “We never were very close friends,” he said, “but I’m always glad to see you.”

“I don’t know whether you are or not, but I certainly am,” said Ilya.

“If you only knew what I was thinking of when you caught me up!” interrupted Pavel. “Best to forget it,” and, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand, he grew silent and slowed his steps.

They went into the first pub they came to, sat down in a corner, and ordered beer. In the lamplight Ilya saw that Pavel’s face was thin and drawn, his eyes were restless, and his lips, that had always been parted in a mocking smile, were now tightly shut.

"Where do you work?" he asked.

"Back in the print-shop," said Pavel glumly.

"Hard?"

"Not the work, but the worry."

Ilya got a certain satisfaction out of seeing his once gay and energetic friend so listless and dejected, and he wondered what could have brought about the change.

"Still writing poetry?" he asked as he refilled Pavel's glass.

"Not now, but I wrote a lot before. Showed it to the doctor. He praised it. Even printed one of my poems in the paper."

"Oho!" exclaimed Ilya. "What kind of poetry? Recite something to me."

Ilya's eagerness and a few glasses of beer revived Pavel. His eyes began to shine and two red spots appeared on his sallow cheeks.

"What kind?" he echoed, rubbing his forehead vigorously. "I've forgotten—I really have. Wait, maybe I'll remember something. They're always buzzing about in my head like bees in a hive—buzz! buzz! Sometimes I want so hard to write—break all out in a sweat. Feel as if I'd burst, and the tears come to my eyes. I want to make it nice and smooth but . . . no words come." He gave a sigh and threw back his head. "There's a lot inside of me, but it spreads out to nothing on paper."

“Do recite something,” pressed Ilya. The more he looked at Pavel, the more curious he became, and to his curiosity was gradually added a sympathy tinged with sadness.

“They’re funny, the poems I write. All about my own life,” said Pavel with a self-conscious smile. Presently he glanced about, cleared his throat, and, avoiding his friend’s eyes, began to recite in an undertone:

*Night. . . Despair. Through the dusty pane  
Shines a sickly moon that throws a lane  
Of light on the littered floor  
And up the oozing stones of the wall;  
It patterns the boards of the sagging door  
That leads into the cheerless hall.  
Silent I sit, all in a heap—  
Somehow I cannot sleep. . .*

Pavel paused and took a deep breath before going on more softly and slowly:

*I am strangled by life, I am pummelled and thrashed—  
Now a thrust at my heart, now a blow on the spine.  
I cherished one hope, even that has crashed.  
The only thing left is this bottle of wine.  
Faintly agleam in the moonlight it stands  
And smiles like a pal as I stretch out my hands.*



*Good. Let my wounds be doctored by drink.  
As my mind grows hazy the pain will pass.  
Deep in sleep I will blissfully sink—  
Why should I not take another glass?  
There!*

*Let those who can go to sleep abstain;  
I am driven to drink by my pain.*

When he finished, he shot a swift glance at Ilya and dropped his head even lower.

"Most of my poems are like that," he murmured.

He drummed on the table with his fingers and shifted in his chair.

Ilya sat staring at him for a few seconds in amazed incredulity. The measured lines kept ringing in his ears and it was hard for him to believe they could have been written by this thin lad in the rough blouse and coarse boots and with such an uneasy look in his eyes.

"There's nothing very funny about that," he drawled softly at last, looking hard at Pavel. "I liked it. It almost made me cry—really it did. Recite it again."

Pavel quickly lifted his head and glanced happily at his friend.

"Did you really like it?" he asked softly, drawing his chair closer.

"Silly. Do you think I'd lie to you?"

Pavel recited it again—softly, pensively, stopping and taking deep breaths when his voice gave out. A second reading only increased Ilya's doubt that Pavel had written the poems himself.

"Recite something else," he said.

"Perhaps I'd better come and see you and bring my notebook. All my poems are so long. It's time for me to be going. And I have such a bad memory. I only remember the beginnings and ends. There's one poem: I'm walking through the woods at night, lose my way, worn out and scared, all alone. So while I'm looking for a way out I say:

*My feet are heavy,  
My head is bowed  
With misery.  
Where shall I go?  
Oh, native land,  
Point the way to me.  
I fell on the earth  
'Neath a spreading tree,  
Pressed my cheek to the earth,  
And my fainting heart  
A whisper heard:  
"Come to me."*

"Listen, Ilya—come along with me. Do. I'm not ready to say good-bye to you yet."

Pavel hopped about, pulling at Ilya's sleeve and glancing affectionately into his face.

"All right," agreed Ilya. "I don't want to leave you yet either. To be perfectly honest with you—I believe you wrote them, and then again I don't. You're such a queer fish. And the verses turn out so good."

"So you don't believe they're mine?"

"Well, if they are, you're wonderful," said Ilya sincerely.

"Just you wait—I'll learn how to write, and then you'll see what I can do!"

"Go ahead."

"Oh, Ilya! If only I wasn't so dumb!"

They strode quickly down the street, snatching at each other's words, tossing them swiftly back and forth, growing more and more animated and fraternal as they went on. Each was overjoyed to discover that the other shared his views, and their spirits soared on the wings of joy. The snow was falling heavily now. It melted on their faces, settled on their clothes, clung to their boots, and whirled in a solid mass all about them.

"Damn!" cried Ilya as he plunged into a hole filled with mud and slush.

"Keep to the left."

"Where are we going?"

"To Sidorikha's. Know her place?"

"I do," said Ilya after a little pause; then, laughing, "We all take the same road."

"I know," said Pavel softly. "But I've got to go there. For a certain reason. I'll tell you why, though it's devilish hard to come out with it." He spat noisily. "Listen—there's a certain girl there. Wait till you see her. Makes everything melt inside you. She was the parlour maid at the doctor's who took care of me. I used to go to his house for books after I got well. I'd sit there reading. And there she was, fluttering about, laughing. I made up to her. She gave herself up straight away, without a word. What an affair began between us! The very sky caught fire! I flew to her like a moth to the flame. Our lips swelled up and our bones ached from our kisses. Such a clean little thing she is, Ilya! Like a toy. Take her in your arms and there's nothing there! It's as if a bird had flown into my heart and was singing away, singing away...."

He stopped talking and made a little whimpering sound.

"Well?" said Ilya, eager to hear the rest of the story.

"The doctor's wife caught us. And she was a decent sort, damn her. She used to spend a lot of time talking to me. Very nice. A handsome baggage, blast her bones!"

"Well?"

"Well, she made a row. Turned Vera out. Gave Vera hell. And me too. Vera came to live with me. I was out

of work then. We ate up our last rag. Vera—she's got spirit. She ran away. Was gone for two weeks. Then she came back. All decked out in fine clothes—a gold bracelet—money." Pavel grit his teeth. "I beat her. Beat her hard."

"Did she leave you?" asked Ilya.

"No. If she had, I'd have thrown myself in the river. 'Either kill me,' says she, 'or don't touch me. It's hard for you to live with me,' says she, 'but I'll not give my heart to anyone else.'"

"And you?"

"I did everything I could—beat her—argued—cried. What else could I do? I couldn't support her."

"Didn't she want to go to work?"

"Who knows? 'Very well,' she says. 'But we'll have children. What'll we do with them? This way, everything's yours. And there won't be any children.'"

Ilya thought for a moment.

"Very sensible," he said.

Pavel plunged ahead into the snowy darkness without answering. When he was some three paces ahead of his friend he stopped and turned round.

"Every time I think of someone else kissing her it's as if ... as if molten lead was poured into my heart," he said breathlessly.

"Can't you give her up?"

“What?!” cried Pavel in astonishment.

Ilya appreciated his astonishment when he saw the girl.

They came to a one-storey house at the edge of town. Its six windows were tightly shuttered, giving it the appearance of a long low barn. Wet snow clung to the walls and roof as if trying to hide the house.

“This is a special sort of house,” said Pavel as he knocked at the door. “Sidorikha gives the girls room and board. Takes fifty rubles a month from each. There are only four girls. Of course the madame sells wine and beer and sweets. But she doesn’t keep a tight hold on the girls—they can come and go as they like. All she cares about is her fifty a month. The girls are dear—they easily make that much. One of them—Olimpiada—she’s not to be had for less than twenty-five rubles.”

“What does yours take?” asked Ilya, shaking the snow off his coat.

Pavel did not answer immediately.

“I don’t know; she’s dear too,” he said softly.

There was a rustle on the other side of the door and a tiny thread of golden light shot through the darkness.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Vassa Sidorovna. Grachov.”

“Ah.” The door was opened and a thin little old lady with an enormous nose on her flabby face said to Pavel as she

held a candle up to his face, "Good evening. Vera's been waiting for you ever so long. Who's that with you?"

"A friend."

"Who is it?" came a clear voice from the other end of the long dark hall.

"It's for Vera, Olimpiada," said the old lady.

"For you, Vera!" called out the same clear voice.

At the other end of the hall a door was flung open and the small figure of a girl was silhouetted against the square of light. She was dressed all in white and heavy locks of golden hair fell over her shoulders.

"You're late," she said petulantly. Then she put her hands on Pavel's shoulders and stood on her toes to look at Ilya over his shoulder with her brown eyes.

"A friend of mine—Ilya Lunyev."

"How do you do."

As she held out her hand the wide sleeve of her white blouse fell back almost to her shoulder. Ilya took the hot little hand gently and deferentially and gazed at her with the delight one feels on seeing a slender birch rising out of the weeds and underbrush of a bog. When she stepped aside to admit him into her room he, too, stepped aside and said:

"You first."

"Oh, what a gallant gentleman you are!" she laughed, and it was a lovely laugh—gay and clear. Pavel laughed too.

"You've knocked the breath out of him, Vera," he said. "Look how he's standing there—like a bear in front of a tub of honey."

"Really?" she said, smiling at Ilya.

"Really," he smiled back. "Your beauty has knocked the earth out from under my feet."

"Just try falling in love with her! I'll cut your throat!" warned Pavel with a happy laugh, his eyes flashing proudly. He was glad to see that Ilya was struck by his sweetheart's beauty. And she showed herself off with innocent shamelessness, conscious of her woman's power. She was wearing nothing but a snow-white skirt and a loose blouse over a chemise. The unfastened blouse fell open, revealing a body as firm and fresh as a ripe peach. The rosy lips of her little mouth were parted in a complacent smile: she was as pleased with herself as a child with a toy that has not yet become a bore. Ilya could not take his eyes off her as she moved lithely about the room, her little nose up-tilted, casting loving glances at Pavel and chattering gaily. And it made him sad to think that he did not have such a companion.

In the middle of the neat little room stood a table covered with a white cloth. A samovar steamed away cheerily and everything in the room looked fresh and youthful. There was nothing Ilya did not admire—the cups, the bottle of wine, the plates of sausage and bread. He could not help



envying Pavel. Pavel sat at the table beaming happily and saying pretty things:

"I bask in the sunshine when sitting with you. My woes are forgotten and hope springs anew. Your beauty is as bright as the stars in the sky. As long as you live, how can I die?"

"Oh, Pavel! How nice!" cried the delighted Vera.

"Hot off the griddle. Baked on the spot. Hey, there, Ilya! Stop moping! Find one of your own."

"A *good* one," said the girl with an odd new note in her voice as she glanced into Ilya's eyes.

"I'll never find one as good as you," said Ilya with a smile.

"You don't know what you're saying," said Vera softly.

"He does know," frowned Pavel; then, turning to Ilya, "Everything's fine! Glorious! And then all of a sudden—I remember. It's as if someone has stuck a knife in my heart."

"Don't remember," said Vera, bowing her head low over the table. Ilya looked at her and saw that the tips of her ears were red.

"This is what you ought to say to yourself every night," she went on softly but firmly, "'The day that's gone was only one, but it was mine.' It's not easy for me, either. Like in the song, I keep my sorrow to myself but share my joy with you."

Pavel frowned as he listened to her, and Ilya longed to say something nice, something that would encourage both of them.

“What’s to be done if the knot can’t be untied?” he asked after a moment’s reflection. “But here’s what I want to say to you: if I had a thousand rubles, I’d give it all to you—here, take it! Take it for the sake of your love. Because I can see it’s a good, clean, true love, and nothing else is worth a straw.”

He was caught up in a sudden wave of emotion. He even got up, the better to endure the strain of the girl’s grateful gaze and Pavel’s smile, which seemed to be asking something else of him.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen people really love each other. And the first time I’ve had a true glimpse into your heart, Pavel—seen your real worth. And I must admit I envy you. As for the . . . the other side of the picture . . . here’s what I have to say about that: I don’t like folk from Chuvashia and Mordovia. I can’t stand them: they’ve all got sore eyes. But I wash in the same river as they do and drink the same water. Am I to give up the river on account of them? I’m not. God, I’m sure, sees that it gets purified.”

“That’s right, Ilya! Good for you!” cried Pavel.

“Drink water from the spring,” said Vera quietly.

“I’d rather have you pour me out a cup of tea,” said Ilya.

"You *are* good," said the girl.

"Thank you," said Ilya gravely.

This little scene had the effect of strong wine on Pavel. A flush came to his lively face, his eyes sparkled, and he jumped up and took to pacing the floor.

"Damn it all! It's a good thing to be alive when there's people like you on this earth!" he exclaimed. "I did my heart a good turn by bringing you here, Ilya. Here's to you, pal!"

"It's gone to his head," said the girl, giving him a tender smile. "He's always like that—either down in dumps or up in the clouds."

Just then somebody knocked at the door.

"May I come in, Vera?" asked a woman's voice.

"Oh, yes; do. Ilya Yakovlevich, this is Olimpiada, a friend of mine."

Ilya turned and saw a tall graceful young woman gazing at him with calm blue eyes. Her clothes exhaled a delicate scent, her cheeks were fresh and pink, and a crown of dark hair rose on the top of her head, increasing her height.

"I felt lonely all by myself. I heard you laughing in here and decided to join you. Do you mind? Here, I see, is a young man without a lady. I'll take him in charge—may I?" With a sweeping gesture she drew a chair over to Ilya and sat down. "Don't you get tired of hearing them bill and coo? Doesn't it make you jealous?"

"It's hard to get tired of them," said Ilya, embarrassed by her proximity.

"Too bad," said the woman serenely; then, turning to Vera, "Yesterday I went to the nunnery for mass, and you can't imagine what a pretty little novice I saw there! Simply adorable. I kept looking at her and wondering what could have made her take the veil. I felt so sorry for her."

"I wouldn't have," said Vera.

"I don't believe you."

Ilya sat breathing in the fragrance that hung about her, stealing glances at her out of the corner of his eye, and listening to her voice. Her voice was unusually low and tranquil; it lulled the senses, and Ilya fancied that her words, too, had a fragrance of their own.

"I keep wondering, Vera, if I should go and live with Poluektov."

"I don't know."

"Perhaps I shall. He's old and rich, but he's stingy. I'm asking him to put five thousand in the bank and pay me a hundred and fifty a month, but he only agrees to put in three and pay me one."

"Don't talk about it now, darling," said Vera.

"Very well," said Olimpiada, turning back to Ilya. "Let's you and me talk, young man. I like you. You have a nice face and earnest eyes. What do you say to that?"

"Nothing," said Ilya with a shy smile, feeling that this woman was wrapping him round like a cloud.

"Nothing? How uninteresting! What do you do?"

"I'm a pedlar."

"Really? I thought you were a bank clerk or an assistant in one of the better shops."

"I like to be neat and clean," said Ilya. He felt uncomfortably warm and the scent was going to his head.

"Neat and clean? I'm glad. Are you a good guesser?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Can't you guess that you're in the way of your friends here?" said the blue-eyed woman blandly.

"I was just about to leave," murmured Ilya.

"May I steal him away, Vera?"

"You may if he'll let you," laughed Vera.

"Where to?" asked Ilya nervously.

"Go with her, you noodle," said Pavel.

The dazed Ilya stood smiling idiotically, but the woman calmly took his arm and said, as she led him out:

"You haven't been tamed yet, and I'm capricious and insist on having my own way. If I wanted to put out the sun I'd climb up on the roof and blow until there wouldn't be a bit of breath left in my body. That's what I'm like."

Ilya walked away with his arm in hers, not understanding—indeed, scarcely hearing—what she said, conscious only of her warmth, her softness, her fragrance. . . .

This connection, so random and unexpected, absorbed Ilya completely. It brought him a certain self-complacency and healed the heart-wounds life had dealt him. The fact that a handsome well-dressed woman bestowed on him her expensive kisses of her own free will and without asking anything in return raised him in his own estimation. It was as if he were floating in a broad river whose waves gently caressed his body.

"My whim-boy," Olimpiada would say as she toyed with his curly hair or ran a finger over the dark fuzz on his upper lip. "I like you better and better every day. You have a brave heart and I can see you won't be satisfied till you get what you want. I'm like that too. If I were younger I'd marry you. Life would flow along like a song for the two of us."

Ilya had respect for her. He found that she was clever and had a sense of her own worth despite the life she led. Her body was as strong and willowy as her voice, and as sound as her character. He liked her thriftiness, her cleanliness, her ability to form an opinion on anything, and her independence of spirit that amounted almost to pride. But sometimes when he came to see her he would find her in bed, her face pale and crumpled, her hair tumbling about her. Then a feeling of repulsion would rise up within him, and he would stand staring harshly at her dull, washed-out eyes, unable to find a word to say to her.

Sensing his indignation, she would pull up the blanket and turn away.

“Get out of here,” she would say. “Go and wait in Vera’s room. Tell the old woman to bring me some water with snow in it.”

And he would go into the neat little room that belonged to Pavel’s girl. On seeing his troubled face, Vera would give a guilty smile.

“It’s hard having girls like us, isn’t it?” she once said to him.

“Ah, Vera,” he sighed, “your sins are like snow—as soon as you smile they melt away.”

“Poor you! Poor Pavel!”

He liked and felt sorry for Vera. It upset him greatly whenever she and Pavel quarrelled and he always did his best to bring them together. He enjoyed sitting in her room and watching her comb out her golden hair or mend her clothes, humming to herself as she stitched. At such times he liked her even better and was more keenly aware of her unhappiness. He would comfort her as best he could, but she would say:

“We can’t go on like this, Ilya Yakovlevich, we just can’t. It doesn’t matter so much about me—the smirch is on me for good—but why should Pavel stick to me?”

Olimpiada would come in silently, looking like a cool ray of moonlight in her pale blue dressing-gown.

"Come and have tea with me, whim-boy! And you come later, Vera."

Flushed from the cold water, clean, firm-fleshed, and serene, she would lead him away imperiously, and as he followed he would think to himself: Is this the same woman who an hour ago lay there crumpled and mauled by filthy hands?

"Too bad you left school so soon," she said as they had tea. "You ought to drop your peddling and try something else. Wait, I'll find something for you. You need help. When I go and live with Poluektov I'll be able to do something for you."

"Will he give you your five thousand?" asked Ilya.

"He will," said the woman confidently.

"If ever I catch him here I'll knock his head off," said Ilya viciously.

"Wait till he gives me the money," she laughed.

The merchant did give her what she wanted. Not long afterwards Ilya was sitting in Olimpiada's new flat staring at the thick rugs on the floor and the furniture upholstered in dark plush and listening to the calm flow of his mistress's speech. He did not notice any change in her manner corresponding to the change in her situation: she was as serene and untroubled as ever.

"I'm twenty-seven years old. By the time I'm thirty I'll have ten thousand rubles. Then I'll get rid of the



old man and be free. Learn from me how to get on in life, my grave whim-boy."

Ilya learned from her to be unwavering in the pursuit of what he wanted. But whenever he remembered that she was giving of her charms to another, he felt the humiliation of a grievous injury. And then his dream of owning a shop and a bright clean room in which he could receive this woman came back with increasing force. He was not certain that he loved her, but he knew that he needed her.

In this way three months went by.

One evening on coming home from his day's work, he stepped into the cobbler's basement room and was surprised to find Yakov and Perfishka sitting at the table with a bottle of vodka between them. The boy lay sprawled over the table, shaking his head and muttering:

"If God can see everything, He can see me. My father doesn't love me. He's a thief, isn't he?"

"That he is, Yakov. Sad but true," said the cobbler.

"What am I gonna do?" asked Yakov thickly, shaking back his tousled hair.

Ilya felt a pang in his heart. He saw Yakov's big head swaying helplessly on his thin neck, he saw Perfishka's lean and yellow face lighted by a blissful smile, and he could not believe that this was really Yakov—the meek and quiet Yakov that he knew.

"What are you doing here?" he said, going over to him.

Yakov started, looked at him with frightened eyes, and gave a crooked little smile.

"I thought you were my father."

"What are you doing, I ask you?"

"Leave him alone, Ilya Yakovlevich," said Perfishka, staggering to his feet. "He's got a right. You'd ought to be glad he's only drinking."

"Ilya!" cried Yakov hysterically. "My father—my father beat me!"

"He did. I saw it myself," said Perfishka, striking himself on the chest. "I saw everything, so help me God."

Yakov's face, and especially his upper lip, was badly swollen. He stood looking at his friend with a pathetic smile on his lips.

"How dared he?"

Ilya realized he could neither comfort nor blame him.

"Why did he do it?"

Yakov moved his lips as if about to explain, but instead he clutched his head in his hands and howled, his whole body rocking from side to side.

"Let him cry," said Perfishka as he poured himself out another glass of vodka. "It does a person good to cry. Masha, too—she bawled at the top of her lungs. Said she'd scratch his eyes out. I packed her off to Matitza."

"What happened between Yakov and his father?" asked Ilya.

"An awful row," said Perfishka. "Your uncle started it all. 'Let me off,' he says to Petrukha. 'I want to go to Kiev, to the holy men there.' Petrukha's only too glad, if the truth be told. Glad to get rid of Terenty. Sometimes a friend knows too much. 'Go ahead,' says he. 'Go and have the holy men say a prayer for me too.' At that, Yakov ups and says, 'Let me go too.'" Perfishka opened wide his eyes, made a dreadful face, and drawled in a menacing tone. "'What's that?' says Petrukha. 'Let me go too,' says Yakov. 'You?' says Petrukha. 'I'll pray for your soul,' says Yakov. 'I'll show you how to pray!' says Petrukha. 'Let me go,' says Yakov. At that Petrukha gives him a punch in the face—bang! And again—bang! bang!"

"I can't live with him any more," cried Yakov. "I'll kill myself. What did he hit me for? I meant no harm."

Unable to bear the sound of his cries, Ilya shrugged his shoulders, turned, and left the basement. He was glad to hear that his uncle was going on a pilgrimage: as soon as Terenty was gone, he, too, would move away. He would find clean lodgings and live all by himself.

Scarcely had he reached his room when Terenty came in. The man's eyes were shining and his face was radiant.

"Well, I'm leaving," he said. "Holy Mother of God, it's as if I was being let out of prison into the light of day!"

"Yakov drank himself drunk—did you know that?" said Ilya drily.

"Did he? That's too bad."

"Were you there when his father beat him?"

"Yes. Why?"

"That's why he got drunk," said Ilya severely.

"You don't say! Think of that!"

Ilya could see that his uncle was not concerned about Yakov's fate, and this heightened his dislike for him. Never before had he seen Terenty in such a joyous state, and his joy, coming on top of Yakov's despair, made Ilya bitter.

"Go back into the pub," he said, sitting down by the window.

"Perfishka's in there. I want to talk to you," said his uncle.

"What about?"

The hunchback went up to him.

"It won't take me long to get ready," he said softly and mysteriously. "You'll be left here alone ... and so ... that is...."

"Come straight out with it," said Ilya.

"Straight out with it?" Terenty blinked. "It's not so easy. You see.... I've saved up a little money...."

Ilya glanced at him and gave a harsh laugh. His uncle started.

"What's the matter?" asked Terenty.

"Well, so you saved up some money?... " Ilya put special stress on the "saved up."

"Yes," said Terenty without looking at him. "And now ... well, I've decided to give two hundred to the monastery and one hundred to you."

"One hundred?" said Ilya quickly. Only now did he realize that in his heart of hearts he had cherished the hope of getting much more than a hundred from his uncle. He was angry with himself—he knew such a thought was unworthy of him; but he was angry with his uncle, too, for offering him so little. He got up and squared his shoulders.

"I won't take your stolen money," he said viciously.

Terenty backed away and collapsed on the bed—a pale, pitiable figure staring at Ilya with his mouth hanging open and his eyes round with fear.

"What are you gaping at? I don't want your money."

"Merciful Jesus!" whispered the hunchback hoarsely. "You've been a son to me, Ilya. It was for you ... for your future ... I committed that sin. The Lord'll never forgive me if you don't take the money."

"So that's it, is it?" scoffed Ilya. "So you want to come before the Lord with endorsed bills in your hand, do you? Did I ever ask you to steal Grandad's money? Just think who it was you stole it from!"

"Ilya, you didn't ask to get born either," said his uncle,

holding out his hands comically. "Take the money—take it, for the love of God, for the salvation of my soul. God'll never forgive me if you don't take it."

His lips quivered and his eyes were brimming with fear as he implored him. Ilya was not sure whether he felt sorry for him or not.

"Very well, I'll take it," he said at last, and went out of the room. He hated the thought that he was taking the money: it lowered him in his own eyes. What did he want with a hundred rubles? What could he do with it? If it were a thousand, now—oh, then it would not take him long to exchange this drab, troublous life for a bright, clean one, spent in untroubled solitude, far away from everybody. What if he should ask his uncle what his share of the rag-picker's money had been? But the thought revolted him.

Petrukha's house seemed to have become even more squalid and dirty since Ilya had known Olimpiada. The dirt and the squalor made him cringe physically. Today he was particularly sensitive to it, as if he were touched by cold and slimy fingers. Unable to compose himself, he went up to Matitza's room and found her sitting on a chair beside the big bed. She looked up as he came in and shook a warning finger.

"Sh! She's asleep." The whisper came as a gust of wind. Masha was curled up in a ball on the bed.

“How do you like that?” went on Matitza, her big eyes rolling fiercely. “They’ve taken to beating little children, the monsters! May the earth drop out from under their feet!”

As Ilya stood next to the stove listening to her whispering, he gazed at the form of Masha wrapped up in a greyish rag and thought to himself: Whatever will become of her?

“He dragged her round by the hair, the accursed thief with the soul of a pub! Beat his own son and her as well and threatened to turn them out of the house! How do you like that? Where’s she to go to, tell me that?”

“Maybe I can find her a place,” said Ilya, remembering that Olimpiada was looking for a parlour maid.

“You!” scoffed Matitza. “The way you walk around with your nose in the air! You’re too young an oak yet—no shade from you, and no acorns.”

“Wait, stop hissing at me,” said Ilya, glad to have found a pretext for going to see Olimpiada. “How old is Masha?”

“Fifteen. How old did you think? But what if she is fifteen? Nobody’d give her twelve, she’s so little and frail. No more’n a child. No good for this world; no good at all. What’s she got to live for? It’d be a good thing if she slept right on and woke up in the lap of Jesus.”

An hour later Ilya was standing in front of Olimpiada’s door waiting for it to be opened. He waited a long time,

and at last he heard someone say in a thin cracked voice:

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me,” said Ilya, wondering who the person could be: Olimpiada’s servant, a lumbering, pock-marked creature, had a deep, harsh voice and always opened the door without asking any questions.

“Who do you want?”

“Is Olimpiada Danilovna in?”

The door was suddenly flung open and a ray of light struck Ilya in the face. He dropped back and winced, unable to believe his eyes.

In front of him stood a little old man with a lamp in his hand. He was wearing a loose dressing-gown of some heavy maroon stuff, his head was almost bald, and a skimpy grey beard wagged at the end of his chin. As he stared at Ilya his sharp little grey eyes glinted spitefully and the few hairs sprouting out of his upper lip wriggled in a horrid way. The lamp shook in his skinny hand.

“Who are you? Well, come in,” he said. “Who are you?”

Ilya realized who *he* was. He felt the blood rush to his cheeks and something heave in his chest. So this was the man with whom he shared the caresses of that clean wholesome woman!

“I’m ... I’m a pedlar,” he said, stepping across the threshold. The old man winked his left eye and gave a



little chuckle. His eyelids were red and lashless and a few yellow stumps stuck out of his gums.

"A pedlar-meddler, eh? What do you peddle?" Still chuckling, he held the lamp up to Ilya's face.

"All sorts of things—ribbons, scent, and such like," said Ilya, dropping his head. He felt dizzy and black dots swam in front of his eyes.

"I see, I see—ribbons and laces for pretty faces, eh? Heh, heh! Well, what do you want, pedlar?"

"Olimpiada Danilovna—"

"What do you want of her?"

"She owes me some money," said Ilya with an effort.

The loathsome old man filled him with inexplicable terror. He hated him. There was something in his shrill voice and spiteful glance that bored into Ilya's heart, insulting and humiliating him.

"Money? She owes it to you, eh? Very well."

Suddenly the old man swung the lamp away, stretched up on his toes, and pushed his flabby yellow face into Ilya's.

"Where's the note?" he whispered with biting mockery. "Let's have the note."

"What note?" asked Ilya, recoiling in fear.

"From your master. The note for Olimpiada Danilovna. Let's have it. I'll give it to her. Come, quickly!" The old

man advanced upon him and Ilya's mouth went dry with terror.

"I have no note," he cried out in despair, feeling that something dreadful was about to happen.

At that moment the tall graceful figure of Olimpiada appeared in the doorway. Calmly, without so much as blinking an eye, she gazed at Ilya over the head of the old man and said in an unperturbed voice:

"What's the matter, Vasily Gavrilovich?"

"This pedlar's come, my dear. You owe him money, it seems. Was it ribbons you bought? And didn't pay him? Well, here he is—come for his money."

The old man hopped about in front of her, darting glances from her to Ilya. With a sweeping movement of her right hand Olimpiada brushed him away, then thrust her hand into the pocket of her dressing-gown.

"Couldn't you have found another time to come for your money?" she said to Ilya severely.

"Quite right!" screamed the old man. "A dolt, that's what you are—coming when you're not wanted. An ass!"

Ilya stood as if turned to stone.

"Don't shout, Vasily Gavrilovich, it's very unpleasant," said Olimpiada; then, to Ilya, "How much do I owe you? Three rubles forty? Here."

"And be off with you!" screamed the old man again. "No, I'll see him out. I will."

He folded his gown about him and opened the door.

“Get out!” he shouted.

Ilya found himself out in the cold, gazing in stupefaction at the locked door, unable to realize whether he was awake or dreaming. In one hand he clutched his cap, in the other—Olimpiada’s money. And there he stood until he felt the frost pinching his toes and gripping his skull as in an iron band. Then he put his cap on his head and the money in his pocket, thrust his hands up the sleeves of his coat, hunched his shoulders, dropped his eyes, and went slowly down the street, his heart a lump of ice, his head pounding as if hard balls were knocking about inside of it. In front of him floated the dark form of the old man with his yellow pate shining in the cold light of the lantern.

Poluektov was smiling at him—smiling exultantly, spitefully, cunningly....

On the next day Ilya walked slowly and silently up and down the main street of the town. He was haunted by memories of the old man’s spiteful glance, Olimpiada’s calm blue eyes, and the movement of her hand as she gave him the money. Sharp snow-flakes came flying through the air, stinging his face.

He had just passed a little shop squeezed into an out-of-the-way corner between a chapel and a big house belonging

to merchant Lukin. Over the shop hung a rusty sign which read:

V. G. POLUEKTOV

Money lent and exchanged.

Trade in silver and gold, icon settings,  
valuables, old coins.

Ilya fancied that on passing the shop he had seen the old man standing at the glass door grinning at him and nodding his bald head. The boy had an irresistible desire to go in and see him at close hand. He found a pretext for this. Like all small tradesmen, Ilya saved up all the coins of historical interest that happened to fall into his hands and sold them at the profitable exchange of a ruble twenty for a ruble. At the moment he happened to have a few such coins in his purse.

He turned back, boldly opened the door of the shop, and pushed through, box and all.

"Good day to you," he said, snatching off his cap.

The old man was sitting behind his narrow counter removing an icon-setting with a miniature screwdriver. He glanced briefly at the boy and went back to work.

"What do you want?" he said curtly.

"Recognize me?" asked Ilya.

The old man glanced up at him again.

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't. What do you want?"

"I have some old coins—"

"Let's see them."

Ilya felt for his purse but his hands, like his heart, were trembling with fear and loathing, and he could not find his pocket. As he fumbled for it he kept his eyes fixed on the little bald head, and cold shivers went running up and down his spine.

"What's taking you so long?" asked the old man crossly.

"Just a minute," said Ilya.

Here was the purse at last. He went up to the counter and shook out the coins.

"Is that all you've got?"

The old man seized the silver in thin yellow fingers and began examining it.

"This one's a Catherine the Great . . . this an Anna . . . this a Pavel," he muttered through his nose. "This one . . . what's that, 1732? . . . the devil himself couldn't make it out. Here, you can keep it—it's worn smooth."

"You can see by the size it's a twenty-five kopek piece," said Ilya testily.

The old man flung the coin at him, opening his cash drawer with a swift movement, and began to rummage in it.

Ilya swung up his arm and brought a hard fist down on the old man's head. Poluektov fell back against the

wall, but the next instant he threw himself across the counter and lifted his head on its skinny neck. Ilya could see the eyes glittering in the grey face, could see the lips moving, could hear a hoarse whisper:

“Mercy . . . have mercy . . . .”

“You toad!” said Ilya, and with an awful repugnance he began squeezing the old man’s throat. He squeezed it and shook it and his victim clutched his hands and made gasping sounds. His eyes grew big and bloodshot, tears poured out of them, and his tongue hung out of his black mouth and wagged as if mocking the murderer. Ilya felt warm saliva dripping on his hands. Something in the old man’s throat rasped and wheezed and cold hooked fingers reached out for the boy’s throat. Ilya grit his teeth and bent back his head as far as he could, holding the weightless body up in the air and shaking it harder and harder. If at that moment someone had come in and struck Ilya over the head, he would not have loosed his hold on the throat he was crunching in steel fingers. With horror and loathing he saw the old man’s glazed eyes grow bigger and bigger; he squeezed harder, and as the body grew heavier his own heart grew lighter, as if something inside it were melting away. At last he flung the old man away from him, and the body fell with a soft thud behind the counter.

Ilya glanced about him: the shop was silent and empty; snow was still coming down heavily outside. On the

floor at Ilya's feet lay two bars of soap, his purse, and a roll of tape. Aware that they had fallen out of his box, he picked them up and put them back. Then he leaned over the counter and glanced at the old man: he lay all in a heap in the narrow space between the counter and the wall; his head had dropped on his chest, so that only the yellow skin on the back of his neck was to be seen. At the same time Ilya's eyes fell on the open cash drawer: it was filled with glittering gold and silver coins and some packets of bank-notes. Hastily he seized one of the packets, then another, and another, and pushed them inside his shirt.

He walked out of the shop unhurriedly, and when he had gone some three paces he stopped and carefully covered his box with a piece of oilcloth; then he walked on into the dense whirl of snow falling from unseen heights. And outside of him and inside of him was a cold and clinging murkiness. As he stared into it he suddenly felt a dull pain in his eyes. He lifted his hand to touch them, and stopped in horror, as if his feet had become frozen to the spot. It seemed to him that his eyes were starting from their sockets as Poluektov's had, and that they would stay that way as long as he lived, bulging painfully, never closing, so that all should read in them the story of his crime. It was as if his eyes had died. He touched the balls with his fingers: it hurt, but he could not lower the lids. His chest constricted with fear. At last he succeeded in closing

them, and he was so overjoyed to be encompassed by darkness that he went on standing there with closed eyes, sightless, motionless, drinking in great breaths of air. Somebody jostled him in passing. He glanced up. It was a tall man in a sheepskin coat. Ilya watched him until he was swallowed up in the seething mass of white snow-flakes. Then, pulling his cap down over his ears, he strode on down the pavement, conscious of the pain in his eyes and the heaviness of his head. His shoulders jerked, the fingers of his hands contracted convulsively, an obstinate defiance crept into his heart, driving the fear out of it.

On reaching the cross-roads he saw the grey form of a policeman. Quietly, very quietly, and without thinking of what he was doing, he went straight up to him. His heart sank.

"A lot of snow," he said brightly, looking hard at the man.

"Isn't it? It'll be warmer now, thank the Lord," replied the policeman with gusto. His face was big and red and he wore a beard.

"What time is it?" asked Ilya.

"Just a minute." The policeman knocked the snow off his sleeve and thrust his hand inside his coat. Suddenly Ilya, who was finding gruesome pleasure in standing beside this man, gave a hard, unnatural laugh.

"What're you laughing at?" asked the policeman as



he opened the case of his watch with his finger-nail.

"The way the snow's piled up on you," explained Ilya.

"Nothing funny about that in such a storm. It's half-past one—or rather, twenty-five past. It'd pile up on anybody, lad. But what's it to you? You'll go and sit in a warm pub. It's me as has got to stand out here till six in the evening. Look at all the snow there is on your box."

With a sigh, the policeman snapped his watch shut.

"That's right, I will go and sit in a pub," said Ilya. "In that one over there," he added with a crooked little smile.

"Don't tease me," said the policeman.

Ilya took a seat next to a window from which he knew he could get a view of the chapel adjoining Poluektov's shop. But now everything was shut out by the white curtain of snow. Intently he watched the flakes whirl down, covering all footprints with a thick and fuzzy blanket. His heart was beating hard and fast, but he felt exuberant. On he sat, his mind a blank, waiting for something to happen.

When the waiter brought him his tea he could not resist saying:

"Anything new?"

"Only that it's warmer," the waiter tossed over his shoulder as he scurried away. Ilya poured himself out a

glass of tea, but he did not drink, he did not eat, he did not move; he just sat waiting. He felt hot and raised his hands to unfasten the collar of his coat, but as they touched his chin he gave a little start: they were not his hands, they were somebody else's. Cold, strange hands. He held them up in front of his face and carefully studied the fingers. There were no stains on them, but he thought he had better wash them anyhow.

"Poluektov's been murdered!" somebody shouted.

Ilya jumped up as if the cry were a call to him. There was a stir in the pub; people got up and made for the door, pulling on caps as they went. He tossed a coin on the waiter's tray, slipped the strap of his box over his shoulder, and hurried out with the others.

A crowd had gathered outside the money-lender's shop. Policemen were popping in and out, shouting anxiously to one another. The bearded policeman Ilya had spoken to was standing in the doorway to keep the crowd out, glancing about him with frightened eyes and rubbing his left cheek, which was redder than the right one. Ilya stood where the policeman could see him and listened to the remarks the people were making. Next to him stood a tall, stern-looking shopkeeper with a black beard, who was listening to the excited chatter of an old man in a fox-skin coat.

"So the boy thinks he's got a fit or something and runs

for Pyotr Stepanovich—begs him to come to the shop—his master's took sick. So Pyotr comes, fast as his legs'll carry him, gives one look and sees the man's dead. Think of that, now! Did you ever hear the likes of it? In broad daylight, in a busy street like this! A bold business."

The shopkeeper cleared his throat.

"The finger of God's to be seen here," he said severely. "It's clear the Lord had no mind to forgive Poluektov his sins."

Ilya pushed forward to get a better look at the speaker's face and accidentally struck him with his box.

"Have a care!" cried the shopkeeper, giving Ilya a poke with his elbow and glancing sharply into his face. Then he turned back to the little old man. "It's writ: not a hair of a man's head shall fall without it's the will of God."

"Quite right," said the old man with a bob of his head, adding in lowered tones and with a wink, "The Lord has an eye open for rascals, if I do say so as I shouldn't, may the Lord forgive me, but I can't keep it back."

Ilya chuckled. As he listened he felt an upsurge of strength and courage that was at once awesome and pleasant. If at that moment anyone had said to him, "Did you murder him?" he was sure he would have answered fearlessly, "Yes, I did."

Supported by this courage, he pushed through the crowd to the door of the shop.

"Where you going?" cried the policeman, taking him by the shoulder. "This is no business of yours! Get out of here!"

Ilya staggered and lunged into one of the onlookers. Again he was pushed.

"Give it to him! He must be drunk."

Ilya made his way out of the crowd and sat down on the steps of the chapel, secretly laughing at all these people. Separate remarks came to him through the hum of voices and the crunching of snow:

"And didn't the scoundrel have to go and do it while I was on duty!"

"By all accounts, he was the richest man in town."

"How was I to see anything in all this snow?"

"He skinned folk alive without batting an eye."

"Look, his wife's come."

"Poor creature!" sighed a ragged muzhik.

Ilya rose and saw a stout elderly woman in a wide cloak and with a black shawl over her head climbing with difficulty out of a sled lined with a bear-skin robe. On one side she was supported by a policeman, on the other by a man with red whiskers.

"Merciful heavens!" he heard her breathe in a frightened voice. The crowd grew silent. As Ilya looked at her, he thought of Olimpiada.

"Is his son here?" somebody asked softly.

"No, he's in Moscow."

"This is probably just what he's been waiting for."

"I should think so!"

Ilya was glad nobody felt sorry for Poluektov, but still he found that all these people, with the exception of the black-bearded shopkeeper, were stupid and disgusting. There was something stern and right about the shopkeeper, but all the others stood about like stumps in the woods, chattering maliciously with their filthy tongues.

When the wizened body of the money-lender had been carried out, Ilya went home, cold and tired, but calm in spirit. He locked himself in his room and counted his money: each of the two packets of small notes contained five hundred rubles and the third—eight hundred and fifty. There was another packet of coupons, but he did not bother to count them. He wrapped all of the money in a piece of paper, leaned his elbows on the table, and fell to wondering where he should hide it. The effort made him drowsy. He decided to hide the money in the attic and went out with it in his hand, making no attempt to hide it. In the entranceway he met Yakov.

"Home so soon?" said Yakov. "What's that you've got there?"

"This?" said Ilya, looking at the money; a little tremor of fear passed over him, but he waved the packet nonchalantly. "Tape," he said.

“Will you come and have tea with us?” said Yakov.

“In just a minute.”

He walked away quickly, but his step was uncertain and his head was as heavy and sodden as if he were drunk. Cautiously he climbed the attic stairs, afraid of meeting someone. And when the money was hidden (he dug it into the earth around the chimney) he suddenly fancied that someone was hiding in the corner and watching him. His first impulse was to throw a brick into the corner, but he restrained himself and went quietly downstairs. He no longer felt any fear; it was as if he had buried his fear with the money. But now he was besieged by doubts.

Why did I kill him? he kept asking himself.

When he entered the basement room Masha, who was busy with the samovar at the stove, gave a joyful little cry of surprise.

“How early you are today!”

“Because of the snow,” he said, but the next instant he exclaimed irritably, “Why early? I always come home at this time. Can’t you see? It’s dark already.”

“It’s always dark down here. Why are you shouting?”

“Because the whole lot of you are like spies: ‘Where you going?’ ‘Why are you home so soon?’ ‘What’s that in your hand?’ It’s none of your business.”

Masha looked at him intently for a moment. “You’ve begun to think too much of yourself, Ilya,” she said.

“To hell with you.” And he sat down at the table.

With a contemptuous little “Pooh!” Masha turned away and began to blow up the samovar. Small and fragile, she stood there tossing back her black curls, coughing and screwing up her eyes from the smoke. Her face was thin and the black circles under her eyes heightened their shine. She looked like one of those flowers that grow among the weeds in some remote corner of the garden. Ilya sat looking at her and thinking to himself: Here she is, living all alone in this hole in the ground, working like a grown-up, with no joy in life and no hope of ever having any. He, on the other hand, would soon live as he had longed to for so long: in quiet and cleanliness. The thought was a pleasant one, but the contrast between his prospects and Masha’s made him feel guilty. Softly he called to her.

“What do you want, nasty?” she said.

“Did you ever know I was . . . er . . . wicked?” he said. His voice was unsteady and he wondered whether he ought to tell her or not. She straightened up and smiled at him.

“There’s nobody to give you the thrashing you deserve, that’s all that’s wrong with you.” Quickly she went over to him and said in a changed voice, “Listen, Ilya, ask your uncle to take me with him, please do. I’ll thank you for it till the end of my days.”

“Take you where?” asked Ilya wearily, so engrossed in his own thoughts that he had only a vague idea of what she was saying.

“With him. Ask him to, please, please.”

She put her palms together as if she were praying and tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, how wonderful it would be!” she sighed. “We’d set out in the spring. That’s all I think about day after day. I even dream about it at night—see myself walking, as if I was already on my way—walking on and on. Please ask him to. Please! He’ll listen to you. Tell him he must. I won’t eat his bread. I’ll beg my own. Folk will give it to me, I’m so little. Please, Ilya, please! I’ll kiss your hand if you do.”

Suddenly she seized his hand and bent over it. Ilya pushed her away and jumped up.

“You little fool!” he cried. “Don’t kiss me. I’m a murderer.” Frightened by his own words, he hastened to put in, “Maybe I . . . what if I’ve done something wicked . . . and you go kissing me.”

“That’s all right,” said Masha, coming close to him. “I’d kiss you anyway, what difference would it make? Petrukha’s worse than you are, but I kiss his hand every time he gives me something to eat. I hate it, but he makes me. ‘Kiss me!’ he says. And he pinches me, too. Pinches and feels me, the beast!”



For some reason—perhaps because Ilya had said the dreadful words, or perhaps because he had not really said them—he suddenly felt light-hearted and cheerful.

“All right, I’ll do it for you,” he said gently, giving her a tender smile. “I really will. You’ll go with him, wait and see. And I’ll give you some money to take with you.”

“You dear!” cried Masha, jumping up and falling on his neck.

“Come, come,” said Ilya, impatiently. “If I’ve said you’ll go, you’ll go. You can be sure of that. And you can say a prayer for me.”

“Oh, I will, I will!”

Yakov came in at this moment.

“What are you squealing about?” he asked Masha in astonishment. “I could hear you out in the yard.”

“Yakov!” she cried, gasping with joy. “I’m going away! I’m leaving this place! Good-bye! He promised to ask the hunchback!”

“So that’s it!” said Yakov with a low whistle. “Well, that’s the end of me. Leaving me here to live as lonely as the moon in the sky.”

“Hire a nurse-maid to live with you,” laughed Ilya.

“I’ll take to drink, that’s what I’ll do,” said Yakov. Masha glanced at him and walked over to the door with hanging head.

"You're such a weakling, Yakov," came her voice, full of sad reproach.

"And you're both so strong! Dropping a fellow like this, damn you!" He slumped down on a chair opposite Ilya. "Maybe I ought to steal off with Terenty too?" he said.

"Go ahead. I would if I was you."

"You would! My father will set the police after me."

There was a silence which Yakov was the first to break.

"It's a grand thing to get drunk," he said with a show of bravado. "Don't know anything. Don't think of anything."

"Shame on you!" said Masha as she put the samovar on the table.

"Hold your tongue," said Yakov crossly. "You might as well have no father at all. He never keeps you from doing what you want."

"Oh, yes! I have such an easy life! I'd run away if I could, and never once look back."

"None of us have it easy," murmured Ilya, growing thoughtful again.

Yakov gazed dreamily out of the window.

"How good it would be to get away from everything!" he said. "To sit beside a river at the edge of a wood and just think and think. . . ."

"I can't bear people who try to escape life," snapped Ilya.

Yakov stared hard at him.

"Listen, I found a book...."

"What sort of book?"

"An old one. Bound in leather like the psalter. But it must have been written by a heretic. I bought it from the Tatar for seventy kopeks."

"What's it called?" asked Ilya casually. He had no desire to talk, but he was afraid not to.

"The name's torn off, but it's all about the beginning of the world. It's hard to read. It says Thales of Miletus was the first to say, 'And His name is Water, and from Water have all things sprung and are springing, but Thales hath said that the name of God is Thought, from which springeth the Water and all that cometh thereof.' And then there was an infidel named Diagoras who said, 'The mind rejecteth the existence of God.' In other words, he didn't believe in God. And another named Epicurus, who said, 'God doth truly exist, but he bestoweth no gifts, nor favours, nor showeth concern for the affairs of this world.' In other words, there is a God, but he don't give a damn for humans—that's how I see it. Let them get on as best they can. It's none of His business."

Ilya rose, scowling, and cut short the slow flow of his friend's thoughts.

"I'd like to take that book and knock you over the head with it," he said.

“But why?” asked Yakov, hurt and bewildered.

“So that you’d never look at it again. You’re a fool. And the one who wrote it was a bigger fool.”

Ilya walked round the table to bend over Yakov.

“There is a God. He sees everything. He knows everything. And there isn’t anything but God.” He spat out the words viciously, passionately, each of them striking like a hammer-blow upon Yakov’s big head. “Life was given us as a trial. Sin is a temptation—can we stand up against it or not? If we can’t, we’ll be punished. We’re sure to be. Not by people, but by Him. Sure as sure.”

“Wait!” cried Yakov. “That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“It doesn’t matter. How can you be my judge?” cried Ilya, white with anger and excitement. “‘Not a hair of your head. . . .’ Have you heard that? That means the crime I’ve committed was done with His knowledge and by His will, you fool!”

“Are you crazy?” cried the frightened Yakov, cringing against the wall. “What crime have you committed?”

The question came dimly to Ilya through the roaring in his ears, but it had the effect of a dash of cold water. He turned a suspicious look on Yakov, then on Masha, who was no less frightened by his cries and agitation.

“I just used that as an example,” he said in a hollow voice.

"There's something the matter with you," said Masha timidly.

Yakov glanced into his face.

"Your eyes look hazy," he said.

Ilya involuntarily ran a hand over his eyes.

"That's nothing. It'll pass," he said weakly.

But it was too much of a strain on him to be in the presence of others, and so, refusing tea, he went to his room.

Scarcely had he gone to bed when Terenty came in. Ever since the hunchback had made up his mind to go on a pilgrimage to expiate his sins, his eyes had taken on a blissful shine, as if he were enjoying a foretaste of salvation. Quietly, with a smile on his lips, he went over to his nephew's bed and stood fingering his stringy beard as he said mildly:

"I saw you come in and thought I'd come and have a little chat with you—there's not much time left for us to be together."

"Are you really going?" asked Ilya drily.

"Soon's it gets a little warmer. I want to be in Kiev by Holy Week."

"I see. Why not take Masha with you?"

"Masha!" cried the hunchback, throwing up his hands in horror.

"Listen," said Ilya firmly, "there's nothing to keep her here. And she's at an age . . . well, you know . . . there's

Yakov ... and Petrukha ... see what I mean? This house is accursed, it's a trap. She's got to be taken away from it, and then maybe she'll never come back."

"But what'll I do with her?" wailed the hunchback.

"Take her. Take her, I say," insisted Ilya. "And take that hundred rubles you wanted to give me. I don't want your money. She'll pray for you, and her prayers count for a lot."

"They *do* count for a lot," mused the hunchback. "That's true. I can't take your money—we'll leave that as it is. But as for Masha ... well, I'll think it over." At this point his eyes flashed with joy and he bent down to whisper into Ilya's ear, "What a man I met yesterday! A very famous man—Pyotr Vasilyevich Sizov—ever heard of him? A learned man. What wisdom there is in that head of his! The Lord Himself sent him to me to ease my heart—I was sure God could never forgive me my sins."

Ilya lay without speaking. He wished his uncle would go away. Through half-closed eyes he gazed at the high dark wall beyond the window.

"We spoke about sin and the salvation of the soul," went on Terenty eagerly. "He says, 'As it takes a whetstone to sharpen the edge of a chisel, so it takes sin to twist the soul of a man so that it can be flung into the ashes at the feet of a merciful God.'"

Ilya glanced at his uncle.

"Did he look like the devil, that wise man of yours?" he asked with a malicious grin.

"How can you say such a thing!" cried Terenty, starting back. "He's a pious man. Why, he's won more fame for himself than your grandfather ever did. Ah, Ilya, Ilya!" And Terenty shook his head and chewed at his lips.

"Very well. What else did he say?" Ilya gave a disagreeable laugh that brought a look of surprise to his uncle's face.

"What's the matter with you?" said Terenty, withdrawing.

"Nothing. Very slick, what he said. I like it. In fact, it's just what I think myself—just exactly."

He stared hard at his uncle without speaking for a second, then turned his face to the wall.

"And besides that," began Terenty cautiously, sitting down on the bed, "he said that sin lends wings of repentance to the soul, so that it can fly up to the throne of the Almighty."

"You yourself look something like the devil, Uncle," interrupted Ilya, and he gave another disagreeable laugh.

The hunchback waved his hands helplessly, as a great bird might flap its wings, and grew silent, hurt and

alarmed. Ilya suddenly swung his legs over the side of the bed and gave his uncle a little push.

"Move over," he said sharply.

Terenty jumped up and stood in the middle of the room, gazing dully at his nephew, who was sitting all in a heap, with bowed head, clutching the side of the bed in tense fingers.

"But what if I don't want to repent?" asked Ilya in a firm voice. "This is how I look at it: if I had no thought of sinning—if it just came of itself, by the will of God, why should I be troubled? He knows all things and is the cause of all things. If He hadn't wanted me to do it, He'd have stopped me. If He didn't stop me, I was right in doing it. All people live in sin, but do any of them ever repent?"

"Ah, me!" sighed Terenty dismally, "I don't understand a word you say."

Ilya laughed.

"If you don't understand, don't talk to me," he said, and threw himself back on the bed again. "I don't feel well."

"I can see that."

"I'm sleepy. Go away."

Left to himself, Ilya felt his head going round and round. The experiences of the past few hours were whirled into a jumble and seemed to fuse and congeal into something hot that seared his brain. And he seemed



to have been tortured thus for a long time, as if ages rather than just a few hours had passed since he had murdered the old man.

He shut his eyes and lay motionless, and in his ears sounded the old man's feeble voice:

"What's taking you so long?"

He confused the stern remarks of the black-bearded shopkeeper with Masha's supplications, and the archaic words of Yakov's heretical book with the speech of Terenty's wise man. Everything rocked and shook and seemed to be pulling him down and down. If only he could fall asleep and forget it all!

He fell asleep.

When he woke up in the morning, the reflection on the wall told him the day was fine and cold. He recalled the events of the preceding day and was sure he knew what line of conduct he ought to adopt. In an hour's time he was walking down the street with his box on his chest, narrowing his eyes against the sun as he gazed calmly at the passers-by. When he came to the church he took off his cap and crossed himself as usual. He crossed himself again when he came to the chapel next to the closed shop of Poluektov, and he went calmly on his way, feeling neither fear nor pity nor any other disturbing emotion. While having dinner in the pub he read the newspaper account of the daring murder of the money-

lender. When he came to the words: "The police are taking energetic measures to find the murderer," he smiled and shook his head. He was certain they would never find him unless he himself wanted them to.

That evening Olimpiada's maid brought him a note from her.

"Meet me at the Bath House on the corner of Kuznetskaya Street at nine o'clock."

As he read it he felt his insides trembling and contracting as if from cold. He recalled the contemptuous look on his mistress's face as she had spoken the sharp, wounding words:

"Couldn't you have found a better time to come?"

He stared at the note and wondered why Olimpiada had sent for him. The probable reason made his heart sink.

At nine o'clock he arrived at the appointed place, and when he saw the tall form of Olimpiada advancing among the women strolling singly and in pairs in front of the Bath House, his fears increased. She was wearing an old and worn coat and had wrapped her head in a shawl that covered everything but her eyes. He stepped in front of her without speaking.

"Follow me," she said, adding under her breath, "Turn up your coat collar to hide your face."

They went down the corridor of the Bath House with

their faces hidden as if in shame, and disappeared in one of the private rooms. Olimpiada instantly threw off her shawl, and Ilya was reassured by the sight of her flushed untroubled face. But he did not want her to be untroubled. She sat down on the couch next to him and gazed tenderly into his eyes.

"Well, my whim-boy, soon you and I are to receive a summons from the investigator," she said.

"Why should we?" asked Ilya, wiping the melting hoarfrost off his moustache.

"Oh, what a foolish fellow you make yourself out to be!" she exclaimed in soft mockery; but suddenly she frowned and whispered, "There was a detective at my flat today."

Ilya looked at her as he said drily, "They have nothing to do with me, your detectives and your affairs. Come straight out with it: why did you send for me?"

Olimpiada looked at him with a supercilious smile.

"Oh, so he's offended, is he?" she said. "Well, I have no time for that now. This is what I wanted to say: if the investigator sends for you and asks you when you first met me, if you often saw me, and all the rest, tell him the truth; tell him everything exactly as it was, do you hear?"

"I certainly do," laughed Ilya.

"If he asks you about the old man, say you never saw

him. Never. You don't know anything about him. You didn't know I was being kept by anyone. Hear?"

Her glance was stern and meant to impress him; it produced a prickling sensation that he found exhilarating. He felt that Olimpiada was afraid of him, and he wanted to tease her, and so he looked at her narrowly and laughed without saying a word. Olimpiada paled and a shudder passed over her.

"Ilya! What are you looking at me like that for?" she whispered, drawing away from him.

"Why should I lie?" he said with a grin. "I saw the old man at your place." Putting his elbows on the marble table-top he went on speaking slowly and softly but with an intensity born of his misery and resentment. "As soon as I saw him I said to myself, 'He's the one who stands in my way; he's the one who has spoilt my life. And if I didn't kill him then, I—'"

"That's a lie," cried Olimpiada, bringing her palm down on the table. "That's a lie. He never stood in your way."

"He didn't, didn't he?" said Ilya.

"No, he didn't. If you'd just said the word I'd have got rid of him. Didn't I tell you I would turn him out if you asked me to? But you didn't. You just laughed at me. You never really loved me. Of your own free will you let me keep him."

“Stop! Hold your tongue!” cried Ilya, jumping up. But he soon sat down again, for her reproaches had disarmed him.

“I don’t want to keep anything from you,” she said. “You’re young and strong and I love you. What have you done to me? If only you had said, ‘Take your choice, Olimpiada: him or me.’ But did you say it? You didn’t. You’re a gigolo like all the rest.”

Ilya winced.

“How dare you!” he cried, leaping up again. Everything went black before his eyes, and he clenched his fists.

“Perhaps you’d like to strike me?” she said viciously, with a flash of eyes and teeth. “Go ahead! Go ahead, and I’ll open the door and shout that you killed him and I talked you into doing it! Go ahead and strike me!”

For a brief second Ilya was frightened; then he slumped down on the couch and, after a pause, gave a cheerless little laugh. He saw that Olimpiada was biting her lip and her eyes seemed to be searching for something in that dirty room reeking of soap and wet besoms. Now she took a seat on another couch by the door and hung her head.

“Go ahead and laugh, damn you,” she said.

“Thanks, I will.”

“The first time I saw you I thought, ‘He’s the one I’ve been waiting for, the one who will rescue me.’”

“Olimpiada,” said Ilya softly.

She sat without speaking, without moving.

“Olimpiada,” repeated Ilya; then, with the sensation of one taking a plunge into bottomless depths, “I killed the old man, and that’s God’s own truth.”

She gave a start, raised her head, and stared at him wide-eyed. Her lips began to tremble, and with a great effort she gasped:

“You fool!”

Ilya could see she was frightened, but did not believe him. With a dazed smile on his lips he got up and went to sit down beside her. Suddenly she took his head in her hands and pressed it to her breast, kissing his hair frantically.

“Why do you want to spoil everything for me?” she whispered. “I was glad he had been murdered.”

“I did it,” said Ilya again.

“Hush!” she cried in alarm. “I’m glad they killed him. I wish they’d kill all of them—all who ever touched me. All except you. You’re the only man I’ve ever met who was not a brute.”

Her words drew him closer; he pressed his face hard against her bosom and held it there even though he could scarcely breathe, for he knew she was near and dear to him and that he needed her now as he had never needed her before.

"When you frown at me, my lovely clean boy, I see how filthy my own life is, and that's why I love you—for your pride."

Great tears dropped upon Ilya's head, and on feeling them, he, too, began to weep—to weep freely, and with a sense of relief.

She lifted his head and kissed his wet eyes and lips and cheeks.

"It's my beauty you love," she said. "I know that. In your heart of hearts you don't really love me and you disapprove of me. You can't forgive me for the life I live. And for the old man."

"Don't speak of him," said Ilya. He wiped his face on the end of her kerchief and rose to his feet.

"Let come what may," he said softly and resolutely. "If God wants to punish a person, he'll find him wherever he is. Thanks for what you said, Olimpiada. You're right: I wasn't fair to you. I thought you were ... but I see you're ... you're ... in a word, it's all my fault."

His voice broke, his lips quivered, his eyes were stung red. Slowly and with a trembling hand he stroked her disorderly hair; then suddenly he made a gesture of despair and groaned aloud:

"It's all my fault, but why? Why?"

Olimpiada seized his hand and he dropped down on the couch beside her.

"Don't you understand? *I* killed him! *I!*" he cried, unconscious of what she was whispering.

"Sh!" said Olimpiada in fright. "You mustn't."

She clasped him tightly in her arms and looked at him with fear in her eyes.

"It all happened by chance," he said. "God only knows how. I didn't mean to. I only meant to get another look at his ugly mug. That's why I went into the shop. I never dreamt of doing such a thing. And then—it happened. The devil sicked me on to it and the Lord didn't stop me. But I'm sorry I took the money. I oughtn't to have done that."

He drew a deep breath with a sense of relief, as if a scab had dropped off his heart. The trembling woman held him tighter and tighter as she whispered quick, incoherent words.

"It's a good thing you took the money. That makes it robbery. Otherwise they'd think it was jealousy."

"I won't confess," said Ilya pensively. "Let God punish me. People can't judge me. What right have they? I never met a person who was without sin. There aren't any."

"Ah, me!" breathed Olimpiada. "What's going to happen? My sweet boy. I can't do anything ... can't think ... can't speak ... nothing. But it's time we were getting out of here."



She got up, swaying on her feet as if drunk. But when she had wound the shawl round her head, she said in a calm voice:

"What are we to do now, Ilya? Surely everything isn't lost?"

Ilya shook his head.

"Then," said she, "you must tell the investigator everything just as it was."

"I will," he said. "Do you think I can't stand up for myself? Do you think I'll let myself be packed off as a convict just on account of that old man? Oh, no! I've got things to do in my life, hear? And I mean to do them!"

He grew red with excitement and his eyes flashed.

"Was the money only two thousand?" she whispered, bending towards him.

"Two-something."

"Poor boy! No luck there, either."

Ilya glanced at her and gave a little snort.

"Do you think I did it for money? Can't you see? ... Here, I'll go out first. Men always leave first."

"Come and see me soon. There's no reason why we should hide. Soon!" she said urgently.

They kissed each other long and hard, and then Ilya went out. On reaching the street he hailed an izvozchik, and as he rode along he kept glancing back to see if any-

one were following him. His talk with Olimpiada had eased the burden on his heart and had changed his attitude towards her. Not once, by word or glance, had she reproached him when he had confessed to the murder, nor had she turned away from him. On the contrary, she seemed to have accepted part of the guilt as her own. And yet, just a few minutes earlier, before she knew of his guilt, she had threatened to turn him over to the police. And she would have done it—he had read that in the expression of her face. He smiled tenderly as he thought of her.

But the next day he felt like a wild animal being tracked by hounds. Petrukha, whom he met in the pub early in the morning, replied to his greeting with a scarcely perceptible nod and gave him a strangely searching look. Terenty, too, sighed whenever he looked at him and hardly spoke to him. Yakov beckoned him down into Masha's room, where he said in a frightened voice:

“Last night a policeman was here and asked my father all sorts of questions about you. Why do you suppose he did that?”

“What sort of questions?” asked Ilya complacently.

“Where you live, if you drink, and about women. He named a certain Olimpiada—asked if we knew anything about her. What does it mean?”

“How do I know?” said Ilya, and went out.

That evening he got another note from Olimpiada. It read:

“They questioned me about you. I told them everything in detail. It’s all very simple and not the least frightening. Don’t be afraid. A thousand kisses, darling boy.”

He tossed the note into the fire. The murder of the money-lender was the talk of the town and the pub. Ilya enjoyed listening to the stories that were told. It pleased him to ask people for detailed accounts of the circumstances they themselves had invented, and to realize that if he wanted to, he could stun them all by simply saying:

“I am the murderer.”

Some of the gossips praised him for his cunning and daring, others regretted that he had not had time to take all the money, still others expressed the hope that he would not get caught. But not a single one felt sorry for the money-lender or had a good word to say for him. Their lack of feeling for the victim confirmed Ilya in his contempt for people as a whole. It was not of Poluektov he thought, but of the fact that he had committed a great crime and would be called to answer for it. The realization did not upset him, however; it lay static within his consciousness, it became a part of his being. Like the swelling caused by a blow, it did not

hurt unless he touched it. He was deeply convinced that the hour would strike when God, who knew all things and would never forgive the breaking of His laws, would punish him. This stoical readiness to accept his due at any moment enabled him to remain almost tranquil. But he was now more critical than ever of the evil in others.

He grew more sombre and introspective, but he still peddled his wares in the streets of the town from morning to night, sat in pubs, watched his fellowmen, and lent a sharp ear to everything they said. One day, remembering the money hidden in the attic, he felt he ought to find a better place for it, but then he said to himself, no, I won't. Let it remain where it is. If there's a search they'll find it and then I'll confess.

But there was no search and the investigator did not send for him. Not, that is, until the sixth day. Ilya prepared for the interview by changing his underwear, donning his best suit, and polishing his boots. He hired a sled to take him there and held himself stiffly erect as it bounced over the ruts in the road, for everything inside of him was contracted into so hard a knot he felt that the least jolt might make something snap. For the same reason he climbed the stairs to the office slowly and cautiously, like one encased in glass.

When he entered the room the investigator, a young man in gold-rimmed spectacles and with curly hair and

an aquiline nose, rubbed his thin white hands together briskly, then took off his spectacles, wiped them on his handkerchief, and looked at Ilya with large dark eyes. Ilya bowed without speaking.

“How do you do. Sit down—over here.”

He indicated a chair beside the big desk covered with maroon-coloured felt. As Ilya sat down he pushed away some papers lying on the edge of the table with a little movement of his elbow. Noticing this, the investigator politely removed the papers. Then he sat down at the desk opposite Ilya and proceeded to leaf through a book without speaking, glancing up at Ilya from time to time from under lowered brows. Finding the silence a strain, Ilya looked about the room, which was handsomely furnished and very clean. The walls were hung with pictures, one of which was a picture of Christ walking with bowed head, pensive and alone, among ruins; the ground at his feet was strewn with weapons and human bodies, and smoke wreathed up from a conflagration in the background. Ilya gazed at the picture for a long time, trying to discover its meaning. He was about to ask when the investigator closed his book with a bang. Ilya started and looked at him. The man's face had become hard and dry and he pursed up his lips comically as if offended by something.

“We-ell,” he drawled, tapping on the desk with his

fingers. "Ilya Yakovlevich Lunyev, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes."

"Have you guessed why I have sent for you?"

"No," said Ilya, stealing another glance at the picture. It was clean and quiet and attractive in the room. Never before had Ilya seen such cleanliness and so many rich appointments. And a pleasant scent hung about the investigator. All of this distracted him, calmed his nerves, and gave rise to envious thoughts: Just see how some people live! It must pay to track down thieves and murderers. I wonder how much he gets for it.

"You haven't?" repeated the investigator in surprise.

"Hasn't Olimpiada Danilovna told you?"

"No. I haven't seen her for a long time."

The investigator threw himself back in his chair and again pursed his lips comically.

"How long?" he asked.

"I don't know—eight or nine days, I guess."

"I see. Did you often meet Poluektov at her house?"

"The old man who was killed?" said Ilya, glancing into the eyes of the investigator.

"Yes, the old man who was killed."

"I never did."

"Never? Mm."

"Never."

The investigator followed up with a quick string of

questions, and when Ilya, who took his time in answering, lingered over any one of them, he would drum impatiently on the desk.

"Did you know that Olimpiada Danilovna was kept by Poluektov?" he asked suddenly, staring hard at Ilya through his spectacles.

Ilya reddened under his stare and felt affronted by it.

"No," he answered hollowly.

"Yes, she was kept by him," repeated the investigator in an exasperating voice, adding, on seeing that Ilya had no intention of making any comment, "Not a very pretty picture, is it?"

"Not very."

"So you agree with me?"

Again Ilya made no answer.

"Have you known her long?"

"More than a year."

"In other words, you knew her before she met Poluektov?"

A clever dog, thought Ilya, but he answered serenely, "How could I know that if I didn't know about Poluektov?"

The investigator pursed his lips and whistled softly as he took to inspecting one of the papers on the desk. Ilya turned back to the picture, feeling that his study of it helped to calm his nerves. From another room came

the ringing laugh of a little child and a woman's voice singing tenderly:

*"Little-one, honey-one, pretty-one, lovey-one. . ."*

"Do you like that picture?" asked the investigator.

"Where's Christ going?" asked Ilya softly.

The investigator studied him for a moment with dull, disappointed eyes.

"He has descended upon the earth, as you see, to find out how people are carrying out his holy commandments. Here He is shown walking over a battle-field, the scene of fire, plunder, slaughter. . ."

"Couldn't He have seen all that from up in heaven?" asked Ilya.

"The picture was painted merely as a symbol, an illustration of the discrepancy between Christ's teachings and the reality of life."

Once again came a stream of little insignificant questions to pester Ilya like a swarm of mosquitoes. They wore him down; they undermined his powers of concentration and dulled the edge of his wariness, and he hated the investigator for asking them, knowing only too well that he was doing it intentionally.

"Do you by any chance remember," said the man quickly and in an off-hand manner, "where you were on Thursday between two and three?"

"Having tea in a pub," said Ilya.



“Ah. In what pub?”

“‘The Plevna.’”

“How do you explain your being able to tell me exactly where you were at exactly that time?”

The muscles of the man’s face twitched, he leaned forward until his chest touched the desk, his burning eyes bored into Ilya’s. Ilya did not answer immediately.

“Just before I went into the pub I asked a policeman what time it was,” he said calmly.

The investigator threw himself back in his chair, picked up a pencil, and began tapping his finger-nails with it.

“The policeman told me it was going on for two—twenty after one, or something like that.”

“Does he know you?”

“Yes.”

“Haven’t you a watch of your own?”

“No.”

“Did you ever ask him the time before?”

“Occasionally.”

“Were you in ‘The Plevna’ long?”

“Until someone shouted the news of the murder.”

“Where did you go then?”

“To see the body.”

“Did anyone see you there?—at the shop, I mean.”

“The same policeman. He even chased me away—gave me a push.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed the investigator with satisfaction; then, casually, and without looking at Ilya, “Did you ask the policeman the time before or after the murder?”

Ilya saw the catch. In his anger he turned swiftly to this man in the dazzling white shirt, with the slender fingers and the manicured nails, with the gold spectacles and the piercing dark eyes.

“How do I know?” he said.

The investigator gave a dry little cough and twisted his fingers till the bones cracked.

“Very good,” he said, disgruntled. “Splendid. Just a few more questions and we’re through.”

Now his questions were put in an expressionless voice, unhurriedly, apparently without any hope of getting important information, but Ilya, as he answered, was constantly on his guard. Every word he pronounced seemed to strike upon a taut string inside his hollow chest. But the investigator did not attempt to trap him again.

“As you were walking down the street that day, do you remember seeing a tall man in a sheepskin coat and a black fur cap?”

“No,” said Ilya.

“Very well—listen to the testimony you have given; I shall ask you to sign it.” Holding the paper up in front of his face, the investigator read it in a quick monotone,

then thrust a pen into Ilya's hand. When he had signed it, the boy got up slowly.

"Good-bye," he said in a low firm voice.

The man responded with a careless and condescending nod and began to write. But Ilya did not go out. He wanted to say something to this man who had tortured him so long. In the silence of the room he could distinctly hear the scratch of the pen and the woman's voice coming from the other room:

*"Dolly, dolly, dance for me, dance for me, dance for me!"*

"What is it?" asked the investigator, suddenly looking up.

"Nothing," said Ilya sullenly.

"I told you you could go."

"I'm going."

They stared at each other for a tense moment, during which Ilya felt something big and terrifying welling up within him. Quickly he turned and went out, and when he reached the street and a cold wind struck him, he discovered his body was drenched in sweat. In half an hour he was at Olimpiada's. She herself opened the door to him, having seen him drive up, and she welcomed him with the joy of a mother greeting her son. Her face was pale, her eyes were wide and had an uneasy look in them.

"How wise of you," she said when Ilya told her he had come directly from the investigator. "Just what you

should have done. Well, how did you like him?"

"He's a sly old fox," said Ilya viciously. "He kept trying to catch me."

"What did you expect? That's what he's paid for," she said sensibly.

"Why couldn't he come straight out with it, 'You're suspected of so-and-so and so-and-so.'"

"But you didn't come straight out with it either," said Olimpiada with a smile.

"Me?" said the astonished Ilya. "No-o, I guess I didn't. Hm, damn it all." He seemed to be struck by a new idea, and after a moment's deliberation he said, "Funny—while I was sitting there in his office I had the feeling that *I* was the one who was in the right, can you believe it?"

"Thank goodness!" cried Olimpiada happily. "Everything will turn out all right."

Ilya smiled at her as he said slowly, "I didn't have to do much lying. I'm a lucky son-of-a-gun, Olimpiada." He gave a queer little laugh.

"Plain-clothes men are following me," she said under her breath. "And they're probably following you."

"Oh, be sure of that!" he cried with mocking venom. "Sniffing at our trail—tracking us down as if we were wolves in the forest. But they'll not catch us. It's not for them! And I'm no wolf—I'm a miserable human being. I didn't want to strangle that old man. Life's strangling me,

like Pavel wrote in his poem. And it's strangling Pavel, and Yakov, and . . . and everybody."

"Come, Ilya," said Olimpiada as she brewed the tea, "everything will turn out all right."

Ilya got up off the couch and went to the window, from where he went on sullenly, resentfully, as he gazed out into the street:

"All my life I've had my nose rubbed into filth. Whatever I hated, whatever I wanted to get away from—that's what I've been pushed into. I've never known a single person I could look up to. Isn't there really anything clean and decent in this world? Look at me now—why did I have to go and strangle that . . . that? . . . I just soiled my hands and put a smudge on my soul. And the money . . . what did I have to take that for?"

"Don't brood over it, he wasn't worth it," said Olimpiada consolingly.

"I'm not brooding, I'm just trying to justify what I did. Everybody tries to justify what they do because everybody's got to go on living. Except that investigator—he lives like a chocolate in silver paper. He don't have to strangle anybody. He can live an upright life—everything neat and clean."

"Wait, you and I will move away from this town—"

"Oh, no, we won't! I'm not moving anywhere," said Ilya resolutely, turning round to her. "I'm staying right

here to see what will happen." The words sounded like a threat.

Olimpiada grew thoughtful. She was sitting at the samovar looking very pretty and buxom in a white dressing-gown.

"I still have something to say to them," said Ilya with a significant toss of his head as he walked to and fro.

"Is it because you're afraid of me you don't want to go?" said Olimpiada in an injured tone. "Afraid I'll keep a tight hold on you now? That once I know your secret I won't let you go? You're wrong, dear boy. I'll never drag you after me against your will."

Her voice was calm, but her lips were quivering as if with pain.

"What are you saying?" said Ilya in surprise.

"Have no fear, I'll never force you to stick to me. Go wherever you want to, and good riddance."

"Don't," said Ilya, sitting down next to her and taking her hand. "I don't know why you should say such a thing."

"Oh, you don't, don't you?" she cried unhappily, snatching her hand out of his. "I know you. You're proud. You're cruel. You can't forgive me for living with that old man and you loathe me for the life I lead. You think it's all on account of me this thing happened. You hate me."

"That's a lie!" said Ilya proudly. "A lie, I tell you. I don't blame you in the least. I know that clean, unspotted

women aren't for the likes of me. They're too dear for men like me. You're expected to marry such women. And they have babies. Clean things are only for the rich. We get the left-overs, the hand-me-downs, what's been mauled and spat on."

"Then leave me, if you think I've been spat on!" cried Olimpiada, jumping up. "Get out!" Tears sprang to her eyes and she assaulted him with words like hot coals. "I crawled into that ditch of my own free will, because there was money in it. And now I'm climbing back out of it up this money, like a ladder, and I mean to live a decent life again. You've helped me to this. I know. And I love you, I don't care if you've killed a dozen old men. And it isn't for the help you've given me that I love you, it's for the pride in you, for the youngness in you—for your curly hair and your strong hands and your stern glance—and for your reproaches, each like a knife-thrust in my heart—I'll be grateful to you for them to my dying day. I'll fall on my knees and kiss your feet—here!"

And she dropped down in front of the seated Ilya and kissed his knees, saying, "God's my witness it was to save my soul I committed that sin; surely He would rather have me wade through the mud and come out into the cleanliness than to wallow in filth all my life. Once I was out I could pray for forgiveness. I couldn't bear to go on living like that all my life. I'm dirty all over, stained through and

through. All the tears I can shed will never wash me clean.”

At first Ilya pushed her away and tried to lift her up, but she only tightened her hold on him and pressed her head against his knees, rubbing her face against them as she spoke in a gasping, choking voice. Then he began stroking her hair with a trembling hand, and at last, raising her to her knees, he put his arms about her and laid her head on his shoulder. Her burning cheek was pressed tight against his, and as she knelt in front of him, held by a strong arm, she went on speaking in a whisper:

“If a person has once sinned, does it do anyone any good to humiliate him for the rest of his life? When I was just a little girl and my stepfather came crawling to me with his ugly want, I slapped him off with a rag. But then they got the better of me—they made me drunk. I was just a little girl—clean, and as fresh as a flower. I cried. It seemed such a pity to soil my prettiness. I didn’t want to be like that—oh, I didn’t want to! But then I saw it didn’t matter. There was no going back. Well, I thought, at least I’ll make them pay me well. I hated them all. I stole money from them, and I drank. Not once did I put my heart in the kisses I gave—not once! Until I met you.” The words trailed off in a low whisper; then, suddenly pulling away from him, she cried, “Let me go!”

He only held her the tighter and began to kiss her face passionately, despairingly.



"There's nothing I can say to you," he murmured. "Nothing but this: nobody cares about us, and so we won't care about anybody else. I'm glad you said what you did. It was good. And you yourself are good. And I love you more than . . . more than . . . There are no words to say how much I love you."

Her lament had evoked in him a pure and ardent feeling. Her grief fused with his misery, making them one, and for a long time they sat clinging to each other, whispering their grievances into each other's ears.

"We'll never know happiness, you and I," she said with a hopeless shake of her head.

"Then we'll share our unhappiness. If we're sent into exile, off we'll go together, won't we? But until that time comes, we'll drown our troubles in love. For the present, they can burn me alive if they want to—my heart's as light as a feather."

Moved by each other's words, thrilled by each other's touch, they gazed mistily into each other's eyes. Their flesh was hot from their embraces; their clothes were confining. . . .

Outside, the sky was grey and drab. A cold mist enveloped the earth, coating the trees in hoarfrost. The thin twigs of a birch-tree growing in the front garden scratched at the window and shook off fluffy snow-flakes. A winter evening had set in.

A few days later Ilya found out that the police were searching for a tall man in a black fur cap who was suspected of the Poluektov murder. An examination of the shop had brought to light the silver decorations of two icons that turned out to have been stolen. The shop-boy said they had been purchased two or three days before the murder from a tall man in a sheepskin coat whose name was Andrei, and that Poluektov had often bought things from him and lent him money. It was later established that on the eve of the murder, as well as on the very day, a man who answered to the description given by the boy had been carousing in one of the brothels of the town.

Every day brought new rumours to Ilya's ears. The whole town was aroused by the bold murder, which was discussed everywhere—on the street, in pubs and private houses. But Ilya was little interested in the talk. The apprehension of danger had dropped away from him as the scab drops off a sore, and its place had been taken by a sense of uncertainty: how was he to go on living now? His feelings were similar to those of a recruit, or of a person about to set out on a long journey to an unknown place.

Of late Yakov had been giving him no peace. Dirty and unkempt, Petrukha's son hung idly about the pub and the yard, his enormous eyes wandering from one object to another, giving him the air of a person absorbed in some deep problem. As soon as he caught sight of Ilya he would

accost him in a mysterious tone, perhaps even in a whisper.

Once he said:

“Could you spare me a minute?”

“A little later, not just now.”

“But it’s awfully important.”

“What is?”

“That book—if you only knew the things it says! Oh, my!”

“To hell with you and your books. Tell me this: what is your father always scowling at me for?”

But Yakov was not the least interested in actualities. In reply to Ilya’s question he merely opened his eyes wider and said:

“Is he? I don’t know why. True, I once heard him say something to your uncle, like as if you were trading in counterfeit money. But that’s all bosh.”

“How do you know?” asked Ilya with a smile.

“Pooh! Counterfeit money! Nonsense.” He dismissed the absurdity with a wave of his hand. “So you really haven’t time to talk to me?”

“About that book?”

“Yes. There’s a certain place in it, if I understood it right—Oh my! oh my!” And the philosopher screwed up his face into an awful grimace.

Ilya stared at him as if he were a monstrosity or the village fool. At times it seemed to him that Yakov was

blind, and he always looked upon him as unfortunate and incapable of coping with life. It was whispered in the house, and the whole street knew it, that Petrukha intended to marry his mistress, a woman who kept one of the more expensive brothels in the town. But Yakov accepted the news with complete indifference. When Ilya asked him if the wedding was to be soon, he said:

“Whose wedding?”

“Your father’s.”

“Oh, that. Who knows? It’s a disgrace. To marry a woman like that! Ugh!”

“Do you know she has a son? Almost grown up—he studies at the gymnasium.”

“What of it?”

“He’ll be your father’s heir.”

“Uh-huh,” said Yakov complacently. Suddenly he grew animated, “A son? That ought to help me out. If my father would only put him behind the bar I could go wherever I liked! What luck!”

And he smacked his lips at the anticipation of such freedom. Ilya glanced at him with a pitying smile.

“It’s true what they say, ‘If a beggar’s a fool he prefers a carrot to a coin.’ Ah, Yakov, Yakov, I don’t know how you’re ever going to get on in this world.”

Yakov was suddenly alert and wide-eyed.

“I’ve thought about that,” he whispered quickly.

"First of all a person's got to make order in his soul, he's got to know what God wants of him. So far only one thing is clear to me: people are tangled up like threads, each pulling in a different direction, and nobody knows what he ought to tie up to. A man gets born, nobody knows what for; he goes on living, nobody knows why; he dies, and everything's over. And so the first thing he's got to decide is what he's here for, see?"

"You do nothing but think about such things," said Ilya tensely. "What's the good of it?"

He was aware that Yakov's groping ideas affected him now as they had never done before, giving rise to unwanted thoughts. When Yakov spoke it was as if some dark being within Ilya, the being that always opposed his bright dreams of a clean and wholesome way of life, stirred in his soul as a babe stirs in the womb, hungrily drinking in Yakov's every word. He did not want this, he resented it, was afraid of it, and so he avoided talking to Yakov. But it was hard to shake off his friend.

"The good of it? Why, that's clear. You can no more do without it than without air."

"You're a regular old man, Yakov; you've become an awful bore. 'Each wants the best, like all the rest,' as the saying goes."

After such talks Ilya felt as if he had stuffed himself on salt cabbage: he was tortured by thirst, but he could

not have said for what. To his obscure and oppressive thoughts of God was added something harsh and demanding.

God sees everything, but he does nothing about it, he thought sullenly, aware that he was becoming entangled in irreconcilable contradictions. He took refuge from his thoughts and fears in Olimpiada's arms.

Occasionally he would go and see Vera. Gradually she was being sucked down into the whirlpool of gay living. She gave Ilya rapturous accounts of the sprees she went on with merchants, officials, and army officers; she described restaurants and troika rides, and she showed him clothes and jewelry she received as gifts. She had a strong, firm body with lovely curves, and she boasted of how her admirers fought with each other for the possession of her. Ilya admired her beauty and strength and gaiety, but on more than one occasion he said in a tone of admonition:

"Careful, Vera; you'll be dragged down by it all."

"What of it? That's all I deserve. At least I'll go down with a flourish. I'll have my fill and—farewell!"

"What about Pavel?"

Her face quivered and the brightness went out of her voice.

"He ought to leave me. It's hard for him to stick to me. Why should he torture himself? I'll never give it up—once a fly falls into the treacle...."

"Don't you love him?" asked Ilya.

"You can't help loving Pavel," she said gravely. "He's ... he's wonderful."

"Well, then, why don't you live with him?"

"And be a stone round his neck? He can hardly keep himself alive, let alone me. Oh, no; I have too much feeling for him."

"Watch out, or this will have a bad ending," he warned her.

"For heavens' sake," she exclaimed testily, "what do you expect me to do? Do you think I was made just for one man? Everyone wants to enjoy himself. And everyone lives as he likes—you, and me, and everybody else."

"You're wrong," said Ilya gloomily. "It's not only for ourselves we live."

"For who else?"

"Take you—you live for the merchants, for all sorts of rakes—"

"I'm a rake myself," and she broke into a ripple of laughter.

Ilya left her with a heavy heart. He had seen Pavel twice, but only for a moment each time. It made Pavel peevish to find him at Vera's. He would sit opposite him with tight lips, saying not a word, and two bright red spots would appear on his thin cheeks. Ilya realized that his friend was jealous, and this gave him a certain satis-

faction. But he could see that Pavel had got his head into a noose he could not extricate himself from without injury to himself. And so out of pity for him, and even greater pity for Vera, he kept away from her.

He and Olimpiada were enjoying a second honeymoon. Yet there was something between them that acted as a cold draught, damping their ardour. In the middle of a conversation, Ilya would sometimes fall into a brown study.

“Come, darling, don’t brood,” Olimpiada would coax him. “There aren’t many people in this world whose hands are spotless.”

“Listen,” Ilya would say in a cold, stern voice. “On this subject—not a word. It wasn’t of hands I was thinking. Clever as you are, you’ll never be able to understand my thoughts. Tell me this: how is a person to live an honest life, one that won’t hurt anybody else? As for the old man—not a word! Do you hear?”

But she could not resist talking about the old man and kept urging Ilya to forget him. Ilya would grow angry and leave her. The next time he came she would cry wildly that he only loved her because he was afraid of her, that she didn’t want that and would go away and leave him. She would sob, she would pinch him, she would bite his shoulder and kiss his feet, and at last, exhausted, she would strip off her clothes and stand naked before him, saying:



“Am I not good to look at? Is my body not beautiful? And I love you with every inch of it, with every drop of my blood, every ounce of my flesh! Cut my throat if you like—I’ll laugh in your face.”

Her blue eyes darkened, her lips twitched hungrily, and her bosom rose as if to meet him. He took her in his arms and made love until he was worn out, and then, on his way home, he thought to himself: How could anyone so passionately alive bear to be touched by the filthy hands of that old man? And Olimpiada became repugnant to him, and he spat viciously on remembering her kisses.

One day, after a storm of passion that left him sated with her caresses, he said:

“You’ve loved me more since I did away with that old devil.”

“True. What of it?”

“Nothing. Queer: there are people who think rotten eggs taste better than fresh ones, and still others who only like apples when they’re spotted. Very queer.”

Olimpiada smiled absent-mindedly and said nothing.

Once when Ilya was changing his clothes after work, Terenty came into the room. He closed the door behind him and stood there for a second as if making sure nobody was following him; then, with a shake of his hump, he locked the door. Ilya watched him with a derisive smile.

"Ilya," said Terenty under his breath as he sat down on a chair.

"Well?"

"There's rumours being spread about you. Nasty ones."

The hunchback breathed a deep sigh and dropped his eyes.

"What, for instance?" said Ilya, taking off his boots.

"Different ones. Some say you had a hand in that . . . that . . . you know, the old man as was throttled. Others say you're making false money."

"Jealous, eh?"

"And there's men been seen about the pub—sort of detectives. They keep asking Petrukha about you."

"Let them," said Ilya.

"Oh, of course—let them. Why should you care, once you've done no wrong?"

Ilya laughed and lay down on the bed.

"They've stopped coming. But now Petrukha . . ." Terenty became apologetic. "It might be well if you was to find lodgings for yourself, Ilya. Petrukha says he won't have no bad characters in his house. Says he's square and upright himself. . . ."

Ilya turned a lowering face to his uncle and said in a loud voice:

"If he's so pleased with that varnished mug of his, let him keep his mouth shut! Tell him that. If I hear him

passing any slurring remarks about me I'll smash his head in. Whatever I am, it's not for him to judge me. I'll move out of here when I feel like it. I'd be only too glad to live among decent people for once."

The hunchback was frightened by Ilya's outburst. For a moment he sat without speaking, scratching his hump and gazing in terror at his nephew, who lay staring up at the ceiling, his lips compressed into a hard line. Terenty's eyes passed like feelers over the boy's curly head, his stern and handsome face with its little moustache and jutting chin, his broad chest, his strong and well-formed body.

"A fine lad you've turned into," he murmured. "The girls would give you no peace if you lived in the village. An easy life you'd have of it there. I'd send you money. You could open a shop of your own and find a rich wife for yourself. Life would slide on as smooth as a sled going downhill."

"Maybe I don't want to go downhill, maybe I want to climb up," said Ilya glumly.

"Oh, yes. Of course you want to climb," put in Terenty hastily. "That's what I mean. Life would run smooth, and up you'd climb."

"And when I reached the top?" asked Ilya.

The hunchback glanced at him and gave a cackling laugh. He said something else, but Ilya did not listen to him. He was going back in his mind over all that had happened

and thinking how neatly and imperceptibly events formed themselves into a pattern, like the squares of a net. They marshalled themselves round a man and led him wherever they chose, as policemen lead away a thief. Here was I, thought he, wanting to get away from this house and live by myself, and—presto! here's my chance. He darted a frightened, searching look at his uncle, but at just that moment there came a knock at the door and Terenty jumped up.

"Well, open it," said Ilya tetchily.

When the hunchback unhooked it, there stood Yakov with a big brown book in his hands.

"Let's go to Masha's, Ilya," he said excitedly, going over to the bed.

"Why, what's the matter with her?" asked Ilya quickly.

"The matter? Nothing, I suppose. She's not home."

"Where does she spend her evenings?" said the hunchback insinuatingly.

"She goes out with Matitza."

"No good will come of that," drawled Terenty.

Yakov seized Ilya's hand and gave it a tug.

"You're cracked," said Ilya.

"It is black magic—it must be," whispered Yakov.

"What is?" said Ilya as he pulled on his felt boots.

"This book. Just wait till you hear! Hurry up! A marvel!" And he hurried away, drawing his friend after him through the dark passage. "It makes your blood run cold—like

staring into a dark pool that draws you down and down."

Ilya was aware of his friend's agitation, of the trembling of his voice, and when they reached the cobbler's room and lighted the lamp, he saw that his face was white and his eyes hazy and blissful, like those of a drunkard.

"Have you had a drop?" he asked, darting a suspicious glance at him.

"Me? Not today—not a drop. I don't drink any more—only a glass or two to keep up my spirits when my father's home. I'm afraid of my father. And I don't drink vodka—that smells. Here, listen to this."

He dropped noisily on to a chair, opened the book, bent over it, and followed the lines on the yellowed paper with his finger as he read in a trembling voice:

"'Chapter Three. Of the Origin of Man.' Listen."

When he had taken a deep breath he raised his left hand, and followed with the finger of his right as he read:

"'As hath been witnessed by the aforesaid Diodor, the earliest men were men of good will.' Hear that? 'Men of good will!' 'Deep was the penetration of him who hath written these things. And well hath he said, that the world was not created, neither doth it disintegrate with the ages, and the race of man hath existence without beginning....'"

Yakov raised his head and waved his hand in the air.

“Hear that?” he repeated in an awed whisper. ““Without beginning.””

“Go on,” said Ilya, casting a dubious glance at the ancient leather binding of the book.

“To such sagacity subscribed Cicero, Pythagoras of Samos, Arkhita Terentin, Plato of Athens, Xenocrates, Aristotle of Stageira, and many other men of learning, who in their great wisdom constituted that the world in its eternal manifestation is without beginning and without end.’ Hear that? Again ‘without beginning.’ ‘But within this eternal essence are manifestations of the born and the being born, and with them is associated the concept of creation, whereby temporal phenomena. . . .’”

Ilya reached out and slammed the book shut.

“Enough!” he snorted. “To hell with it! A pack of foreigners thinking up tangles to catch your brains in. There’s no making head or tail of it.”

“Wait!” cried Yakov, glancing apprehensively about him; then, staring wide-eyed at his friend, “Do you know anything about *your* beginning?”

“What beginning?” cried Ilya impatiently.

“Sh. . . . Take the soul. A man is born with a soul, isn’t he?”

“Well?”

“Then he has a right to know where it came from and how. It’s said the soul is immortal, that it always existed,

isn't that so? The important thing is not to know how you got born, but how you came to know you exist. You were born alive. When did you come alive? In your mother's womb? Very well, then why is it you don't remember what happened before you were born and for five years or so afterwards? And if you have a soul, when did it enter your body? Can you tell me that?"

There was a triumphant glint in Yakov's eyes and his face beamed with a joy and satisfaction beyond Ilya's comprehension.

"There's your soul for you!" cried Yakov.

"You fool," said Ilya sternly. "What are you so happy about?"

"It's not that I'm happy, it's just that I'm . . . just that I'm . . ."

"Just that I'm . . ."

mocked Ilya. "The important thing is not why I'm alive, but how I ought to live—how I ought to live clean and decent, without hurting anybody and nobody hurting me. Find me a book that will tell me that."

Yakov was deflated. His failure to kindle his friend's enthusiasm diminished his own. In a moment he said:

"There's something about you of late I don't like. I can't make out what's on your mind. It's as if you were all puffed up over something. As if you took yourself for a saint."

Ilya laughed.

"What are you laughing at? I'm telling you the truth. You're always criticizing people. You don't seem to care for anybody."

"That I don't," said Ilya definitely. "Who should I care for? And why? What has anybody ever done for me? All people want is to get their daily bread at somebody else's expense, and still they expect others to love and respect them. Give me my share, and then maybe I'll respect them. One man's as hungry as another."

"Men don't live by bread alone," said Yakov drily.

"I know. Everybody dresses himself up in fancy clothes, but it's all sham. I can see through it all. My uncle wants to square accounts with the Lord, like a shop-assistant reporting sales to his master. Your father made the church a present of a new icon, and that means he either cheated somebody or intends to. And this is so wherever you go—give five, take ten. Everybody cheating, everybody finding excuses for himself. But I say: if you do something wrong, accidentally or on purpose, be man enough to take your punishment."

"It's true what you say," said Yakov pensively. "True about my father, and true about the hunchback. You and me don't belong here, Ilya; we got born in the wrong place. You at least can get mad and let off steam by criticizing others. That's some relief. I don't even have that.



If I could only get away from here!" he burst out suddenly.

"Where would you go?" said Ilya with gentle mockery.

Yakov did not reply, and the two of them sat on in silence, one on either side of the table, the big book with the brown leather binding and the metal clasps lying between them.

From the stairway came a shuffling of feet and a murmur of voices. A hand fumbled with the handle of the door. The boys waited without speaking, and presently the door opened slowly and there stood Perfishka. He stumbled over the sill, swayed, and fell down, holding his accordion over his head in his right hand.

"Whe-ew!" he laughed drunkenly. Behind him came Matitza. She bent down and took him under the arms to lift him up.

"A nice thing, you old soak!" she muttered thickly.

"Hands off, matchmaker! I'll get up myself."

He struggled to his feet and went over to the boys.

"H'llo," he said, holding out his left hand. "How d'ye do."

Matitza sniggered idiotically.

"Where have you been?" asked Ilya.

Yakov smiled up at the drunken pair and said nothing.

"Where have we been? Hi, lads! Ho, lads!" and Perfishka began to dance and sing:

*Baby bones, baby bones!  
When the bones grow into chops,  
The butchers will sell them in the shops.*

"Hey, you matchmaker!" he said to Matitza. "Let's sing that one you just taught me. C'mon!"

He leaned against the stove beside Matitza and gave her a poke with his elbow as he ran his fingers over the keys of his accordion.

"Where's Masha?" asked Ilya severely.

"Where is she?" repeated Yakov, jumping up.

But the drunkards paid no attention to them. Matitza cocked her head on one side and sang:

*Neighbour, neighbour, now it's Sunday...*

Perfishka pulled on his accordion and joined in a high voice:

*So let us take a swig for Monday...*

Ilya got up and gave him such a shake that the cobbler's head struck the stove.

"Where's your daughter?"

"Lo-o-st is his daughter in the middle of the night," muttered Perfishka, holding his head.

Yakov asked Matitza the same question.

"I won't tell you," simpered the woman. "I won't, I won't, I won't."

"They've probably sold her, the devils," said Ilya with a hard little laugh. Yakov glanced at him in fright.

"Listen, Perfishka, tell me where Masha is," he implored piteously.

"Ma-a-sha," drawled Matitza, "Ma-a-sha's done for."

"Ilya! Do you hear? What shall we do?" Yakov was in a panic.

Ilya gazed gloomily at the drunkards without answering.

Matitza wailed her song in sinister tones, rolling her great eyes from Yakov to Ilya. Suddenly she swung her arms and shouted:

"Get out of here! Out of my house! It's mine, now. We're going to get married—him and me."

The cobbler held his belly and roared with laughter.

"Come along, Yakov," said Ilya. "We can't get anything out of them."

"Wait," said the puzzled and frightened Yakov. "Perfishka, where's Masha?"

"At 'em, Matitza, my loving spouse! At 'em. At 'em! Chew 'em up!... Where's Masha?"

Perfishka pursed up his lips with the intention of whistling, and when no sound came he stuck out his tongue at Yakov

and burst out laughing again. Matitza marched on Ilya, roaring at the top of her lungs:

“Who are you? Do you think I don’t know?”

Ilya gave her a push and went out. On the stairs he was caught up by Yakov, who seized him by the shoulders and swung him round.

“How could they? How dared they? She’s so little, Ilya! Do you suppose they’ve really married her off?”

“Stop snivelling,” said Ilya brusquely. “It won’t help. You ought to have kept an eye on them before. While you were so busy searching for a beginning, they put an end to everything.”

Yakov grew silent, but a minute later, as he was following Ilya through the yard, he said:

“It’s not my fault. I knew she worked as a charwoman somewhere, but—”

“I don’t give a damn whether it’s your fault or not,” said Ilya roughly, coming to a halt in the middle of the yard. “We’ve got to get out of this house. It ought to be burnt down.”

“Oh God! Oh God!” murmured Yakov, who was standing behind Ilya, his arms hanging limply at his sides, his head bent as if to receive a blow.

“Go ahead and cry,” said Ilya scathingly and walked off, leaving his friend alone in the middle of the dark courtyard.

The next morning he learned from Perfishka that Masha had been given in marriage to a shopkeeper named Khrenov, a man about fifty years old whose wife had just died.

Perfishka lay up on the stove-bunk as he told him the story, from time to time giving a little shake of his head, heavy with a hang-over.

“So he says to me, ‘I’ve got two children, two boys. They need a nanny to look after them, but a nanny’s not one of the family, she’s sure to steal and all that. Just you talk to that daughter of yours.’ Well, I talked to her. And Matitza talked to her. Masha’s a smart one—she understood right away. Has she got anything better to look forward to? Nothing. Worse, perhaps, but not better. ‘I’ll go,’ she says. And she did. The whole thing was done in three days. Matitza and I got three rubles a piece—we’ve drunk it up already. The way that skirt guzzles the liquor! A horse couldn’t keep up with her.”

Ilya listened in silence. He understood that Masha had come off better than might be expected, but still he felt sorry for her. He had seen little of her of late and he never thought about her, but it seemed to him that Petrukhka’s house was more unbearable than ever, now that she was gone.

Perfishka’s puffy yellow face hung over the stove-bunk and his voice scratched like a broken twig at the window-pane.

“Khrenov says I’m not never to set foot inside his

house. He says I can come to his shop once in a while and he'll give me a copper for a drink, but there's no more hope of my getting let into his house, he says, than of my getting let into paradise. Ilya Yakovlevich, couldn't you give me five kopeks to chase the fog out of my head? That's a good boy!"

"What are you going to do without her?" asked Ilya.

The cobbler spat.

"I'm going to drink for good now. Masha sort of cramped me—sort of hung on my conscience. Sometimes I'd even do a day's work for her sake. But now I know she's fed, and clothed, and got a roof over her head—tucked safe away in the trunk, so to speak—and so I'm free to go on a permanent binge."

"Can't you drop the vodka?"

"Can't," said Perfishka with a decisive shake of his tousled head. "And why should I? If I can pay my way, who's to say me nay? And if a fellow's the sort you just can't teach anything, who cares what he does? True, there was a time when I had a certain plan in mind—that was when the wife was still alive. I hoped to snatch a little nest-egg from Grandad Yeremei. The way I looked at it, somebody was sure to filch his money, so why not me? Well, thank the Lord somebody else got in ahead of me. I'm not sorry. But I learned you can't do anything if you don't know how—not even steal."

The cobbler laughed and set to climbing down off the bunk.

"Well, let's have the five kopeks; my guts are burning up."

"Here, go and get your drink," said Ilya, smiling up at him. "You're a sot and a faker, and yet sometimes I think you're the best man I know."

"Honest?" he asked dubiously.

"Believe it or not, just as you like. It's not that I think so much of you, but that I think so little of others."

"That's too deep for me. This head of mine wasn't meant to crack nuts with. I'll go and have a drop; maybe that'll make my brains grow."

"Wait," said Ilya, seizing him by the arm. "Do you fear God?"

Perfishka shifted impatiently from one foot to the other.

"Why should I?" he said in an offended tone. "I ain't done nobody no harm."

"Do you pray?" asked Ilya in a lower tone.

"Of course I do—sometimes."

Ilya could see the cobbler was too anxious to get to the pub to hold conversation with him.

"Go along," he said musingly, "but don't forget: when you die God's going to say to you, 'What kind of a life did you live, my man?'"

"And I'll answer, 'I was born a baby; I died a drunk;

I don't remember nothing, Lord.' And the Lord'll just laugh and forgive me."

The cobbler grinned and went out.

Ilya was left alone in the basement. It was odd to think that Masha would never again be seen in that stuffy, dirty room, and that Perfishka, too, would soon be put out of it.

An April sun streamed in at the window lighting up the unswept floor. Everything looked dingy, untidy, and depressing, as if a funeral had just been held there. Oppressive thoughts came rolling over Ilya, one after another, as he sat rigid on his chair staring at the bulky stove with the whitewash flaking off it. Suddenly one thought flashed into his mind with perfect clarity:

"I ought to go and confess."

He angrily thrust it away.

That very evening Ilya was forced to leave the house of Petrukha Filimonov. This is how it happened.

When he came home from work, he found a distressed Uncle Terenty waiting for him in the yard.

"Well, Ilya, you've got to go for sure this time," he said. "You ought to have heard the row there was!" The hunchback expressed his horror by squeezing his eyes tight shut and beating himself on the hips. "Yakov got dead drunk and called his father a thief straight to his face. He called him other things, too—a heartless brute, a



filthy lecher—shouted like mad. How Petrukha did light into him! Socked him in the teeth, pulled him about by the hair, stamped on him with his feet, thrashed him until he was all bloodied up. Yakov's lying in there moaning now. Then he jumps on me, Petrukha does. 'Throw that nephew of yours out of here,' he says. 'It's all his doings,' he says. How he yelped! So it looks like you—"

Ilya took the strap off his neck and handed his box to his uncle.

"Here, hold this."

"Where are you going?"

Ilya's hands were shaking with pity and anger: pity for Yakov, anger for Petrukha.

"Hold it, I said," he muttered through his teeth, and went into the pub. His jaws were clenched till they hurt and there was a roaring inside his ears. Through the roar he heard his uncle shouting something about the police, prison, and exile, but he could not stop.

He found Petrukha in the buffet, smiling and talking to a disreputable-looking character. The light fell on his bald spot, and it seemed as if his whole head was wreathed in a bland smile.

"Ah, the merchant!" he scoffed on seeing Ilya, and his eyebrows twitched menacingly. "Just the person I wanted to see."

He was standing in the doorway of his room.

A cold relentless look came into Ilya's eye.

"Get away!" he ordered in a loud voice.

"Wh-at?" said Petrukha.

"Let me in to see Yakov."

"Won't I just!"

With all his force Ilya struck Petrukha in the face. The man fell down with a groan. Waiters came running from all sides.

"Hold him!" called somebody. "Tie him!"

The customers jumped up, but Ilya calmly stepped over Petrukha and went into the room, locking the door behind him.

A tin lamp was flickering feebly in the little room piled high with boxes and wine-cases. Ilya could not at first make out his friend in the darkness and the clutter, but presently he saw Yakov lying on the floor, his head in shadow, his face dark and distorted. Ilya picked up the lamp and knelt down beside him. Yakov's whole face was an ugly mask of cuts and bruises, his eyes were sunk in swelling, he was breathing hoarsely and apparently could not see, for he groaned:

"Who is it?"

"Me," said Ilya softly, getting up.

"Give me a drink."

Ilya glanced over his shoulder. People were trying to force open the door.

"Go round to the back entrance," shouted somebody.

"I didn't touch him," came Petrukha's whining voice through the clamour.

Ilya gave a little crow of satisfaction. Going over to the door, he began to speak calmly to those on the other side.

"Less noise, fellows!" he said. "He won't die just because I gave him a little sock in the jaw, but I'll get hauled off to court for it. Mind your own business and stop pushing on the door. I'll open it myself."

He unlocked it and stood framed in the opening with his fists clenched, just in case. A readiness to fight was only too clearly expressed on his face, and his whole figure looked so belligerent that the crowd recoiled. But Petrukha egged them on.

"He's a brute, a rascal!" he wailed.

"Take him away and come and see what he's done," said Ilya, stepping aside so that they could enter the room. "Come and see what a wreck he's made out of a human being."

A few of the customers, casting furtive glances at Ilya, slipped past him into the room and bent down to look at Yakov.

"What an ironing he did give the chap!" said one of them in an awed voice.

"Bring some water. And call the police," said Ilya.

The witnesses were on his side; he could see that, and so he went on in a loud accusing voice:

“You all know Petrukha Filimonov, you all know he’s the biggest swindler in the neighbourhood, but who has a bad word to say for his son? Well, there lies his son, so badly beaten he may be disabled for life, and his father will get off scot-free. And you’ll have me put in jail just because I gave Petrukha one blow in the face. Is that right? Is that fair? But that’s the way it always is: one man has a free hand to do whatever he likes, and the rest don’t dare to lift so much as an eyebrow.”

A few of his hearers sighed their sympathy, others walked off noncommittally, Petrukha began to shriek and drive everybody away.

“Get out of here! Get out, I tell you! It’s my business, he’s my son. Get out! I’m not afraid of the police. And I don’t need a court trial. I’ll run him to earth without any trial. Get out!”

Ilya knelt down to give Yakov a drink; the sight of his friend’s cut and swollen lips was unbearable.

“It hurts to breathe,” whispered Yakov as he drank. “Take me away from here, Ilya. Please do; oh, please!”

Tears oozed out of the slits in the swelling.

“He’s got to be put in hospital,” said Ilya grimly to Petrukha.

The bar-keeper glanced at his son and muttered some-

thing incoherent. One of his eyes was staring wide, the other, like Yakov's two eyes, was swollen shut.

"Did you hear what I said?" cried Ilya.

"Don't shout," said Petrukha in an unexpectedly mild tone. "I daren't put him in hospital. There'd be talk. That won't do."

"You beast!" and Ilya spat in contempt. "I'm telling you you've got to put him in hospital. If you don't, I'll raise such hell!..."

"Come, come. Don't get mad. He's probably just putting it on—"

Ilya leaped to his feet, and this sent Petrukha running to the door.

"Ivan!" he called. "Get an izvozchik—a fifteen-kopek one—to take Yakov to the hospital. Put your clothes on, Yakov. No sense making out to be worse than you really are. It ain't as if some stranger had given you a licking—your own father did it. I took worse ones in my time."

He scurried about the room, taking clothes off hooks and tossing them to Ilya as he went on about the beatings he had taken in his youth.

Terenty was behind the bar, and Ilya could hear him saying obsequiously:

"Shall I make it three or five kopeks' worth? Caviar? Sorry, all out of caviar. Perhaps a bit of herring?"

The next day Ilya found himself lodgings. The little room next to the kitchen which he decided to take was shown to him by a young girl in a red blouse. She had pink cheeks, a sharp little bill of a nose, a tiny mouth, and black hair that curled prettily over her narrow forehead. From time to time she would push it back with a quick movement of her dainty little hand.

"Five rubles is very cheap for a sweet little room like this," she chirped with a smile, aware that this broad-shouldered young man was disconcerted by her lively dark eyes. "The wallpaper is brand-new and the window looks out on the garden. What else could you wish for? In the morning I'll heat the samovar for you, but you'll have to carry it into your room yourself."

"Are you the maid?" asked Ilya.

Her smile was quickly replaced by a frown and she drew herself up haughtily.

"Not the maid but the housewife," she said. "This is my house, and my husband—"

"You don't mean to say you're married!" exclaimed Ilya in astonishment, taking in her slender form at a glance. The anger instantly went out of her and she gave a ripple of gay laughter.

"How funny you are! First you take me for the maid, then you don't believe I'm married!"

"How can I? You look like a child," laughed Ilya in return.

“Why, I’ve been married almost three years. My husband’s the policeman on this beat.”

Ilya glanced quickly into her face and gave a little chuckle without knowing why.

“You *are* a funny one,” said the girl with a shrug of her shoulders as she eyed him curiously. “Well, are you taking the room?”

“I am. Must I pay a deposit?”

“You certainly must.”

“I’ll bring my things in an hour or two.”

“Very well. I’m glad to have a lodger like you—you seem a cheery sort.”

“Not particularly,” said Ilya with a little laugh.

He went out with a smile on his lips and a pleasant feeling inside him. He was pleased both by the room with its blue wallpaper, and by the spirited little lady who was the mistress. But the thing that pleased him most was that he was to live in a flat belonging to a policeman. He found this amusing, and audacious.

He had decided to go and see Yakov, and so he hailed an izvozhik, climbed in, and gave himself up to a consideration of what he was to do with the money now: where was he to hide it?

On reaching the hospital he was told that Yakov had just been given a bath and was asleep. Ilya lingered by a window in the corridor trying to make up his mind whether he

should go home or wait until his friend woke up. Patients in bedroom-slippers and yellow bath-robcs shuffled up and down the corridor, casting sluggish looks at him as they went past. Moans coming from a distant room mingled with their hushed voices, and the sounds echoed hollowly down the long tube of the corridor. It was as if an invisible being were uttering heart-rending sighs as it flew soundlessly through the odoriferous air. Ilya felt a sudden urge to flee from the confinement of these yellow walls, but just then one of the patients came up to him, and, holding out his hand, said quietly:

“Hullo.”

Ilya looked up and gave a start of astonishment.

“Pavel! You here too?”

“Why, who else is?” said Pavel quickly.

There was a grey tinge to his face and he blinked uneasily. Ilya told him briefly what had happened to Yakov and concluded by saying:

“But how you’ve changed!”

Pavel drew in a deep breath and his lips quivered.

“I’ve changed all right,” he said in a hoarse whisper, his head hanging as if he were guilty of some crime.

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Ilya sympathetically.

“Humph! As if you couldn’t guess.” Pavel darted a quick look at his friend and hung his head again.



"Caught something?"

"Of course."

"Surely not from Vera?"

"Who else?" said Pavel morosely.

Ilya shook his head. "Some day I'll catch it too," he said.

"I thought you'd turn up your nose at me," Pavel said with a grateful look. "I was out here taking an airing, and all of a sudden I saw you. I was ashamed. Turned away. Went past without speaking."

"Very clever of you," said Ilya ironically.

"How could I tell? A filthy sickness. Been here almost two weeks. Bored stiff, and tortured to death. The nights are the worst—like being fried on a griddle. And the hours drag on and on—no end to them. As if I was being sucked down into a bog and nobody to call to for help."

He spoke almost in a whisper, the muscles of his face twitched, his fingers kept crimping the edge of his bath-robe.

"Where's Vera?" asked Ilya.

"Who knows?" said Pavel with a wry smile.

"Doesn't she come to see you?"

"Came once. I put her out. Can't stand the sight of her," he muttered viciously.

Ilya glanced at his twisted face and said in a tone of reproach:

"That's nonsense. You've got to be fair yourself if you expect others to be. Why do you blame her?"

“Then who?” whispered Pavel vehemently. “Who, I ask you? I lie awake nights trying to decide who’s to blame for making such a mess of my life. For letting me fall in love with Vera. I loved her so! No star ever shone so bright as my love for her.”

Pavel’s eyes were red and two big tears rolled down his cheeks. He whisked them off with the sleeve of his robe.

“Stuff!” said Ilya impatiently, feeling more sorry for Vera than for Pavel. “One drink, and you feel fine: a hero! Ten drinks and you feel sick: a martyr! But what about her? She caught it too, didn’t she?”

“Yes. Do you think I don’t feel sorry for her?” said Pavel in a trembling voice. “When I put her out she cried. So softly and bitterly! I couldn’t bear it. I wanted to cry too, but there was a load of bricks on my heart. Afterwards I fell to thinking. Ah, Ilya, there’s no life for the likes of us in this world!”

“There does seem to be something wrong somewhere,” acquiesced Ilya with an odd little smile. “All we get is the rubs. Yakov’s father makes life miserable for him; Masha got married off to a filthy old man; here are you—” Suddenly he gave a quiet little laugh and lowered his voice. “I’m the only one that has any luck. I have only to wish for something, and—presto! There it is.”

“You oughtn’t to say such a thing,” said Pavel, studying his face. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“Funny? Not me. It’s somebody else who’s trying to be funny. Playing jokes on all of us. As I see it, there’s not a sniff of justice to be had in this world.”

“That’s the way I see it, too,” said Pavel softly, but with his whole heart. The two red spots blazed on his cheeks again and the old fire came into his eyes.

There they stood, the two boys, leaning against the wall in a shadowy corner of the corridor, talking fervently, eagerly, snatching at the thoughts that flew off each other’s tongues. From the distance came long-drawn moans that were like the vibrating of a string touched by an unseen hand, like the despondent cries of a string that knew there was no compassionate heart to assuage the pain of its quivering. Pavel writhed under a consciousness of the injuries dealt him by the heavy hand of fate; like the string, his whole being was painfully aquiver, and in his excitement he poured incoherent grievances into his friend’s ear. And his words struck sparks in Ilya’s heart that set fire to the black tinder of doubts and perplexities which were its constant burden. And it seemed to him that his bewilderment was being supplanted by something else, which would presently illuminate the darkness of his soul and bring him peace for ever.

“Why is it that if a man’s got money he’s sure to be respected, and if he’s got learning he’s sure to be right?” whispered Pavel, standing close to Ilya, heart to heart.

And as he spoke he cast furtive little glances about him, as if he sensed the presence of the enemy who had made havoc of his life.

“Who can understand the things we say?” cried Ilya scornfully.

“True. Who have we to talk to?”

Pavel said nothing more; Ilya stood gazing pensively into the depths of the corridor; and in the silence the sound of moaning grew more distinct. Vast must have been the breast uttering those moans, and great its pain.

“Are you still living with Olimpiada?” Pavel asked Ilya at last.

“Yes,” said Ilya with a little laugh; then, dropping his voice, “Yakov reads so much he doesn’t believe in God any more.”

Pavel glanced up at him.

“He doesn’t?” he said noncommittally.

“He found a certain book.... But how do you feel about it?”

“Me?” mused Pavel. “I don’t know. I don’t go to church.”

“I’ve thought about it a lot. If there’s a God, I don’t see how He could stand for what goes on.”

Again they launched into a whispered discussion that absorbed them until they were interrupted by one of the hospital attendants.

“What do you mean by hiding away here?” he said to Ilya severely.

“I’m not hiding,” said Ilya.

“Can’t you see that all the other visitors have gone?”

“Oh. Sorry. Well, good-bye, Pavel. Go in and see Yakov.”

“Be off with you!” cried the attendant.

“Come back soon!” called Pavel.

Once outside, Ilya reflected on the fate of his two friends. Certainly he was more fortunate than they, but the realization brought him no satisfaction. He gave a bitter little laugh and glanced anxiously about him.

He lived quietly in his new lodgings and took an interest in the couple from whom he hired the room. Her name was Tatyana Vlasyevna. A cheery, chatty soul, she had told him all about their life before two days had passed.

While Ilya was having tea in his room in the morning, she would bustle about the kitchen in an apron with her sleeves rolled up to the elbow, glancing at him through the doorway from time to time. One morning she said:

“We may not be rich, my husband and I, but we’re educated. I studied in the grammar school and he in the Cadet Corps, though he never finished it. But we want to get rich, and we will, you’ll see. We’re lucky not to have any children—they’re such an expense. I do my

own cooking and shopping, and as for the dirty work—I hire a girl to do that for a ruble and a half a month and don't feed her. Can you guess how much that saves us?" And she stood in the doorway counting on her fingers and tossing back her curls, "I'd have to pay a cook three rubles a month; and feed her—seven: that makes ten. She'd steal at least three rubles' worth a month: thirteen. The room she'd live in I hire out to you: eighteen. Just see how much a cook would cost us! Besides that I buy everything wholesale: butter by the pood, flour by the sack, sugar by the head. That means a saving of at least twelve rubles, and that makes thirty. If I had a job—clerking at the police-station or in the telegraph office—I'd pay all I earned to the cook. As it is, I don't cost my husband a kopek and I'm proud of it. That's the way to live, young man! Take lessons from me!"

She glanced roguishly at him with her bright eyes, and he smiled back at her. He liked and respected her. When he woke up in the morning she was busy in the kitchen with her helper—a taciturn, pock-marked girl in her teens who gazed at everything with frightened no-colour eyes. When he came home in the evening, Tatyana Vlashevna opened the door for him with a smile, and she always looked neat and attractive and wore a pleasant scent. When her husband was at home he played the guitar and she sang in a high clear voice, or else the two

of them played cards—a game of “Dunce” with kisses as forfeit. Ilya could hear everything from his room: the strumming of strings—now gay, now sentimental; the slapping down of cards; the smacking of lips. The couple lived in two rooms—a bedroom and a combined dining-sitting-room next to Ilya’s in which they spent their evenings. Every morning this room was full of bird voices; a titmouse sang joyously; a siskin and a goldfinch chirped back and forth as if having an altercation; a bullfinch muttered like a staid old man; occasionally the quiet, pensive song of the linnnet would join these more raucous voices.

Tatyana’s husband, Kirik Nikodimovich Avtonomov, was twenty-six years old. He was tall and stout and had a big nose and discoloured teeth. His good-natured face was covered with pimples and his colourless eyes gazed at all things with bland serenity. Close-cropped fair hair stood up like a brush on his head. He cut a rather comic figure, bulky and unwieldy as he was. The first time he met Ilya he said to him:

“Do you like song-birds?”

“Yes.”

“Do you catch them?”

“No,” said Ilya, glancing at him in some surprise.

Kirik Nikodimovich wrinkled his nose and considered a second before he put the next question.

"Have you ever caught them?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Then you don't really like them," he said with a supercilious smile. "I used to catch them; I was even expelled from the corps for it. And I'd catch them to this day if I wasn't afraid of getting into trouble with my chief, because while it's commendable to like song-birds, it's beneath the dignity of a man in my position to catch them. But if I was you, I'd catch siskins for sure. Such gay little birdies! It's the siskins that are called 'God's little creatures.'"

As he talked he fixed Ilya with a dreamy stare that made the boy squirm. He felt that the policeman was speaking symbolically of the catching of birds, that he was hinting at something. But one look at the man's watery eyes reassured him, and so, deciding that he was without guile, Ilya smiled politely and said nothing. His modest reticence and grave mien apparently pleased Kirik Nikodimovich, for he smiled back and said:

"Come and have tea with us this evening. Don't be shy—we'll play a game of 'Dunce.' We don't often invite guests. It's pleasant to have company but it's unpleasant to feed them—too expensive."

The more Ilya saw of the well-ordered life of this



couple, the better he liked them. Their surroundings were clean and substantial, their life was calm and peaceful, and they seemed to love each other. Tatyana resembled a gay little titmouse; Kirik—a portly bullfinch. And their home was as cosy as a bird's nest. As Ilya sat in his room of an evening listening to the talk on the other side of the wall, he would think to himself: That's how a person ought to live! And with a sigh of envy, he would long for the day when he would have his own shop and a clean little room in which he would keep song-birds and live alone, as quietly and peacefully as in a dream. In the next room Tatyana Vlasyevna would be telling her husband what she had bought at the market, how much she had spent and how much she had saved, and her husband would laugh quietly and say:

“What a smart little lady you are, eh? Here, give me a kiss.”

In his turn he would tell her of the events of the day, of the documents he had drawn up, and what the Chief of Police or another of his superiors had said to him. They spoke of his chances of being promoted and deliberated as to whether or not they should change their flat if he were.

Suddenly, as he listened, Ilya would be seized by an inexplicable fit of depression. At such moments he found the little blue room suffocating and would gaze about

him as if in search of the cause of his dejection. When he could stand it no longer he would get up and go out—sometimes to see Olimpiada, sometimes just to roam the streets.

Olimpiada had become more jealous and exacting and their quarrels were more frequent. Never did she refer to the murder of Poluektov during a rupture, but in their amicable moments she urged him to forget it. Her restraint in this matter surprised Ilya, and once he said to her:

“Why don’t you ever throw the old man in my teeth when we quarrel, Olimpiada?”

“Because he has nothing to do with you and me,” she replied. “If they haven’t caught you, that means the old man got what was coming to him. You had no reason for killing him—you said so yourself. You were just the instrument by which he was punished.”

Ilya gave a dubious laugh.

“What’s the matter?” asked Olimpiada.

“Nothing. I was just thinking that if a person’s got any brains, he can find an excuse for anything. And pick holes in anything.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Olimpiada with a shake of her head.

“Why don’t you?” said Ilya, with a sigh and a shrug of his shoulders. “It’s all very simple. All I ask for is

something that's firm as a rock; something that the cleverest person in the world can't pick holes in or find excuses for. Show me that thing. But you can't. There is no such thing."

After one of their quarrels Ilya did not go to see her for four days, and at the end of this time he got a letter from her saying:

"Good-bye, beloved Ilya, good-bye for ever, we'll never see each other again. Don't look for me because you won't find me. I'm leaving this accursed town on the next boat. My soul's been crippled for life in this place. I'm going far away and I'll never return. Don't think about me and don't expect me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the good things you've done for me, and I'll forget the bad. You have a right to know that I'm not going away alone—I'm going with young Ananin who has been after me for a long time and swears his life is ruined if I won't live with him. Well, I've agreed; it's all the same to me. We're going to a town on the sea-coast where the Ananins have fisheries. He's a simple soul and even wants to marry me, the fool. Good-bye. It's as if I had only seen you in a dream and waked up to find you gone. If you only knew how my heart was aching! I kiss you again and again, my only one. Don't be too proud of yourself—

we're all poor miserable creatures. Your Olimpiada has become very meek of late, and it's as if she was putting her head under the axe, so bitterly does her poor broken heart cry out."

"Olimpiada Shlikova."

"I've sent you a little parcel by post—a ring to remember me by. Please wear it. O. S."

When Ilya finished reading the letter he bit his lip till the tears sprang to his eyes. He read it again and again, and each time with greater satisfaction—it was painful, yet flattering, to read those simple words written in a large uneven hand. Never before had he stopped to consider how much she loved him, but now he saw that she loved him very deeply, and as he read her letter he was filled with pride and gratification. But this gratification was shadowed by the consciousness that he had lost someone very dear to him, and he wondered sadly to whom he could now turn for comfort in his moments of despair. Her image stood out vividly in his mind. As he recalled her fierce caresses, her sensible observations, and her biting humour, his heart was gnawed by sorrow and regret. He stood by the window frowning out into the garden where the elderberry bushes were stirring softly in the twilight and willow wands were swaying

in the breeze. From the other side of the wall came the melancholy strumming of the guitar, and Tatyana Vlasyevna's high voice singing:

*Pearls and amber  
Don't tempt me-e-e . . .*

Ilya clutched the letter in his hand. He felt that he had wronged Olimpiada, and pity for her filled his breast and a lump rose in his throat. The song went on:

*I want but my ring  
From the bottom of the se-e-ea.*

The policeman gave a loud laugh and his wife, laughing too, ran out into the kitchen. Her laughter died away the moment she got there. Ilya sensed her proximity but did not turn round, though he knew she had opened the door. He stood there motionless, absorbed in his thoughts, wrapped in his solitude. The boughs of the trees were swaying out in the garden and he fancied he had been caught up off the earth and was floating away in the cold twilight.

"Ilya Yakovlevich, will you have tea?" called his landlady.

"No, thanks."

There came a mighty peal of the church bell; the sound struck forcefully against the window-pane, making the glass ring. Ilya crossed himself and remembered that he had not been to church for a long time. He was glad of this opportunity to get away.

"I'm going to mass," he said, turning round to face the door. Tatyana was standing with her hands on the door-jamb gazing at him curiously. Ilya winced and said, as if in apology:

"I haven't been to church for a long time."

"Very well. I'll have the samovar ready at nine o'clock."

On his way to church Ilya thought about young Ananin. He was acquainted with him. Ananin was a rich merchant, the youngest member of the "Ananin Brothers" fishing firm, a thin, fair-haired lad with a pale face and blue eyes. He had only recently moved to this town and had instantly won a reputation for riotous living. That, thought Ilya bitterly, is how some people live—like hawks: searching the countryside before they've hardly got wings, and before you know it they've stolen our doves.

He entered the church in the resentful mood engendered by his thoughts and took up his stand in the dark corner where the ladder for lighting the candelabras was kept.

The choir on the left was singing "Merciful Father." One of the boys was carrying the main tune in a shrill voice that jarred upon the ear and was always either

ahead or behind the gruff chanting of the deacon. The dissonance got on Ilya's nerves and made him itch to tweak the youngster's ear. The corner was overheated by the stove and smelt of burnt cloth. An old woman in a voluminous cloak came up to him and said peevishly: "This isn't your place, young man."

Ilya looked at the marten tails decorating the collar of her handsome cloak and moved away without a word, thinking to himself: They put you in your place even in church.

This was the first time Ilya had been to church since the murder of Poluektov, and the sudden remembrance made him shudder.

"Forgive me, Oh Lord," he murmured, crossing himself.

Sweetly sonorous was the singing of the choir. The voices of the boy sopranos, clearly enunciating the words of the psalm, rang out in the dome overhead, dainty as the chiming of little bells. The alto voices vibrated like taut strings. Against the background of their uninterrupted flow of sound the sopranos took on the glitter of sunlight on water. The dark and heavy notes of the basses hung solemnly in the air in support of the boys' voices, and from time to time the fine strong notes of the tenors rose above all the others, only to be eclipsed by a glistening flock of youthful voices soaring up into the shadowy

dome from where the Almighty, in snowy robes, gazed pensively down upon the worshippers, His hands outstretched in benediction. Now the voices of the choir fused into a multiple sound that was like a cloud at the sunset hour, when it burns with a glory of rose and crimson and purple, dissolving at last in the ecstasy born of its beauty.

The singing died away. Ilya drew in a deep breath and his heart was lighter. Gone was the resentment he had brought into the temple, nor did his mind dwell any longer on his crime. The singing had brought relief to his soul and purified it. He was puzzled by and distrustful of this unexpected sense of well-being, yet when he searched his heart he found no repentance there.

Suddenly, like the prick of a needle, came the thought: What if my landlady should rummage about my room in my absence and find the money?

In a trice he was out of the church, had hailed an izvozchik, and was riding home. On the way his mind elaborated his fears, working him up to a high pitch of excitement. What if she does find it? he said to himself. They won't report me. They'll just keep the money for themselves.

The idea that they might keep the money without reporting him only excited him the more. He resolved that in such a contingency he would instantly go to police



headquarters and confess. Why should he go on living in torture and suspense while others lived clean, comfortable, and unperturbed lives on the money he had bought at the price of so grievous a sin? The thought roused him to cold fury. On reaching the house he gave the bell a jerk and stood with set lips and clenched fists waiting for the door to be opened.

It was opened by Tatyana Vlashevna.

"Oh, what a jerk you gave the bell! What's the matter? Has something happened?" she cried in alarm on seeing his face.

He pushed her aside without a word and went into his room, but one glance was enough to assure him his fears had been in vain. The money was hidden on top of the window behind the frame, and he had stuck a tiny feather to the frame so that a hand that reached up for the money would be sure to sweep away the feather. But there it was, a white blur against the brown paint.

"Are you ill?" said his landlady, coming to the door of his room.

"I'm not feeling very well. I'm sorry—I'm afraid I pushed you as I came in."

"Oh, that. Wait, how much do you owe the izvozchik?"

"If you'd be so kind. . . ."

She ran out, and the minute she was gone Ilya jumped up on a chair, took the money, thrust it into his pocket,

and gave a sigh of relief. He was ashamed of his fears, and the feather struck him as being ridiculous, as did his behaviour. I got panicky, he thought, inwardly laughing at himself. Presently Tatyana Vlasyevna was standing in the doorway again.

"The izvozchik took twenty kopeks," she said quickly. "What happened? Did you feel faint?"

"A little. I was standing in church, and all of a sudden—"

"Lie down," she said, coming into the room. "Lie down, don't mind me. And I'll sit here beside you. I'm all alone, my husband is on duty at the club."

Ilya sat down on the bed and she took the only chair in the room.

"Putting you to all this bother," he said with an embarrassed smile.

"It's nothing," she said, studying his face with undisguised curiosity. There was a pause. Ilya did not know what to say to her, and as she watched him she suddenly gave an odd little smile.

"What is it?" asked Ilya, dropping his eyes.

"Shall I tell you?" she said archly.

"Do."

"You don't know how to pretend."

Ilya started and glanced at her in alarm.

"You really don't. Ill! You're not ill at all, it's just

that you got an unpleasant letter. I saw it—yes I did.”

“You’re right,” said Ilya softly, warily.

A rustle of boughs came from the garden. Tatyana Vlashevna looked sharply out of the window, then turned back to Ilya.

“It’s just the wind, or a bird. Listen, my dear lodger, would you like to hear a word from the wise? I may be young, but I’m not stupid.”

“I’d be glad to,” said Ilya, looking up at her with interest.

“Tear up that letter and throw it away,” she said in a tone of authority. “If she turned you down, she behaved like a good little girl. You’re too young to get married; you haven’t had a good start in life yet, and until you do you mustn’t get married. You’re a strong lad, you can work hard; and you’re good-looking—all the girls will fall for you. But don’t you fall for them. Work, sell your wares, save your money, try to get into some promising branch of business, open your own shop, and when things are going well, get married. Not before. You’re sure to be successful. You don’t drink, you’re modest, you have nobody dependent on you.”

Ilya listened with bowed head, and as he listened he smiled inwardly. He wanted to laugh out loud, with gay abandon.

“There’s no reason why you should hang your head,” went on Tatyana Vlasyevna in the tone of one who has had much experience of this world. “It will all pass. Love is a disease that is easily cured. Before I got married I was in love three times, and each time so hard I was ready to drown myself. But it passed. And when I saw it was time for me to make a sensible marriage, I got married without any love at all. And then I fell in love—with my husband. It does happen sometimes, you know—that a woman falls in love with her husband.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ilya, opening wide his eyes. Tatyana Vlasyevna burst out laughing.

“I was just joking. But seriously: a woman can marry without loving her husband and then fall in love with him.”

As she chattered on, she made eyes at Ilya. And as he listened—listened attentively, with interest and respect—he ran his eyes over her delicate, well-formed body. How small and willowy she was, how clever, how reliable! That, he thought, is a wife you could not go wrong with. It was pleasant to be sitting here with her, a cultivated woman, a proper wife and not one of your kept women, a clean, fragile little thing, quite upper-classish, yet with no tendency to show off in front of a simple person like him; indeed, she never allowed herself so much as a suggestion of familiarity with him. He felt grateful to her

for this, and when she got up to go, he, too, rose to his feet and bowed.

"Thank you for your kindness," he said. "Your talk has done me a lot of good."

"Has it really?" and she gave a quiet little laugh. Her cheeks flushed and for a few seconds her eyes clung to Ilya's.

"Well, good-bye," she said with special emphasis, then turned and went out with the light step of a very young girl.

With every day Ilya came to like the Avtonomovs better. He had seen enough of policemen to make him dislike them heartily, but Kirik was kind-hearted, if none too bright, and Ilya found him to be more like a working-man than a policeman. He was the body, his wife the soul, of their household. His word held no weight at home and he spent little time there. Tatyana Vlasyevna became more unceremonious in her relations with Ilya. She asked him to chop the wood, fetch the water, and empty the slop-bucket. He gladly performed all these tasks, and before he knew it they were accepted as his due. Very soon his landlady had the pock-marked serving-girl come only once a week, on Saturdays.

Occasionally the Avtonomovs did have guests. Among them was the Assistant Chief of Police, a man named

Korsakov, who was very thin and had long moustaches. He wore dark spectacles, smoked fat cigarettes, and had such an aversion for izvozchiks that he could not speak of them without losing his temper.

"Nobody is the menace to law and order that the izvozchiks are," he would say. "You can always get pedestrians to respect the law, but not them, the swine! All that's needed to bring order into pedestrian traffic is to post a rule saying those going down the street are to keep to the right, those coming up are to keep to the left. But there's no rule you can get an izvozchik to follow, an izvozchik's a . . . a . . . the devil only knows what an izvozchik is!"

He would rail at izvozchiks all evening long; in fact, Ilya never heard him speak on any other subject.

Another one of the guests was Grizlov, superintendent of an orphanage, a taciturn man with a black beard. He loved to sing "Upon the sea, the deep blue sea," in a deep bass voice. His wife, a tall stout woman with big teeth, always ate up all the sweets, which made Tatyana Vlashevna very angry.

"She does it to spite me," she would say when the guests had gone.

Then there was Alexandra Viktorovna Travkina and her husband. She was tall and thin and red-haired, and she had a peculiar way of blowing her nose that sounded

like the ripping of rags. Her husband always spoke in a whisper because he had something wrong with his throat. But he spoke interminably, giving the impression that he was constantly munching on dry straw. He was well-to-do, held some position in the Excise Office, and was on the Board of Directors of a certain charitable organization. Both he and his wife were for ever decrying the poor, accusing them of simulation, of greed, and of lack of respect for those who tried to do them good.

From where he sat in his own room, Ilya would listen attentively to their observations on life. What he heard perplexed him. These people seemed to know everything and to have solved all problems, and they had nothing but scorn for those whose lives did not conform to their standards.

Sometimes the Avtonomovs would invite Ilya to have tea with them in the evening. On such occasions Tatyana Vlashevna would laugh and make jokes and her husband would say how nice it would be if he got rich all of a sudden so that he could buy himself a house.

"I'd raise chickens," he said, gazing dreamily through half-closed eyes. "All kinds of chickens: red ones, and black ones, and speckled ones. And turkeys, too. And peacocks. Damn it all, what could be better than to sit at the window in a dressing-gown with a cigarette between your teeth watching your own peacock strut up and

down the lawn with its tail spread out like a parasol—strut like the Chief of Police, cooing to itself: brrru, brrru, brrru!”

Tatyana Vlashevna gave a little giggle.

“And I,” she said, with a glance at Ilya, “would go off on holidays to the Crimea and the Caucasus, and in the winter time I’d sit on committees for the Relief of the Poor.” She glanced again at Ilya. “And I’d make myself a black woollen dress, very plain and severe, and the only ornaments I’d wear would be a ruby brooch and pearl earrings. I read a poem in the *Niva* that said the blood and tears of the poor are turned into rubies and pearls in heaven.” With a little sigh she concluded, “Rubies go beautifully with black hair.”

Ilya smiled and said nothing. The room was warm and clean, and filled with the aroma of tea and something else quite as pleasant. The birds were all asleep, curled up into fluffy little balls; bright pictures hung on the walls; a stand between the two windows was filled with fancy medicine boxes, china chickens, and coloured Easter-eggs made of sugar and glass. Ilya found all this attractive, evocative of a quiet, soothing sort of melancholy.

But at times, particularly after an unsuccessful day, this melancholy became vexation. The chickens, the boxes, and the eggs irritated him to such a point that he would gladly have thrown them all on the floor and



stamped on them. In such a mood he would sit silently staring out of the window, afraid to speak lest he injure the feelings of these kind people. Once when he was playing cards with them he looked Kirik hard in the eye and said:

“Have they found the person who throttled the money-lender on Dvoryanskaya Street, Kirik Nikodimovich?”

No sooner were the words out, than he experienced a tickling sensation in his throat.

“You mean Poluektov?” said the policeman absently as he studied his cards; then, playfully:

“Po-lu-ek-tov-vov-vov? . . . No, they haven't found Po-lu-ek-tov-vov-vov . . . that is, not Poluektov, but the one who . . . hm. I haven't looked for him. What do I care? It's not him I need—it's the queen of spades. Spades, spades, spades. Let's see: you, Tatyana, put on a three, then the queen of clubs, the queen of diamonds, and . . . what else?”

“The seven of diamonds. Hurry up and make up your mind.”

“Did away with a man just like that,” said Ilya with a little laugh.

But the policeman was too absorbed in his cards to pay any attention to him.

“Just like that,” repeated Kirik. “Bumped off your Po-lu-ek-tov-vov-vov.”

"Stop whoofing, Kirik," said his wife. "You're holding up the game."

"It must have been a very slick fellow who killed him," persisted Ilya. The indifference with which his observations were received aggravated his desire to talk about the murder.

"Slick?" drawled the policeman. "Not him. I'm the slick one. Here!"

And he slapped down a card that left Ilya the Dunce. Kirik and his wife burst out laughing, and this only irritated Ilya the more.

"It takes a lot of courage to murder a man on the main street of the town in broad daylight," he said as he dealt out a new hand.

"Not courage, but luck," corrected Tatyana Vlas-yevna.

Ilya glanced at her, then at her husband, and gave a little snort.

"Do you call murder luck?" he said.

"Not the murder, but the getting away with it."

"You've pushed that deuced ace of diamonds off on me again," said the policeman.

"I'm the one who ought to have got it,"\* said Ilya gravely.

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\* The blouses worn by prisoners had a mark in the shape of a diamond sewn to the back.—*Tr.*

"Kill a money-lender and you'll get it," said Tatyana Vlashevna as she studied her hand.

"Kill a money-lender and you'll get a thump; for the present take a trump," said Kirik with a guffaw as he trumped Ilya's card.

Ilya looked up again, and the sight of their delighted faces killed his desire to talk about the murder.

The longer he lived with these people, separated by the thinnest of walls from their clean, untroubled life, the more frequent were his fits of depression. Again he was haunted by thoughts of life's incongruities, and of God, who, knowing all things, refrains from punishing the wicked. What could He be waiting for? In his loneliness and depression Ilya took to reading again. His landlady had some copies of the *Niva* and the *Picturesque Reporter* and a few dog-eared books.

Now, as in childhood, Ilya was interested only in books that described a sort of life quite different from that he was familiar with. He found stories of actuality, stories describing the daily lives of ordinary people, dull and untrue. At times they amused him, but more often he felt that such stories were written by sly authors whose purpose was to embellish the hard and hideous life Ilya knew so well. Yes, he knew it well, but he was getting to know it even better. Every day that he walked up and down the streets supplied him with new material to

feed his resentment. He sometimes went to the hospital to share with Pavel his latest impressions.

“Justice! Today I seen some carpenters and plasterers walking down the pavement. Along comes a policeman and shouts, ‘Hey, you pigs! Get off the pavement! Get down with the horses before you spoil the clothes of decent folk!’ And he shoos them off.”

Pavel, keenly responsive, added coals to the fire. He was as unhappy in hospital as if in prison. His eyes glowed with anger and misery, the flesh of his body melted away. He did not like Yakov Filimonov, whom he considered crazy.

But Yakov, who, it turned out, had consumption, had never been so happy as in hospital. He made friends with the man who lay on the cot next to him, a church sexton who had had his leg amputated. The sexton was short and fat, with an enormous bald head and a black beard covering his entire chest. His eyebrows were as bushy as moustaches and he was always moving them up and down. He had a gruff voice that seemed to come from his very bowels. Every time Ilya came to the hospital he found Yakov sitting on the sexton’s cot. The man would be lying silently working his eyebrows while Yakov read to him in a low voice from a Bible as short and fat as the sexton himself.

“For in a night Ar of Moab is laid waste, and brought

to nought: for in a night Kir of Moab is laid waste, and brought to nought.””

Yakov's voice had become so weak it sounded like the rasping of a saw on wood. As he read he lifted his left hand as if inviting the other patients to listen to the prophecy of Isaiah. A fearsome look was lent to his sallow face by his enormous dreamy eyes. On seeing Ilya he dropped the book and anxiously asked his friend the same old question:

“Have you seen Masha?”

Ilya had not.

“Oh, Lordy, Lordy,” he moaned sorrowfully. “Like in a fairy-tale—gone all of a sudden, whisked away by a wicked witch.”

“Has your father been to see you?”

A sudden change came over Yakov's face and he blinked his eyes apprehensively:

“Yes. He told me I'd been lolling here long enough, it was time I came home. I begged the doctor not to let me go. It's so nice here—so quiet and peaceful. Here, this is Nikita Yegorovich—he and I read the Bible together. He's been reading it for seven years—knows everything by heart and can tell you what all the prophecies mean. When I get well I'm going to leave my father and go and live with Nikita Yegorovich. I'll help him clean the church and I'll sing in the choir.”

Slowly the sexton raised his eyebrows, giving a glimpse of round dark eyes that moved with effort in their deep sockets. They came to rest on Ilya's face in a dull immobile gaze.

"What a wonderful book it is, the Bible!" cried Yakov, fighting down a cough. "And we found that place—remember what the wise man said who came to the pub: 'The tabernacles of robbers prosper.' It's here. I found it. And there's even worse ones."

Closing his eyes, his left hand raised, he recited in a solemn voice:

"'How oft is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out: That their calamity cometh upon them?' Hear that? And: 'Ye say, God layeth up his iniquity for his children. Let him recompense it unto himself, that he may know it.'"

"Are you sure that's what it says?" asked Ilya dubiously.

"The very words."

"It seems to me that's . . . that's not right. It's sinful," said Ilya.

The sexton brought his eyebrows down over his eyes and his beard stirred.

"The daring deeds of one who seeks the truth are never sinful," he said in a hollow voice, "for they are done at the instigation of the Most High."

Ilya gave a start. The sexton drew in a deep breath and proceeded in the same slow, careful tone:

“The truth begs to be sought for, for the truth is God. And it has been said, ‘Great is the honour of serving the Lord.’”

The sexton’s hairy face inspired Ilya with respect and humility: there was something sternly significant in that face.

Now the brows shot up, the eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and the beard stirred again.

“Read to him from the tenth chapter of Job, Yakov,” he said.

Without a word Yakov turned over the pages and began to read in a soft, trembling voice:

“‘My soul is weary of my life; I will give free course to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say unto God, do not condemn me; shew me wherefore thou contendest with me. Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress, that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands? . . .’”

Ilya strained forward to get a glimpse of the page.

“Don’t you believe it?” said Yakov. “What a funny one you are!”

“Not funny, but cowardly,” said the sexton serenely. With a great effort he shifted his eyes from the ceiling to Ilya’s face and enunciated heavily, as if trying to crush Ilya with his words, “There are sayings harder to take than those you have heard. Take verse three, chapter

twenty-two: there it says straight out, 'Is it any pleasure to the Almighty, that thou art righteous? Or is it gain to him, that thou makest thy ways perfect?' It takes a lot of understanding to keep a man from giving the wrong meaning to such sayings."

"Do you understand them?" asked Ilya diffidently.

"Him?" cried Yakov. "Why, Nikita Yegorovich understands everything!"

But the sexton said, even more softly:

"It's too late for me to try to understand that. It's death I've got to understand now. They've cut off one leg, but the swelling's gone higher. And the other's swelling up. And my chest, too. I'm going to die soon." His eyes pressed upon Ilya's face as he went on slowly and calmly, "And I have no wish to die, because mine has been a hard life, with no joy in it—nothing but pain and humiliation. In my youth I lived like Yakov—under my father's heel. He was a drunken sot and a beast. Three times he split my head open and once he scalded my legs with boiling water. I had no mother: she died in giving me birth. I got married. My wife didn't love me—she was forced to marry me. She hung herself on the third day after our wedding. I had a brother-in-law. He robbed me. My sister said I drove my wife to hang herself. And everybody else said the same thing, though they knew very well I never touched her and she died the virgin



she was when I took her. I lived nine years after that. It's a dreadful thing to live all by yourself. I kept waiting for some joy to come to me. And here I am—on my deathbed. And that's my whole story." He closed his eyes and was silent for a while. Then he said, "What have I lived for?"

Cold fear gripped Ilya's heart as he listened to him. Yakov's face flushed and tears glistened in his eyes.

"What have I lived for, I ask you? That's what I ask myself, day after day as I lie here. What have I lived for?"

He stopped speaking. His voice broke off as suddenly as the babbling of a stream that dips underground.

A minute later he opened his eyes and resumed:

"For to him that is joined with all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion." Again his beard stirred. "In that same Ecclesiastes it's written: 'In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God hath even made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should not find out anything that shall be after him.'"

But Ilya had had enough. He got up quietly, shook Yakov's hand, and bowed to the sexton. Quite unwittingly he made him the low bow with which one takes leave of the dead.

A new weight had been added to his heart's burden when he left the hospital. It would be a long time before

he forgot this man's sombre visage. His meeting with him had added one more name to the long list of those whom life had cheated. And he remembered well the man's words and turned them over in his mind, viewing them from all sides in the effort to plumb their meaning. They disturbed him, for they touched those depths of his soul wherein his faith in the justice of God was harboured.

He felt that at some time, quite imperceptibly, this faith in the justice of God had been shaken. It was no longer the firm thing it had once been. Something had eaten into it, as rust eats into iron. Two forces warred within him—two forces as incompatible as fire and water. And he experienced a new upsurge of resentment against his past, against his fellowmen, and against a world whose order he could not possibly accept.

Meanwhile the Avtonomovs became more fond of him than ever. Once Kirik clapped him patronizingly on the shoulder and said jovially:

“You're wasting your time, young man. A modest, serious fellow like you should be doing something bigger. There's no reason why a man should be an ordinary policeman if he's got the brains to be a Chief of Police.”

Tatyana Vlashevna began to question him in detail about his business—how much he sold and how much clear profit he made a month. He willingly told her

everything, for with every day he felt greater respect for this woman, who could make life so clean and attractive with so little to go on.

One evening as he was gazing dejectedly out into the dark garden, filled with thoughts of Olimpiada, Tatyana Vlasyevna came into the kitchen and invited him to have tea with them. He went reluctantly: he was sorry to have his thoughts disturbed and he did not feel like talking. Glum and silent, he sat down at the tea table. His hosts, on the contrary, as one glance at their faces told him, were excited. The samovar purred cosily, one of the birds had waked up and was hopping about its cage, the room smelt of roast onion and eau-de-Cologne. Kirik twisted round in his chair and drummed on the tea tray as he sang:

“Boom, boom, boomity-boom! Boom, boom. . .”

“Ilya Yakovlevich,” said Tatyana Vlasyevna solemnly, “my husband and I have got what we think is a good idea and we want to have a serious talk with you.”

“Ho, ho!” laughed the policeman, rubbing his red hands together briskly. Ilya started and glanced at him in surprise.

“My husband and I,” repeated Kirik with a broad grin; then, winking in the direction of his wife, “A marvellous head she’s got.”

“We’ve saved up a little money, Ilya Yakovlevich.”

“We’ve saved it up. Ho, ho! Bless your heart!”

"Stop it!" said Tatyana Vlasyevna severely, and she put on a stern look that gave sharpness to her features.

"We've saved up about a thousand rubles," she said in a low voice, leaning towards Ilya and probing his eyes with her own sharp ones. "It's in the bank and brings us in four per cent interest."

"And that's not enough," cried Kirik, bringing his hand down on the table. "We want more."

His wife silenced him with a look.

"It's quite enough for us, of course, but we should like to help you get a start in life." She made the digression of paying Ilya a few compliments before she went on, "You once said a haberdashery could bring in twenty per cent and more on your money, depending on how the business was run. Well, we're willing to lend you our money on a promissory note—to be paid back whenever we call in the note, not otherwise—so that you can open a shop. You'll run the business under my management, and we'll split the profits. You'll insure your wares in my name, and you'll sign one more paper—oh, just a trifling paper, but one required by form. Think it over and tell us whether you agree to this or not."

Ilya rubbed his forehead vigorously as he listened to her high business-like voice. Once or twice as she spoke he glanced into the corner where the gilt on the icons glittered between two lighted candles. He felt less surprise

than discomfort, almost fear. This proposition, which meant the fulfilment of his old dream, stunned him. But it delighted him, too, and with a smile of perplexity he gazed at this little woman and thought to himself: So she turns out to be my Fairy Godmother.

She went on talking to him patronizingly:

“Think it over well; consider it from all sides. Are you willing to undertake such a step? Have you the brains? The ability? And tell us what else you could put into the venture. After all, our money is not enough, is it?”

“I could put another thousand into it,” said Ilya slowly. “My uncle would give it to me. Maybe even more.”

“Hoo-rah!” cried Kirik Avtonomov.

“So you agree?” said Tatyana Vlasyevna.

“I should think he does!” cried the policeman; then, thrusting his hand into his pocket, “And now we’ll celebrate with a bottle of champagne. Champagne, by Jove! Run to the corner, Ilya, and bring us a bottle of champagne! My treat! Ask for the Don brand, at ninety kopeks a bottle. Tell him it’s for me and he’ll let you have it for sixty-five. Run, lad!”

Ilya smiled into the beaming faces of the couple and went out.

Fortune, he thought, has bent me and twisted me, has led me into grievous sin, has broken my heart and mutilated my soul, and now, as if asking forgiveness, is

smiling at me and giving me my chance. Now the way's clear to a clean and decent life, and I'll live alone and find peace for my soul.

His thoughts went round and round in a gay rondo, and for the first time in his life he experienced a sense of security.

He brought back a bottle of genuine champagne for which he had paid seven rubles.

"Oho!" exclaimed Kirik. "That's being swell! That's the right idea!"

Tatyana Vlashevna took a different view of the matter. She shook her head in disapproval, and when she had examined the bottle she said:

"It must have cost all of five rubles. How extravagant!"

Ilya, touched and happy, stood smiling down at her.

"The genuine stuff!" he said with joy. "I've never tasted the genuine stuff. But then, what sort of a life have I had? A rotten life. Dirty, brutal, no room to breathe. Always having my feelings hurt. Do you call that living?" He had touched the sore spot in his soul and could not resist probing it. "I've been searching for something genuine as long as I can remember, but life has pushed me about like a straw on the river—from one side to another, and everything dark and dirty and threatening all around. Nothing to cling to. And then all of a sudden I got washed up on you. For the first time

in my life I saw people living clean and quiet and loving each other." He gave them a bright smile and made a bow. "Thank you for that. You've taken a great weight off my heart, that you have! You've helped me for the rest of my life. Now I'll make my way in the world. Now I know how I'd ought to live."

Tatyana Vlashevna watched him as a cat watches a bird enamoured of its singing. A little green light flashed in her eyes and her lips quivered. Kirik was bent over the bottle which he held between his knees. His neck was red and his ears twitched.

The cork popped, hit the ceiling, fell back on the table; there was a ring of glass as it struck.

Kirik smacked his lips and poured out the wine.

"Drink up!" he commanded.

As Ilya and Tatyana touched glasses, Kirik held his own high over his head and cried:

"Here's to the success of the firm of Tatyana Avtonomova and Ilya Lunyev. Hurrah!"

For several days Ilya and Tatyana Vlashevna discussed plans for their new enterprise. She seemed to be well informed and spoke with the confidence of one who had been running a haberdashery all her life. Ilya smiled as he listened to her, too overwhelmed to say much himself. He was so impatient to launch the business that he agreed

to all her propositions without really understanding them.

It turned out that Tatyana Vlashevna even had her eye on suitable premises. They were just what Ilya had dreamed of: a little shop with a room behind, situated in a respectable neighbourhood. Everything was turning out just right—everything down to the least detail—and Ilya was ecstatic.

In this joyful and energetic mood he went to the hospital to see his friends. He was met by Pavel, who was also in a good mood.

“I’m going home tomorrow,” he announced without bothering to exchange greetings. “I got a letter from Vera. She’s angry with me, the minx.”

His eyes were shining, two red spots were burning on his cheeks, he kept shuffling his feet and waving his hands, unable to contain himself.

“Take care,” admonished Ilya. “See you don’t get caught again!”

“Have no fear of that. The only question is: does mamselle Vera want to get married? If she does, well and good; if she doesn’t, I’ll knife her.” A little shudder passed over him.

“Oh, come off it,” said Ilya. “Waving that knife of yours!”

“I mean it. I’ve had enough. I can’t live without her. She’s done me enough harm. She ought to be sick of it.



I am, at any rate. Tomorrow we'll have it out—one way or the other."

As Ilya looked at him an idea, very clear and simple, flashed into his mind. He reddened and broke into a smile.

"Pavel," he said, "I've had a stroke of luck."

And he recounted briefly what had happened.

"You *are* a lucky devil," said Pavel with a sigh when he finished.

"So lucky I'm almost ashamed to tell you. Honest. I mean it."

"Thank you for that," said Pavel with a little laugh.

"I'm not saying it just to sound pretty," said Ilya softly. "It's the truth—I feel ashamed."

Pavel looked at him for a moment in silence, then dropped his head pensively.

"This," said Ilya, "is what I wanted to say, we shared our hard luck, let's share our good."

"Hm," grunted Pavel. "I've heard that good luck's like a woman—not to be shared."

"Oh, but it is," said Ilya. "You find out what you need to open a plumbing shop—what tools and materials and all the rest—and how much it will cost, and I'll give you the money."

"Wha-at!" exclaimed Pavel, incredulous. Ilya seized his hand impulsively and squeezed it.

"You ass! I will, honest."

But it took a great deal of persuading to convince Pavel he meant it. Pavel merely shook his head and grunted and kept saying, "Such things don't happen." When at last Ilya convinced him, his friend threw his arms about him, and said in a hoarse shaking voice:

"Thanks, pal. You're pulling me out of a hole. But listen: I don't want a plumbing shop—to hell with them, those shops. I've seen enough of them. But you give me the money and I'll take Vera and go away. I'd rather do that. We'll go off to another town and I'll go to work for somebody else."

"Nonsense," said Ilya. "It's better to be your own boss."

"A fine boss I'd make," said Pavel gaily. "Oh, no, bossing is not in my line. You can't dress up a goat to look like a pig."

Ilya did not understand Pavel's attitude, but there was something in it that appealed to him.

"It's true; you do look like a goat—just as skinny," he joked affectionately. "Do you know who you look like? Perfishka, the cobbler. Well, then, come and get some money from me tomorrow to tide you over until you get a job. And now I'm going in to see Yakov. How do you and Yakov get on?"

"I don't know . . . so-so . . . can't hit it off somehow," said Pavel with a smile.

"He's an unlucky devil," said Ilya thoughtfully.

"We're all that, more or less," said Pavel with a shrug of his shoulders. "It strikes me he's not quite all there. A sort of ninny."

As Ilya walked away Pavel called after him:

"A thousand thanks, pal!"

Ilya smiled and nodded to him.

He found Yakov crushed and despondent. He was lying on his back staring up at the ceiling with wide-open eyes and did not even hear Ilya come in.

"They've put Nikita Yegorovich into another room," he said.

"Good," said Ilya. "He'd give anybody the creeps." Yakov threw him a glance full of reproach. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," said Yakov with a sigh. "I can't even stay ill as long as I'd like. Father came again last night. Said he'd bought another house. Wants to open another pub. And I've got to put up with it all."

Ilya had intended to tell his friend his good news, but now he could not.

A cheery spring sun peeped in at the window, but it only made the yellow hospital walls look yellower than ever and showed up the stains and cracks in the plaster. Two patients were sitting up in bed playing cards, flicking them down without speaking. A tall thin man paced the

floor silently, his bandaged head bent low. The only sounds to be heard were a strangling cough coming from another room and the shuffling of slippered feet in the corridor. There was no life in Yakov's sallow face and his eyes had a hunted look.

"If only I could die!" he said in a grating voice. "I keep thinking as I lie here how nice it would be to die." His voice grew mellower. "The gentle angels—they could answer all my questions." He blinked and grew silent, watching a pale ray of sunlight play on the ceiling. "Have you seen Masha?"

"N-no. My head can't hold everything."

"Not your head, but your heart."

Ilya felt uncomfortable and said nothing.

Yakov heaved a sigh and twisted his head restlessly on the pillow.

"Nikita Yegorovich don't want to die and he's got to. The doctor told me he would. And I want to and can't. I'll get better and have to go back to the pub. I'm no good to anybody."

Slowly his lips stretched in a doleful smile. "You've got to have steel ribs and a steel heart to live in this world."

Ilya frowned, sensing something harsh and disagreeable in Yakov's words.

"As for me," went on Yakov, "I'm like glass between two stones—every time I move I get another crack in me."

"You like to complain," said Ilya vaguely.

"And you?" said Yakov.

Ilya turned away without replying; then, realizing Yakov had no intention of going on, said dreamily: "Nobody has it easy. Take Pavel..."

"I don't like him," said Yakov with a grimace.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just don't."

"Well, it's time for me to be going."

Yakov held out his hand without comment, but suddenly he said in the voice of one begging alms:

"Ilya, do find out about Masha, that's a good chap—for the love of Christ."

"I will," said Ilya.

He gave a sigh of relief as he went out. Yakov's request made him feel ashamed that he had neglected the cobbler's daughter, and he resolved to pay a visit to Matitza, who would surely know what had become of her.

As he moved in the direction of Petrukha's pub he gave himself up to dreams of the future, which seemed to hold great promise for him. So absorbed was he in his dreams that he walked right past the pub. When he discovered it, he did not want to retrace his steps. He went on till he was outside the town. Before him stretched the fields, hemmed in by a wall of forest. The sun was setting, throwing a rosy glow on the young green of the grass.

He held his head high as he walked and fixed his eyes on the sky in the distance, where motionless clouds were flaming in the rays of the sinking sun. He was enjoying the walk: every step he took, every breath he breathed, gave birth to a new dream. He fancied himself rich and powerful, bringing about the ruin of Petrukha Filimonov. Here was Petrukha standing weeping in front of him, while Ilya said:

“Begging for mercy, are you? Who have you ever shown mercy to? Remember how you tortured your son? Remember how you led my uncle into sin? Remember how you made fun of me? No one was ever happy in that bloody house of yours; no one ever knew any joy in life there. It’s a trap, that house. A prison.”

Petrukha groaned and trembled with fear of him and looked as contemptible as a beggar.

“I’ll burn it down because it brings nothing but bad luck to those who live in it,” Ilya went on. “And you—get out and beg your bread and plead for mercy from those you wronged. Roam the earth to the end of your days and die at last like the dog you are!”

Now the fields were wrapped in twilight and the distant forest had assumed the dark solidity of mountains. A little black dot that was a bat darted about in the air as if stitching the darkness. From far away on the river came the rhythmic beating of a paddle-wheel, the sound suggesting the flapping of gigantic wings. Ilya went over

in his mind all the people who had helped make his life a burden, and each of them he chastised mercilessly. This added to the pleasure of his walk, and he began to sing softly to himself, alone out there in the dark fields.

Suddenly an odour of decay was wafted to his nostrils. He stopped singing: the odour had pleasant associations. He had come to the town dump near the gully, in which he had so often rummaged with Grandad Yeremei. The image of the old rag-picker rose up in his mind's eye. Ilya looked for the spot the old man had selected as their resting ground, but he could not find it: perhaps it was now buried under refuse. Ilya drew a sigh, remembering that there was a spot in his heart that was also buried under refuse.

I'd be completely happy now if only I hadn't killed that money-lender, he thought. But another voice within him said, why worry about him? What you did is your misfortune, not your crime.

He was startled by a sound: a small dog darted past him, gave a yelp, and vanished in the darkness. Ilya shuddered. It was as if a bit of the darkness had suddenly become animate, given a small protesting cry, and disappeared.

It's all the same, he thought. I would have no peace of mind even if I hadn't killed him. All the injustice to myself and others that I've seen! Once a person's heart has been wounded, it will go on aching for ever.

Slowly he walked along the edge of the gully. His feet sank in refuse. Twigs snapped, papers rustled under his step. Now he came to a narrow wedge of unlit earth that jutted out over the gully. He walked out and sat down on the point, swinging his legs over the edge. The air was purer here, and as his eyes travelled down the length of the gully he caught a glimpse of the steel surface of the river at the far end. The water, immobile as ice, gave back quivering reflections of the lights of invisible vessels. One of the lights soared in the air like a red bird; another glowed green and sinister, static and rayless. The yawning chasm at Ilya's feet, filled with dense shadow, was like a river flowing with black air. Ilya's heart grew sorrowful; he gazed into the gully and thought: Only recently I was happy; Fate seemed to smile upon me, but now all that is gone. He recalled the talk he had had with Yakov and this increased his dejection. A sound as of falling earth came from down in the gully. He leaned over and stared into the darkness; the dampness of night came up and struck him in the face. He looked up into the sky; hesitantly the stars were coming out and the moon, like a big red eye, was rolling slowly up over the forest. And, just as a few minutes before the bat had darted through the twilight, so now black thoughts and memories darted through Ilya's soul. They came and went, leaving nothing in their wake but deeper darkness.



For a long time he sat lost in thought, gazing down into the gully and up into the sky. The moonlight, piercing the darkness of the chasm, revealed deep fissures in its sides and bushes which threw fantastic shadows. The sky was empty but for moon and stars. It grew cold. Ilya got up, shivered slightly, and set off across the fields towards the lights of the town. He no longer wished to think at all. He was coldly indifferent to everything and filled with a great emptiness—the emptiness of heaven, which had once been for him the dwelling-place of God.

It was late when he got home, and he stood deliberating in front of the door, unable to make up his mind to ring. There was no light in the windows, which meant the Avtonomovs were asleep. He was ashamed to wake up Tatyana Vlashevna: it was she who always opened the door to him. But he had to get in. He gave the bell a gentle tug. Almost immediately the door was opened and in front of him stood his slender little landlady in a white night-dress.

“Lock the door—quickly!” she said in an unfamiliar voice. “It’s cold and I’m undressed. My husband’s out.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Ilya.

“How late you are! Where have you been?”

Ilya locked the door, turned to answer, and—found himself confronted by the woman’s naked breast. Instead of withdrawing, she pressed towards him. He himself was unable to withdraw because he had his back against the

door. She began to laugh—a quiet, tinkling laugh. Ilya raised his hands and put them gently on her shoulders, and his fingers were trembling because he felt shy in the presence of this woman, and because he longed to embrace her. Seeing this, she herself strained up to him and clasped his neck firmly in her hot hands and said in a bell-like voice:

“What do you mean by staying out till all hours of the night? There’s something better for you to do at home, my strong, handsome darling!”

As one in a dream Ilya was conscious of her stinging kisses and the convulsive movements of her lithe body. She clung to his chest like a kitten and kissed him again and again. At last he picked her up in strong arms and carried her into his room, walking as if on air.

The next morning Ilya woke up with fear in his heart.

How shall I ever look Kirik in the face? he thought. And he was as ashamed as he was afraid.

If only I had a grudge against him, he thought unhappily. Or at least did not like him. But to do it just like that—without the slightest excuse! Feelings of hostility towards Tatyana Vlashevna stirred within him. He was sure Kirik would guess that his wife had been unfaithful to him.

She threw herself at me as if she was starved, he mused wonderingly, and this pleasantly tickled his vanity.

He had won the affections of a real woman—a clean, cultivated, married woman. There must be something special about me, he thought proudly. It was shameful—shameful—but then, he was not made of stone. What should he have done, driven her away?

He was young: he remembered how she had caressed him—in a special way, one he had never known before. And, being of a practical turn of mind, he could not help thinking that this alliance might bring him advantages.

These thoughts were followed by a dark swarm of others: Here I am, driven into a corner again. Is that what I was after? I had respect for her—not a single suggestive thought ever entered my mind—and yet . . . look what has happened.

But a moment later all the confusion in his soul, all the contradictions that racked it, were blotted out by the joyful realization that soon he was to enter upon a new, a genuine, a clean way of life.

And again came the thought, sharp as a lance-thrust: But it would be better without *that*.

He made a point of staying in bed until the policeman left for work. He heard Kirik say with a succulent smack of his lips as he took leave of his wife:

“How about some meat dumplings for dinner tonight, ducky? More pork than beef, and when they’re boiled, give them a turn in the frying-pan—you know, till they

get that rosy glow like little sucking-pigs. Mm! That's a dish for you! And don't be stingy with the pepper."

"Run along, run along! As if I didn't know your taste!" said Tatyana affectionately.

"And what about a little kissy, missy?"

Ilya gave a start as he heard the kiss. The situation was repulsive, but amusing.

"Smack, smack, smack," said Avtonomov as he kissed his wife. She laughed. As soon as she had locked the door after her husband she ran into Ilya's room and jumped into his bed.

"Kiss me!" she said. "Quick! I have no time to waste!"

"But you've just kissed your husband," said Ilya glumly.

"What's this? Why, the boy's jealous!" she cried delightedly, and, laughing, jumped up and drew the curtains over the window. "Jealous? Excellent. Jealous men are passionate lovers."

"I didn't say that out of jealousy."

"Silence!" she commanded playfully, holding her hand over his mouth.

... When they had had their fill of love-making, Ilya looked at her with a smile.

"You're a bold little thing," he said. "A regular daredevil. To be up to such mischief under your husband's very nose!"

Her greenish eyes flashed saucily.

"There's nothing remarkable or even unusual about

that," she said. "Do you think there are many women who don't have love affairs? Only ugly ones and sick ones. Pretty ones are always looking for romance."

She devoted the entire morning to Ilya, telling him amusing stories about how women deceive their husbands. Her ringing voice poured incessantly into Ilya's room as she flitted about the kitchen in an apron and red blouse with rolled-up sleeves, making her husband meat dumplings.

"Do you think a woman's husband is enough for her? He may not appeal to her even if she loves him. And then don't forget that *he* makes no bones about having an affair with the first daisy that comes along. And it's very boring for a woman to think of nothing but her husband, husband, husband, all the time. Why shouldn't she have the fun of playing about with other men? That's how she learns the difference between them. Why, even kvass is different: Bavarian kvass, juniper kvass, cranberry kvass, and it's very silly to drink only one kind."

Ilya sipped his tea as he listened, and found the tea bitter. The woman's voice had a disagreeable screech that he had never noticed before. He could not help thinking of Olimpiada with her deep voice, her composed manner, her ardent words throbbing with a force that gripped the heart. To be sure, Olimpiada was a simple, uncultivated woman. Perhaps that was why her shamelessness was with-

out coquetry. As Ilya listened to Tatyana he gave a forced laugh. He was not amused; he laughed only because he did not know what to say to her. But he listened with interest, and at last observed thoughtfully:

“I never supposed there was room for that sort of thing in your clean way of life.”

“There’s always room for that sort of thing, my dear. It’s people who make the world what it is, and all people are after the same thing: an easy life—comfortable and easy, with plenty to eat. And that requires money. Money is to be got by luck or inheritance. A person who holds lottery tickets can hope for happiness, and a pretty woman holds a lottery ticket from birth: her beauty. Oh, you can win a lot with a pretty face! Those who don’t have rich relatives or lottery tickets or beauty have got to work. It’s a pity to have to work all your life. Look at me, I work even though I do hold two tickets. But I have decided to invest them in a shop for you. Two tickets is not enough, and making meat dumplings and kissing a policeman with a pimply face is tiresome. And so I have decided to make love to you.” She threw Ilya an impish glance and said, “Are you disgusted with me? What makes you glare at me so?” And she went over, put her hands on his shoulders, and gazed into his eyes.

“I’m not glaring,” said Ilya.

She burst out laughing.

"Oh, you aren't?" she squealed between peals of laughter. "How simply sweet of you!"

"I was just thinking," went on Ilya, pronouncing his words very slowly. "What you say is true, but . . . not nice, somehow."

"O-o-o, what a prickly porcupine you are! What isn't nice? Come, now, explain."

But he was unable to explain. He himself did not know what displeased him in her words. Olimpiada had spoken much more crudely, yet she had never piqued him as this clean little birdie did. All day long he brooded over the strange antipathy roused in him by a relationship that was undoubtedly flattering. He could not understand it.

That evening when he came home from work he was met in the kitchen by Kirik.

"What a dinner the wifey has made today!" he said boisterously. "What dumplings! It's a sin and a shame to eat them—like eating live nightingales. But I've kept a plateful for you, lad. Take that shop off your neck and sit down. It isn't everyone who can offer you a treat like this!"

Ilya looked at him guiltily and gave a low laugh.

"Thanks," he said, adding after a pause, "You're a good chap, and that's the truth."

"Pooh!" said Kirik with a wave of his hand. "What's a mere plateful of dumplings? If I was Chief of Police,

now . . . hm! . . . then I'd give you reason to say thank you. But I'll never be Chief of Police and I'm giving up the police altogether. I'm thinking of becoming an agent for a certain merchant. That's much better. An agent—an agent's somebody!"

His wife was humming to herself as she fussed about the stove. Ilya looked at her and again felt uneasy and ashamed.

But gradually this feeling vanished under the pressure of other impressions and new cares. He no longer had time to think, so busy was he buying stock and getting ready for the opening of his shop. And day by day, quite imperceptibly, he grew used to Tatyana Vlasyevna. He got to like her more and more as a mistress, although her caresses often embarrassed, even frightened him. Little by little her talk and her caresses destroyed the esteem in which he held her. As soon as her husband had gone to work in the morning or to his club in the evening, she would come into Ilya's room and tell him all sorts of gossip. Her stories were commonplace; they seemed to take place in a land inhabited by rakes and sluts who went about naked and found lasciviousness their sole enjoyment.

"Can what you say be true?" he once asked morosely. He did not wish to believe her, but he felt disarmed by her words and was unable to refute them. She merely laughed and kissed him.



"We'll begin at the very top," she said in the effort to convince him. "The Governor lives with the wife of the Chancellor, and the Chancellor recently stole the wife of one of his clerks—hired her a flat in Sobachi Pereulok and goes to see her twice a week quite openly. I know her—she's scarcely more than a child—hasn't been married a year. And her husband was sent into the provinces as tax inspector. I know him, too—a fine tax inspector, he! A stupid, uneducated puppy."

She told him about merchants who bought young girls to satisfy their lust, and about merchants' wives who had lovers, and about society girls who, becoming pregnant, poisoned the fruit of their womb.

As Ilya listened he got the impression that life was a sort of garbage heap in which people wriggled like worms.

"Ugh!" he said wearily, "ain't there nothing pure and genuine?"

"Genuine?" she repeated in surprise. "They are all genuine cases. You silly boy! Did you think I made them up?"

"That wasn't what I meant. Surely there must be something genuinely good and pure, ain't there?"

She laughed without understanding him. Sometimes their talk took another turn. Once, for instance, flashing upon him the weird fire of her greenish eyes, she said:

"Tell me about your first experience of a woman."

Ilya found the memory shameful and revolting, and he turned away from her clinging gaze.

"You'd ought to be ashamed to ask about such things," he said reproachfully.

But she only laughed and pressed him to tell her. At times he felt as if smudged with tar by her obscene talk. Whenever she read displeasure in his face and misery in his eyes she boldly awoke the male in him and fondled away his hostility.

One day, on coming home from the shop where carpenters were putting up shelves, Ilya was surprised to find Matitza waiting for him in the kitchen. She was sitting with her big arms on the table talking to Tatyana Vlasyevna, who was standing by the stove.

"This lady has been waiting for you a long time," said Tatyana, nodding towards Matitza with a smile.

"Good evening," said the "lady," rising with difficulty.

"What!" said Ilya. "You still alive?"

"Even the pigs won't eat rotten cabbage," said Matitza in a thick voice.

It had been a long time since Ilya had seen her, and now he gazed at her with a mixture of pity and pleasure. She was wearing a torn cotton dress, her head was tied up in a faded kerchief, and her feet were bare. She could hardly lift them off the floor and held on to the wall for

support as she made her way slowly into Ilya's room and collapsed on a chair.

"I'll kick the bucket soon," she said hoarsely. "I'll not be able to walk at all soon, and that means I'll not be able to beg my bread; in a word—the end."

Her face was horribly swollen and covered with dark spots. Her eyes were almost swollen shut.

"What are you staring at my mug for?" she asked Ilya. "Think I've taken a beating? It's the sickness eating me up."

"How do you manage to make a living?" asked Ilya.

"Begging crumbs on the church porch," she boomed in a voice like a French horn. "But there's a reason why I come here. Perfishka told me you was living here, so here I come."

"Have some tea?" asked Ilya. He recoiled from the sound of her voice and the sight of her big flabby body going to rot before she was dead.

"The devil can wash his tail in that tea of yours. Give me a copper instead and I'll get myself a decent drink. But I come—what do you suppose I come for?"

She had difficulty in speaking. Her breath came in short gasps and she gave off a dreadful odour.

"What for?" asked Ilya, averting his face and recalling how he had once insulted her.

“Remember Masha? But you’ve forgot everybody, now you’re rich.”

“What about her? How is she?” asked Ilya quickly. Matitza slowly shook her head.

“She ain’t hung herself yet,” she said.

“Come straight out with it,” said Ilya gruffly. “What are you blaming me for? You’re the one who sold her for three rubles.”

“It’s myself I’m blaming, not you,” said Matitza complacently, and, with a sigh, began to tell him about Masha.

The old man she had married was madly jealous of her. He would not let her go anywhere, not even to the shop. All day long she sat indoors and had to ask his permission if she so much as wanted to go out into the garden. Her husband had given his children into somebody else’s custody and lived alone with Masha. His first wife had deceived him—neither of the children were his own—and he was taking his spite out on his second wife. Twice Masha had run away from him, but both times the police had brought her back. As punishment, he had pinched and starved her.

“A fine deal you and Perfishka made!” said Ilya, frowning.

“I thought it was all for the best,” said Matitza. “I’d ought to have done what was for the worst; I’d ought

to have sold her to a rich man. He'd give her clothes and a flat and all. Later on she could have got rid of him and lived on her savings. Lots of women do that—live on what they've saved from old men."

"But what have you come here for?" asked Ilya.

"Because you're living with a policeman. It's them as catch her. Tell them not to. Let her run away. Maybe she'll find a place to run away to. Ain't there no place a person can run away to?"

Ilya considered. What possible help could he offer Masha? Matitza got up and moved her legs painfully.

"Good-bye. My days is numbered," she muttered. "Thanks for everything, you clean rich man."

When she had rocked her way out the kitchen door, Tatyana came running into Ilya's room and threw her arms round his neck.

"So *she's* your first love, is she?" she asked laughing.

Ilya removed her arms and said gravely:

"She can hardly drag one foot after the other, and still she goes about trying to help a person she loves."

"And who does she love?" asked the woman, gazing insinuatingly into Ilya's troubled face.

"Wait, Tatyana," he said. "Wait. This ain't time to joke." And he told her briefly about Masha. "What had I to do?" he asked when he had finished.

"Nothing," she said with a shrug of her shoulders.

“According to the law a wife belongs to her husband and nobody has a right to take her away.”

With the importance of one versed in the law and convinced of its infallibility, she made a long speech about the necessity of Masha's submitting to the demands of her husband.

“Let her wait. He's old. He'll die soon and she'll be free and in possession of all his property. And you'll marry a young widow of means. How do you like that?” She laughed, then proceeded to lecture him on how he ought to behave. “You really ought not to have anything more to do with those old acquaintances of yours. They're not your sort; they may even cause you embarrassment. They're all rough and dirty—like that fellow who borrowed money from you, remember? The thin one with the wicked eyes.”

“Pavel Grachov?”

“Yes. What funny names the common people have! Grachov, Lunyev, Petukhov, Skvortsov. The names of people in our class are much prettier: Avtonomov, Korsakov; my father was Florianov; before I got married I had an up-and-coming young suitor named Gloriantov who was about to be appointed to a court position. Once when we were ice-skating he took off my garter and said he would make a row if I didn't come and get it myself.”

As she spoke Ilya's mind went back over the past. He was aware of invisible ties binding him for ever to

the house of Petrukha Filimonov, and he knew this house would always prevent him from enjoying any peace of mind.

At last the dream of Ilya Lunyev was realized.

From morning to night he stood behind the counter of his own shop, feasting his eyes on it, radiating a quiet joy. The shelves were neatly stocked with cardboard boxes; he had arranged an attractive window display of soap, purses, shiny buckles and buttons, with ribbons and laces festooned above them. It all looked very bright and airy. He himself, handsome and dignified, met his customers with a polite bow and deftly tossed his wares upon the counter for their examination. The rustle of lace and ribbons was as music to his ears; the little seamstresses who ran into his shop to buy a few kopeks' worth of needles and thread were delightful; life was pleasant and easy, and assumed a clear and simple meaning. The past was veiled in mist. And not a thought did he have but of his trade, his wares, his customers.

He employed a boy to assist him, and he dressed him in a grey jacket and saw that he was scrupulously clean.

"It's delicate goods we handle, Gavrik," he said to him, "so we must be sure to be clean."

Gavrik was a lad of twelve—chubby, slightly pock-marked, snub-nosed, with little grey eyes and an expressive

face. He had just finished the elementary school and looked upon himself as a serious young man. He, too, was glad to be working in this clean little shop. It gave him pleasure to handle the boxes and packages, and he tried to be as polite with customers as his master was.

Whenever Ilya looked at him he was reminded of the days when he had served as a boy in Strogany's fish-shop. This made him sympathize with his own assistant, and he would joke and talk to him genially whenever there were no customers about.

"When you have nothing to do, take a book and read it, Gavrik," he advised. "You'll be surprised how the time will fly, and you'll get a lot of pleasure out of reading."

Ilya's manner became mild, he was very attentive with people, and his smile seemed to say to them:

"I'm fortunate, as you see, but bide your time: soon fortune will come your way."

He opened his shop at seven in the morning and closed it at nine in the evening. There were not many customers, so he had plenty of time to sit beside the door and bask in the spring sunshine without a single thought or desire.

Gavrik sat beside him watching the passers-by, making fun of them, whistling to stray dogs, throwing stones at sparrows and pigeons, or sniffing excitedly over a book. Sometimes his master got him to read out loud and then did not listen to him: he preferred listening to the silence



and serenity of his own soul. To this he listened with delight, feasting upon it, for it was new and inexpressibly dear. But at times something spoiled the sweet completeness of his life. This something was an almost imperceptible premonition of danger; it did not disturb his soul's serenity, it merely brushed it, lightly as a shadow.

At such moments Ilya would enter into conversation with the boy.

"What does your father do, Gavrik?"

"He's a postman—carries letters."

"Is yours a large family?"

"Oh, yes. There's lots of us. Some are big, some little."

"Many little ones?"

"Five. And three big ones. Us big ones are all working: I'm here with you, Vasily's in Siberia working for the telegraph, and Sonya gives lessons. She's got it best of all—brings in as much as twelve rubles a month. And then there's Misha. He's not so well off. He's older than me—studies at the gymnasium."

"Then there are *four* of you big ones."

"No, there aren't," objected Gavrik. "Misha's still studying. The big ones are those that work."

"Is your family poor?"

"Of course," said Gavrik, with a loud snuffle. Then he launched upon an exposition of his plans for the future, "When I'm big I'll join the army. There'll be a war, and

that's when I'll show what I can do. I'm brave. I'll rush up ahead of everyone else and snatch the enemy's banner away. My uncle did that once, and General Gurko gave him a cross and five rubles for it."

Ilya smiled as he looked at the boy's pock-marked face and his broad nose that was for ever sniffing.

On closing the shop in the evening, Ilya would retire to the little room behind it. Gavrik would have heated the samovar and put it on the table, and it would be standing there hissing with a plate of bread and sausage beside it. After supper Gavrik would go into the shop to sleep and Ilya would sit on beside the samovar, sometimes for two hours or more.

Two chairs, a table, a bed and a cupboard—these were all the furnishings of Ilya's new room. It was a small, low room with a square window giving a view of the legs of people who walked past, the roof of the house on the other side of the street, and the sky above the roof. He had hung a white gauze curtain at the window, which was protected on the street side by an iron grating that he heartily disliked. Over his bed he hung a picture called "The Phases of a Man's Life." He was fond of this picture and had intended buying it for a long time; for some reason he had put it off until he opened his shop, although it cost only ten kopeks.

The "Phases of a Man's Life" were illustrated on an

arc, under which was a representation of paradise. In this representation Jehovah, decorated with flowers and a nimbus, was talking to Adam and Eve. There were altogether seventeen phases. The first one showed a baby supported by its mother, and under it was written: "Learning to Walk." The second showed a small child dancing and beating a drum, and the title was: "Five years old: Playtime." At seven years of age the child was "Beginning to Learn." At ten he was "Going to School." At twenty-one he stood with a rifle in his hand, and a smile on his lips: "Military Service." In the next picture he was twenty-five years old; he was wearing a frock-coat and had a silk hat in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other: "A Suitor." Then he grew a beard, put on a grey suit and a pink tie and was shown holding the hand of a fat woman in a yellow dress. At the age of thirty-five he stood beside an anvil with his sleeves rolled up, wielding a hammer. In the picture at the top of the arc he was sitting in a red armchair reading the paper to his wife and four children. He and all the members of his family were well dressed and looked happy and wholesome. He was then fifty years old. The next picture began the descent. The man's beard was now grey, he wore a long yellow *caftan*, in one hand he had some fish, in the other a pitcher, and the title was: "Household Duties." In the next picture he was shown taking care of his grandchild. Later on he was being led by the

arm, for he was now eighty years old. In the last picture, at the age of ninety, he was sitting in an armchair with his feet in a coffin, and Death, scythe in hand, was standing behind his chair.

Ilya enjoyed sitting at the table and studying this picture, in which man's life was divided into such clear, neat phases. The picture emanated tranquillity, and its bright colours seemed to smile, as if assuring all who looked at it that life was herein depicted wisely and truthfully, for the edification of mankind. And as Ilya looked at it he thought that at last he had achieved what he wanted and from now on his life ought to proceed in the neat pattern illustrated in the picture. He would climb up and up, and when he reached the top and saved up enough money he would marry a modest girl with an education.

Drearily the samovar hissed and sputtered. Through the glass of the window-pane and the gauze of the curtain, dull stars stared at Ilya out of a murky sky. There is always something disturbing in the shine of the stars.

The hiss of the samovar gradually became softer, but more penetrating, and the thin sound attacked Ilya's ears with annoying persistence. It was like the hum of a mosquito, interrupting and confusing his thoughts. Yet he did not want to put a stop to it, the room would be too quiet without the sound of the samovar. Here in his new quarters Ilya enjoyed an entirely novel experience: hith-

erto he had always lived among people, separated from them by the thinnest of wooden partitions; now he was surrounded by stone walls, on the other side of which there may have been no people at all for all he knew.

Why should a person have to die? he suddenly asked himself as he looked at the man descending from the heights of well-being into the grave. He remembered that Yakov was always thinking about death, and he recalled his words: "If only I could die!"

With repugnance he thrust the remembrance away.

I wonder how Pavel and Vera are getting on? was the next question that came into his mind.

An izvozchik drove his trap down the street. The window-panes rattled and the lamp flickered from the impact of the wheels against the cobble-stones. From the shop came odd little noises: Gavrik muttering in his sleep. The deep shadows in the corners of the room seemed to shudder. Ilya sat with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands studying the picture. Next to Jehovah stood a noble-browed lion, a turtle was crawling along the ground at its feet, near the turtle was a badger and a toad, and the Tree of Knowledge rose above them, covered with enormous blood-red flowers. The old man with his feet in the coffin resembled Poluektov—thin and bald, with a scrawny neck. Hollow steps sounded on the pavement as someone walked unhurriedly past the shop. The samovar

went out and the room became so utterly quiet that the very air seemed to have congealed to the density of walls.

Thoughts of the money-lender did not disturb Ilya, in fact no thoughts disturbed him. They merely wrapped themselves round him softly and gently, as clouds wrap themselves round the moon. And they caused the colours of "Phases of a Man's Life" to fade and spots to break out on the picture. Every remembrance of the murder of Poluektov was followed by the calm realization that there must be some justice in this world, and accordingly a man is sure to be punished for his sins sooner or later. As these thoughts passed through his mind he gazed intently into a corner of the room that was particularly dark and quiet and where the shadows seemed striving to assume definite form. At last he got undressed, climbed into bed, and put out the light. He did not put it out at once; first he turned the wick up and down, causing the light to flare up and die down and shadows to leap about the bed, now hurling themselves upon it from all sides, now rushing back into the corners. Motionless he lay watching the impalpable black waves threaten to engulf him. For some time he played at this game, throwing the beams of his wide-open eyes into the darkness as if hoping to catch something in them. When he grew tired of playing, he gave the wick a final turn and the light went out with a flicker. For a moment the whole room was plunged in a darkness that

seemed to rock, as if it had not yet achieved a state of equilibrium after its struggle with the light. Then out of the darkness emerged the bluish blur of the window. If the night were moonlit, the floor would be striped by the shadow of the grating on the window. So intense was the silence that it seemed the mere drawing of a breath would be enough to cause everything in the room to quake. Ilya wrapped himself up tightly in his blanket, taking pains to see that his neck was covered and his face free, and gazed into the darkness until sleep overtook him. In the morning he woke up feeling calm and refreshed, and he almost blushed to remember the foolish fears of the night. After having tea with Gavrik he would inspect his shop, and each time it was as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Occasionally Pavel would drop in to see him on his way home from work. His face would be black with soot, his shirt singed by the soldering-iron and smudged with dirt and grease. He was working for the plumber again and usually carried a tin of solder, some lead pipes and a soldering-iron with him. He was always in a hurry to get home, and if Ilya persuaded him to stay a while, he would say with a self-conscious smile:

“I can't. There's a fire-bird waiting for me at home and the cage is none too strong. Ah, Vera, Vera! Who knows what thoughts creep into that head of hers as she sits at

home all by herself from morning to night? It's a dull life she leads now—I know that only too well. If only we had a child!" And he would give a deep sigh.

One day he said drearily, "I've poured all the water I had over my garden. What if I've swamped it?"

On another occasion Ilya asked him if he were still writing verse.

"Writing on the sky with my finger," he said with a bitter laugh. "To hell with it! Who are we to sit at the banquet table in bast sandals? I've run amuck for sure this time, pal. Not a spark of inspiration—not the least. All I do is think about her. Start soldering a pipe—thoughts of her run all over me like the solder. There's your poetry for you—ha, ha! True, they say a man ought to throw himself heart and soul into some one thing. . . . She's having a hard time of it."

"And you?" asked Ilya.

"Me too. But she's used to a gay life. That makes it worse. She dreams of having money. Says everything would be different if we only had some money. Says she was a fool not to have plucked some rich merchant. Says all sorts of foolish things—out of pity for me, I know. She's having a hard time."

Suddenly he turned and rushed off, goaded by his anxiety.

Often Ilya would be visited by the ragged, half-naked



cobbler with the inevitable accordion under his arm. He told Ilya about Yakov and what was going on in Petrukha's house. Dirty, dishevelled, emaciated, he would stand in the doorway of the shop with a smile on his face and tell Ilya the news in his picturesque language.

"Petrukha got married. His wife's like a beetroot and his stepson's like a carrot. A whole kitchen-garden, upon my word! His wife's short and fat and red-faced and she's got a triple-decked chin. Three chins, but only one mouth. And eyes like a pedigree pig—little ones, that don't see higher than the ground. Her son's long and thin and yellow and he wears specs. A gent for sure. His name's Savva and he talks through his nose. A perfect saint when his ma's around, but a swilling windbag when she's not. A fine set, I must say. Yakov? He looks as if he was getting ready to crawl off into a chink like a frightened cockroach. He drinks on the sly, poor devil, and coughs his head off. It's clear his pa put his insides out of order for good that time. His ma and pa are eating him alive. He's soft as a boiled turnip—nobody'll choke over him. Your uncle sent us a letter from Kiev. I don't know what good this trip'll do him—as if a hunchback would ever get let into paradise! Matitza can't walk at all any more; she rides about in a cart—hitches a blind man to it and drives him about like a horse. Funniest sight you ever saw. But they manage to feed themselves. She's a good-hearted

baggage, I will say that for her. If I'd not had such a remarkable woman for a wife, I'd be sure to marry that Matitza, that I would. I'll tell you straight: there's only been two honest-to-goodness women—women with hearts—on this earth: my wife and Matitza. Oh, I know she's a drunk, Matitza is, but all good people are drunks."

"How's Masha?" asked Ilya.

The mention of Masha swept the fun out of the cobbler's speech and the smile off his face as an autumn wind drives the leaves off the trees. His sallow face instantly grew long.

"I don't know nothing about her," he confessed uneasily. "Khrenov warned me he'd break her bones if I so much as passed the house. Ilya Yakovlevich, be so kind as to make a little contribution to the building up of a half-pint or even a wee glassful."

"You're a lost soul, Perfishka," said Ilya ruefully.

"Lost finally and for ever," admitted the cobbler. "But lots of people will have a good word to say for me when I'm gone because I was always a gay fellow and liked to give people a laugh. They're always oh-ing and ah-ing, moaning and groaning, and I come along and sing them a jolly song to make them laugh at themselves. It's all the same—sin for a kopek, sin for a ruble, we'll all of us end up in the same place and the devil will torture us all alike. A gay fellow's got to have his taste of life like everybody else."

With a wink and a laugh he went out, looking like an old and plucked rooster, and Ilya smiled and shook his head as he watched him go. He pitied Perfishka, but he knew there was no need to, and pity disturbed his peace of mind. The past was still not far behind him, and every reminder of it made him uneasy. He was like one who, exhausted, has at last settled down into blissful sleep, from which he is constantly being roused by pestering flies. While talking to Pavel or listening to Perfishka he would smile and shake his head sympathetically and—wonder how soon they would go. Sometimes the things Pavel told him made him sad and uncomfortable, and then he would insist on giving him money.

“How else can I help you?” he would say with a shrug of his shoulder. “I think you ought to drop Vera.”

“I can’t,” Pavel would say softly. “You can only drop something you don’t need. I need her. But they’re trying to take her away from me, that’s the thing. Maybe it’s not my heart that loves her—it’s my hate and my anger. She’s all the happiness I’ve got. And am I to give her up? What will be left to me? I won’t give her up, I won’t! I’ll kill her first!”

Red blotches broke out on his face and he clenched his fists.

“Have you noticed anyone paying her attention?” asked Ilya.

“No.”

“Then why do you say they’re trying to take her away from you?”

“They are. There’s some force pulling her away from me. My father was ruined by a woman and it looks as if I was to be, too.”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do to help you,” said Ilya, and the recognition brought with it a certain relief. He felt even more sorry for Pavel than for Perfishka, and when Pavel grew wrathful he felt his own wrath rising up. But the enemy dealing the blows, the enemy blasting Pavel’s life, was not to be seen; he was an invisible enemy. And there was as little need of Ilya’s wrath as of his pity—or all the other emotions people evoked in him. None of them were needed, none of them did any good.

“I know you can’t help me,” said Pavel with a frown; then, firmly, and with a sinister note of conviction, “You’ve made yourself this cosy little corner and you’re sitting here nice and peaceful. But mark my word: somebody’s laying awake at nights thinking of a way to throw you out. And you’ll get thrown out, you’ll see. Or else you’ll give it up of your own accord.”

“Oh, won’t I just!” mocked Ilya.

But Pavel was adamant.

“You will,” he insisted, staring hard into his friend’s face. “It’s not in you to spend your life sitting quietly

in a dark hole. You'll either take to drink or go bankrupt—something's sure to happen to you."

"But why?" asked the astonished Ilya.

"Just because. It don't become you, a calm, easy life. You're a good sort, you've got a heart. There are some people who are healthy all their lives, and then all of a sudden—off they go."

"What do you mean, off they go?"

"Drop down dead."

Ilya laughed and stretched himself to unknot his strong muscles, and he drew in a breath that filled his whole chest.

"Nonsense," he said.

But as he sat beside the samovar that evening Pavel's words came back to him, and he fell to thinking about his business relations with Tatyana Vlasyevna. So grateful had he been for the chance to open his own shop that he had accepted all her terms. And now he suddenly realized that, although he had invested more in the business than she had, he was more like her agent than her partner. The discovery made him furious.

So you hug me tight just so's you can slip your hand into my pocket without my noticing it? he said to her in imagination. And he decided then and there to use his last ruble to buy out her interest in the shop and sever all ties with her. It cost him no effort to make this decision. For some time he had felt that their relationship was un-

desirable, and lately it had become even irksome. He could not get used to her caresses, and once he had said to her bluntly:

“You’re a shameless woman, Tatyana.”

She had only laughed in reply.

She still told him all the gossip about the people of her set, and one day Ilya observed:

“If what you say is true, then that respectable life of yours ain’t worth a pin.”

“Why not? It’s fun,” she said with a lift of her pretty shoulders.

“Great fun. Fuss and gossip all day; lust and lechery all night.”

“What a simple soul you are!” she laughed.

And again, as she talked to him of their clean, comfortable, middle-class life, he saw all its filth and cruelty.

“Do you think that’s right?” said Ilya.

“Oh, you’re so funny! I didn’t say it was right, did I? But life would be tiresome without it.”

Sometimes she tried to improve him.

“It’s high time you stopped wearing those calico shirts; respectable gentlemen wear linen ones. And please listen to how I speak and try to copy it. You mustn’t say ‘ain’t,’ and ‘like as if’ and ‘he’d ought.’ Only muzhiks talk like that and you’re no longer a muzhik.”

She began to harp on the difference between him, a mere

muzhik, and herself, a woman of education, and often the things she said offended him. While living with Olimpiada he had felt a close friendship for her. Never had he felt this for Tatyana Vlasyevna. He saw that she was more attractive than Olimpiada, but he had lost all respect for her. While living with the Avtonomovs he had once overheard Tatyana saying her prayers before going to bed.

“Our Father who art in heaven...” had come the hurried whisper from the other side of the partition. “Give us this day our daily bread...” Kirik! Get up and close the kitchen door. It’s blowing on my feet.”

“Why do you kneel on the bare floor?” asked Kirik sleepily.

“Don’t interrupt!” And again Ilya heard the tense, hasty whisper. “Bring peace to the souls of Thy servants Vlass, Nikolai, Yevdokia, and Maria, and shed Thy blessings upon Tatyana, Kirik, Serafima...”

Ilya did not like the way she hurried through her prayers. Obviously she prayed from force of habit and not because she felt the need of it.

“Do you believe in God, Tatyana?” he once asked her.

“What a question!” she exclaimed in surprise. “Of course I do. Why do you ask?”

“Just because. You always seem to be so anxious to get Him over with,” said Ilya with a smile.

“For one thing, that word should be pronounced jUst,

and not jEst, and for another I'm so tired by the end of the day that God can't help forgiving me if I hurry a little." Rolling up her eyes, she added with pious conviction, "He's merciful; He forgives everything."

That's the only reason you need Him: so's to have somebody to forgive your sins, thought Ilya maliciously. He remembered that Olimpiada had always prayed in silence and for a long time, kneeling with bowed head before the icons as motionless as if turned to stone, and her face had worn a stricken, solemn look.

When Ilya realized Tatyana had taken advantage of him in the business, he developed what was almost an aversion for her.

If she was a stranger I might have expected it, he thought. Everybody tries to get the better of everybody else. But she's something like ... something like my wife—kisses me, lives with me. Sly as a fox!

His manner with her became cold and distrustful and he found excuses for not seeing her. At about this time he made the acquaintance of another woman—Gavrik's sister, who sometimes came to the shop to see her brother. She was tall and graceful, but not at all pretty; Gavrik said she was nineteen years old, but Ilya thought she looked much older. Her face was long and thin and sallow. Fine lines cut across her high forehead, the big nostrils of her turned-up nose seemed dilated with anger, and her thin lips



were always tightly compressed. She spoke with a clear enunciation, but haltingly, reluctantly. Her step was quick and she held her head high, as if showing off her homely face—but perhaps it was the long heavy braid of dark hair that pulled her head back. Her large dark eyes were stern and grave and her features as a whole lent an air of unbending pride to her tall figure. Ilya felt shy in her presence; he thought she was overbearing, but she inspired respect. Whenever she came into the shop he offered her a chair and invited her to sit down.

“Thank you,” she would say with a brief nod. And as she sat there Ilya would secretly study her face (so different from the faces of all the other women he knew) and her worn brown dress and patched boots and yellow straw hat. As she sat talking to her brother, she nervously beat out a soundless tune on her knee with the long fingers of her right hand. With her left she swung some books at the end of a strap. Ilya thought it odd that so poorly dressed a young lady should be so proud. After sitting there two or three minutes she would say to her brother:

“Well, good-bye. Don’t get into mischief.”

And with a silent nod to the owner of the shop, she would sweep out with the air of a soldier marching into battle.

“What a stern little lady your sister is,” Ilya once said to Gavrik.

Gavrik wrinkled up his nose, opened wide his eyes, and pursed out his lips, caricaturing an expression of intentness that vividly suggested the expression of his sister's face.

"That's what she's like," he said with a smile. "Only she just lets on to be that way."

"Why should she?"

"Just for fun. I'm like that, too—I can make any sort of face I like."

Ilya became very much interested in her, and mentally he said what he had once said about Tatyana Vlasyevna: She's the sort of woman a man ought to marry.

One day she brought a thick book with her.

"Here, read it," she said, handing it to her brother.

"May I see it?" asked Ilya politely.

She took it out of her brother's hands and gave it to him.

"*Don Quixote*," she said. "It's about a knight who was very kind."

"I've read lots of books about knights," said Ilya with a gracious smile, glancing into her face.

Her eyebrows quivered. "What you read were fairy-tales," she said drily, "but this is a very deep and fine book. The hero of it devoted his life to defending the unfortunate—all those who suffered from life's injustice. He was always ready to sacrifice himself for others. It's written in a

humorous vein, but that is only because the age in which it was written demanded it. It must be read seriously, with great attention."

"That's exactly how we shall read it," said Ilya.

This was the first time the girl had ever spoken to him. It made him very happy, and he smiled. But she darted him a quick glance and said in the same dry tone:

"I don't think you will enjoy it."

And she went out. Ilya fancied she had placed particular stress on the "you," and this nettled him.

"This is no time to read," he said brusquely to Gavrik, who was looking at the pictures in the book.

"Why not? There's no customers," said Gavrik without shutting the book. Ilya looked at him, but said nothing. He kept going over in his mind what the girl had said about the book. As for the girl herself, his verdict was: A stuck-up creature!

Time passed. Ilya stood behind the counter twirling his moustache and selling his goods, but the days began to drag. Sometimes he felt like locking the shop and going out for a stroll, but knowing this would be bad for business, he resisted the urge. He could not even leave the shop in the evening. Gavrik was afraid to remain alone, and even if he weren't, it would be dangerous to leave him: he might accidentally set fire to the premises or

open the door to a thief. Business was thriving; Ilya even thought of hiring a shop assistant. Gradually his connection with Tatyana Vlashevna died of itself, and she, too, seemed to have no objection to this. She laughed it off lightly, but she examined the daily accounts very seriously. Ilya felt he could not endure this woman with the bird-like face as he saw her sitting in his room clicking the beads of the abacus. But then again she would come to him bright and gay and full of fun and make eyes at him and call him her "partner," and then he would succumb to her charms and renew what he called "that rotten business." Occasionally Kirik would drop in and sprawl on a chair at the counter, bantering the seamstresses who happened to come in. By this time he had exchanged his police uniform for a suit of tusser-silk, and he boasted of his new job with the merchant:

"Sixty rubles a month salary and as much again in pickings—not bad, eh? I'm very careful about the pickings—nothing but what's legitimate. Have you heard we've changed our flat? We've got a marvellous new flat. We've got a cook, too—and how she does cook! Oh, Lordy, Lordy! In the autumn we'll begin to entertain—play cards—a deuced fine way to spend an evening. Fun and winnings besides. There are two of us, me and my wife, so one of us is sure to win. The winnings'll cover the expense of the guests, ho, ho! That's having a good time without paying

for it." His big body flowed all over the chair, he lighted a cigarette, and, between puffs, went on in a lowered voice, "Did you know I just came back from a trip to the country? Good Lord, man! What girls there are there! Never saw anything like it! Daughters of nature, so to speak. So round and firm—can't stick a pin into them. And cheap, damn it all! A bottle of wine and a pound of cakes and she's yours."

Ilya listened in silence. For some reason he felt sorry for Kirik, felt sorry instinctively, without knowing what there was about this fat, lumpish fellow to make him feel sorry. Yet he was inclined to laugh at him. He did not believe Kirik's stories about his conquests. He was sure they were just empty boasting, words taken out of somebody else's mouth. If Ilya happened to be in a bad mood when Kirik launched on one of his tirades, he would mutter to himself: The stupid windbag!

"Ah, it's a grand thing to make love in the lap of nature, 'under the spreading chestnut-tree,' as the poet says."

"What if Tatyana Vlashevna finds out?" asked Ilya.

"Why should she want to find out?" said Kirik with a sly wink. "What you don't know won't hurt you. A man's a buck by nature. But what about you, my boy? Haven't you got a lady love?"

"I'm afraid I have," laughed Ilya.

"A seamstress, eh? A pretty little brunette?"

"No, not a seamstress."

"A cook? Cooks are nice—fat and juicy."

Ilya laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks, and his laughter convinced Kirik that she must be a cook.

"Change them often," he advised in the tone of a connoisseur.

"What makes you think she's a cook or a seamstress? Don't I deserve anything better?" asked Ilya between fits of laughter.

"They suit your social position. After all, you couldn't expect to have an affair with a girl or a married woman from respectable society, could you?"

"Why not?"

"It's clear enough. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but ... well ... you're a simple fellow ... a muzhik, so to speak."

"But mine ... mine's a lady," said Ilya, choking with laughter.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Kirik, and he, too, burst out laughing.

But when he had gone and Ilya thought over what he had said, he felt injured. He could see that, however good-natured Kirik was, he did not place himself on Ilya's level; he considered himself superior and better. Yet he and his wife used Ilya.

From Perfishka he heard that Petrukha made fun of his business venture and called him a shark. Yakov told the cobbler that Ilya had been better in the old days—more sympathetic and less conceited. Gavrik's sister, too, was constantly giving him to understand that he was not her equal. This postman's daughter, dressed almost in rags, looked at him as if she resented his living on the same earth. Ilya's self-respect had increased since he had opened his own shop and he was much more sensitive to what people thought of him. And he became more and more interested in that homely girl, so different from others; he could not understand why anyone as poor as she was should vaunt a pride that intimidated him. She never was the first to speak to him, and this was vexing. After all, her brother was in his employ, and that alone should make her more civil to him, her brother's master.

One day he said to her, "I'm reading your book about Don Quixote."

"Do you like it?" she asked without looking up.

"Ever so much. It's very funny. What a queer bird he was!"

Ilya fancied he caught a stab of hatred from her proud black eyes.

"I was sure you would say something of that sort," she said slowly and distinctly.

Her tone was wounding and antagonistic.

"I'm just an ignorant fellow," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

She ignored the remark.

And once more Ilya's soul was possessed by a feeling that had long since subsided—a hatred for human beings that made him ruminare long and intently upon life's injustices, the crime he had committed, and the fate awaiting him. Could it be that he would spend the rest of his life standing in the shop from morning to night, then sitting beside the samovar with his thoughts until he went to bed, only to get up in the morning and go back to his post? He knew that most tradesmen, perhaps all of them, did just this, but there were many attributes of his outer as well as his inner life that made him look upon himself as a person apart, different from the ordinary run. He remembered what Yakov had said about him, "I hope to God you'll never be a success. You're too greedy." He found these words extremely unjust. He was not greedy—he merely wanted to lead a clean and tranquil life, wanted others to respect him, wanted no one to remind him at every step, "I'm better than you are, Ilya Lunyev; I'm your superior."

And again he wondered what his ultimate fate would be: would he be called upon to answer for his crime? At times it seemed to him that if he were, it would be unfair. The town was full of murderers, adulterers,



swindlers; everybody knew they were deliberate murderers, adulterers, and swindlers, and yet they went on enjoying the blessings of life without being punished. Justice demanded that every offence be answered for. As the Bible says: "Let God recompense it unto himself, that he may know it." These thoughts opened old wounds in his heart, and he was filled with a mad desire to get revenge for his ruined life. At other times he longed to do something reckless: set fire to the house of Petrukha Filimonov, and cry out when people came running:

"I'm the one who did it! And I'm the one who killed Poluektov!"

He would be seized, tried, and exiled to Siberia as his father had been. This prospect had a sobering influence and made him modify his dreams of getting revenge: he would merely tell Kirik that he was living with his wife, or perhaps it would be better to give old Khrenov a beating for torturing Masha.

As he lay in bed staring into the darkness and listening into the stillness, he fancied that suddenly everything would quake and collapse and spin about in a mad whirlwind, making much noise and commotion. And he himself would be caught up in the whirlwind and spun about until he perished. And he shuddered at the premonition of some great catastrophe.

One evening as he was just about to shut his shop,

Pavel came and announced calmly, without so much as saying hullo:

“Vera has bolted.”

He perched himself on a stool, put his elbows on the counter, and whistled softly to himself as he gazed out into the street. His face was frozen into a mask, but his little brown moustache twitched like the whiskers of a cat.

“Alone or with somebody else?”

“Don’t know. She’s been gone three days.”

Ilya watched him in silence. His friend’s expressionless face and voice made it impossible for him to guess how he took the loss of his wife. But he sensed some irrevocable resolution behind Pavel’s serenity.

“What do you mean to do?” he asked quietly, when Pavel did not volunteer further information. At that Pavel stopped whistling and announced briefly, without so much as turning his head:

“To kill her.”

“Harping on the same old note!” ejaculated Ilya with a wave of disgust.

“I’ve eaten my heart out on account of her,” said Pavel softly. “Here’s the knife.”

He pulled a smallish bread-knife out of his blouse and turned it in front of his nose.

“I’ll seize her by the throat. . . .”

Ilya snatched the knife away and tossed it behind the counter.

"Pointing a cannon at a fly," he said testily.

Pavel jumped off the stool and swung round to confront him. His eyes were blazing, his face was distorted, he was trembling all over. But the next minute he was back on the stool.

"You're a fool," he said contemptuously.

"But then you're so bright!"

"The knife doesn't matter—I've still got my hands."

"Yes."

"And if my hands refuse to obey me, I'll seize her throat in my teeth."

"Grr! What a ferocious beast!"

"Don't, Ilya," said Pavel softly, after a short pause. "You can believe me or not, just as you like, but don't tease me. I've been teased enough in my lifetime."

"But think what you're saying, you simpleton," said Ilya mildly.

"I've thought. But I'd better be going. What's there to say to you? You're no friend to me—you with your full belly."

"Put that nonsense out of your head," said Ilya.

"I'm starved—soul and body."

"It's a marvel, the way people look at things," said Ilya with a lift of his shoulders. "They take a woman

for a sort of domestic animal—something like a horse. Haul me? That's a good girl, I won't beat you. Refuse to haul me? Down comes the whip on her head! But a woman's a human being like anybody else and she's got a mind of her own."

Pavel glanced at him and gave a harsh laugh.

"And what about me? Aren't I a human being?"

"That's why you've got to be fair."

"To hell with your fairness!" shouted Pavel in fury, leaping up off the stool. "It's easy enough for you to be fair; you've got a full belly. And good-bye to you."

And he rushed out of the shop, snatching off his cap as he reached the door. Ilya sprang out from behind the counter and went after him, but Pavel was already making his way down the street, swinging his cap excitedly.

"Pavel!" shouted Ilya. "Wait!"

But he did not wait. He did not even look round, and the next minute he had turned a corner and was out of sight. Ilya went slowly back behind the counter, conscious that the words of his comrade had made his cheeks burn.

"He's a fierce one, he is!" came the voice of Gavrik.

Ilya laughed.

"Who's he going to knife?" asked Gavrik, coming up to the counter. His hands were folded behind him, his

head was tilted back, and his pitted face was flushed.

"His wife," said Ilya, darting a glance at the boy.

Gavrik considered this a moment; then, blowing out his cheeks, he announced to his master in a low and thoughtful tone:

"Our neighbour gave her husband arsenic last Christmas. He was a tailor."

"They do, sometimes," said Ilya absent-mindedly, his thoughts with Pavel.

"This fellow . . . do you think he'll really knife her?"

"Oh, shut up, Gavrik."

The boy turned round and went to the door, muttering as he went:

"What the hell makes them get married?"

Twilight was flowing into the street and lights were lit in the windows of the house opposite.

"Time to lock up," said Gavrik softly.

Ilya stared at the lighted windows. They were shielded below by potted plants, above—by white curtains. Through the leaves of the plants could be glimpsed the gilt frame of a picture hanging on the wall. When the windows were open he could hear the strains of a guitar, voices singing, and loud laughter. Almost every evening people sang and laughed and played in that house. Ilya knew that a judge of the circuit court named Gromov—a stout, red-cheeked man with a big black moustache—lived there.

His wife, too, was stout, and she had fair hair and blue eyes. She carried herself as proudly as a queen out of a fairy-tale when she walked down the street, and she always smiled when talking to people. Gromov had a marriageable sister—a tall girl, dark-haired and dark-complexioned, who was always surrounded by young officials. It was they who laughed and sang almost every evening.

“It really is time to lock up,” repeated Gavrik.

“Then go ahead and do it.”

The boy shut the door, plunging the shop in darkness, and turned the key in the lock.

Like a prison, thought Ilya.

Pavel's words about his having a full belly festered in his heart. As he sat beside the samovar he felt very hostile towards Pavel, but he was sure Pavel was incapable of harming Vera.

I wish I hadn't stood up for her, he thought bitterly. To hell with them! They're miserable themselves and make everybody else miserable.

Gavrik sucked his tea up out of the saucer noisily and scraped his feet over the floor.

“Do you think he's knifed her yet?” he suddenly asked his master.

Ilya gave him a black look.

“Drink your tea and go to bed,” he said.

The samovar hissed and roared as if about to leap off the table.

Suddenly a dark figure appeared at the window and a timid, trembling voice asked:

"Does Ilya Yakovlevich live here?"

"Yes," called out Gavrik, and before Ilya could say a word he had jumped off his stool and had gone to open the door.

In the doorway appeared the slender figure of a woman with a kerchief on her head. With one hand she held on to the door-jamb, with the other she twisted the ends of her kerchief. She stood sidewise, as if about to run away.

"Come in," said Ilya stiffly, not recognizing her.

She started and raised her head at the sound of his voice, and a smile lighted her pale face.

"Masha!" exclaimed Ilya, jumping up.

She gave a low laugh and came towards him.

"You . . . didn't recognize me," she said, stopping in the middle of the room.

"Good Lord! How could I be expected to recognize you! You look. . . ."

He took her arm with exaggerated courtesy and led her over to the table, leaning over to catch a better glimpse of her, not daring to tell her what she looked like. She was indescribably thin and walked as if her legs were about to give way under her.

"So this . . . so this is what you're like!" he muttered, seating her in a chair solicitously and looking into her face.

"It's all his doings," she said, gazing back at Ilya.

Now that she was in the lamplight he could get a good look at her. She was leaning back, her thin arms hanging limply at her sides, her head on one side, her flat chest rising and falling quickly. She looked almost fleshless, as if made only of bone. The angles of her shoulders, elbows, and knees were clearly marked by the folds of her cotton frock, and the emaciation of her face was dreadful to see. Her skin had a bluish tinge and was drawn tightly over her temples, cheek-bones, and chin, her mouth hung open in a sickly way, her thin lips did not cover her teeth, and her pinched oval face wore an expression of pain. There was no life or light in her eyes.

"Have you been ill?" asked Ilya softly.

"No-no," she said. "I'm quite well. It's just on account of him."

Her low, long-drawn-out words sounded like groans, and her bared teeth gave her face a fish-like look.

Gavrik, who was standing beside her, stared with tight lips and frightened eyes.

"Go to bed!" Ilya said to him sharply.

The boy went into the shop, busied himself there for a minute or two, then thrust his head through the door.



Masha sat utterly still but for her eyes, which travelled with difficulty from one object to another. Ilya poured her out a cup of tea and watched her, but could think of nothing to say.

"He's torturing me to death," she said. Her lips quivered and she closed her eyes for a second. When she opened them, big tears crept out from under the lashes.

"Don't cry," said Ilya, turning his eyes away. "Have some tea and tell me everything. You'll feel better then."

"I'm afraid he'll find me," she said, shaking her head.

"Have you left him?"

"Yes. For the fourth time. Whenever I can't stand it any longer I run away. Last time I wanted to throw myself down a well. But he found me. How he beat me! How he tortured me!"

Her eyes grew wide with horror and her chin quivered.

"He twisted my legs."

"Why do you stand for it?" cried Ilya. "Why don't you report him to the police—tell them he tortures you. They put people in jail for that."

"Not him. He's a judge himself," said Masha hopelessly.

"Khrenov? No he isn't."

"Oh, yes he is. Not long ago he sat in court two weeks running. He passed sentence on all sorts of people—came home starved and ugly—took my breasts in the samovar tongs and pinched and twisted them. Look."

With trembling fingers she unfastened her dress and showed Ilya her flaccid little breasts covered with bruises as if they had been chewed.

"Button up your dress," said Ilya hollowly. It was disagreeable to look at her poor bruised body. He could hardly believe it was the delightful Masha, his childhood friend, who was sitting opposite him.

"And the way he beat me on the shoulders!" she said, slipping her dress off her shoulders. "And all the rest of me's the same. He pinched me all over and pulled the hair out of my arm-pits."

"But why?" said Ilya.

"So you don't love me?" he says, and pinches me."

"Maybe you . . . weren't a virgin when you went to him and that's why he does it?"

"How can you think it? I lived with you and Yakov all the time and nobody ever came near me. And now . . . now I just can't . . . it hurts and I hate it . . . it makes me sick. . . ."

"We won't talk about it any more, Masha," said Ilya softly.

She grew silent and sat with that frozen expression on her face, her breasts uncovered.

From behind the samovar Ilya gazed at her thin, castigated body.

"Button up your dress," he repeated.

"I'm not ashamed to have you see me," she said in a scarcely audible voice as she buttoned her dress with trembling fingers.

The room was deathly still. Suddenly loud snuffles came from the shop. Ilya got up and went over to close the door.

"Stop it, Gavrik," he said sternly.

"Is that your boy?" asked Masha. "What's the matter with him?"

"He's crying."

"Afraid?"

"No. Feels sorry, I guess."

"For who?"

"You."

"The silly," said Masha indifferently, with no change of expression on her mask-like face. She began to drink tea, and her hands were shaking so that the saucer struck against her teeth. As Ilya watched her from behind the samovar he could not make up his mind whether he pitied her or not.

"What are you going to do?" he asked after a long pause.

"I don't know," she said with a sigh. "What had I ought to do?"

"File a complaint," said Ilya decisively.

"He treated his first wife the same," said Masha. "He tied her to the bed by the hair and pinched her—just like

me. Once I was asleep and all of a sudden I felt a pain. I woke up and cried out. He had struck a match and was holding it against my stomach.”

Ilya jumped up and shouted in fury that she must go to the police the very next day and show them her injuries and demand that her husband be arrested. As he spoke she squirmed and darted frightened glances at him.

“Please don’t shout,” she said. “Someone might hear you.”

His words, he saw, did nothing but frighten her.

“Very well,” he said, sitting down again, “I’ll go myself. Spend the night here, Masha. You can sleep in my bed and I’ll sleep in the shop.”

“I do want to lie down. I’m so tired,” she said.

Silently he pushed the table away from the bed. Masha lay down and tried to wrap herself in the blanket, but it was too much for her.

“I feel so funny—like as if I was drunk,” she said with a feeble little smile.

Ilya tucked the blanket round her and arranged the pillow under her head. As he was about to go out she said anxiously:

“Don’t go away. I’m afraid to be alone. I keep seeing things.”

He sat down on a chair beside her, but the sight of her white face in its frame of black curls made him turn away.

It gave him a twinge of conscience to see her like this—more dead than alive. He remembered Yakov's request, and what Matitza had told him about her, and he hung his head in shame.

A two-part song was being sung in the house across the way, and the sounds floated into Ilya's room through the open window. A strong bass voice was singing:

*Ala—a—as! My heart is bro—o—ken....*

"I'm falling asleep," murmured Masha. "It's so nice here ... somebody's singing ... a nice voice...."

"Yes, they're singing," said Ilya with a bitter laugh. "Some sing, some weep."

*I shall ne—e—ver love again...  
O—o—only once!*

A high note rang out in the silence of the night, soaring with an easy grace.

Ilya got up and shut the window irritably. The song seemed out of place; it got on his nerves. Masha was awakened by the shutting of the window. She opened her eyes and raised her head in fright.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Me. I shut the window."

"Oh dear, are you going away?"

“No, have no fear.”

She dropped her head back on the pillow and was soon drowsing again. But everything disturbed her—Ilya's least movement, or the sound of steps out in the street. She would instantly open her eyes and cry out, half asleep:

“Just a minute.... Oh dear!... Just a minute.”

Ilya opened the window again and sat without stirring, wondering what he could do to help Masha. He determined not to let her leave him until her case had been reported to the police.

I must act through Kirik, he thought.

“Encore! Encore!” came lively cries from Gromov's house. Someone clapped. Masha groaned. Again there was the sound of singing:

*A pair of ba—a—a—ys, harnessed at da—a—awn....*

Ilya gave a despairing shake of his head. The singing, the gay voices, and the laughter were a taunt. He sat with his elbows on the window-sill staring at the lighted windows opposite in wrathful indignation, thinking what a pleasure it would be to go outside and throw a cobble-stone through one of them. Or send a charge of grape-shot into the merry-makers. Grape-shot would be sure to reach them. He imagined their frightened, blood-stained faces, their shouts and confusion, and the picture

filled his heart with gladness and brought a smile to his lips. The words of the song impressed themselves on his mind; he repeated them to himself and discovered to his astonishment that the merry-makers were singing about the death of a street-walker. He was shocked. He listened more attentively, and as he listened he thought: Why should they sing such a song? What amusement can it bring them? A fine thing to do! And here, only a few paces away, lies a soul in torment, while they....

“Bravo! Bravo!” came the cries.

Ilya smiled and kept looking from Masha to the windows and back. He found it amusing that people should entertain themselves by singing about the death of a street-walker.

“Vasily . . . Vasilyevich...” murmured Masha.

She tossed as if in pain, threw the blanket off on the floor, flung out her arms, and then lay perfectly still. Her mouth was half open and she made little gasping sounds. Ilya quickly bent down to listen, afraid that she was dying. When he was reassured by the sound of her breathing, he covered her with the blanket, climbed back on the window-sill, and pressed his face against the iron grating to stare at the windows of the Gromov house. They were still singing over there—solos, duets, and in chorus. Music and laughter. He caught glimpses of women at the window in pink and blue and white frocks. As he listened he marvelled that they could sing such mournful, long-drawn

songs about the Volga, death, and untilled fields, and laugh after each of them as if nothing had happened, as if they had not sung them. What entertainment could they derive from such misery?

Every time that Masha, by some little sound or movement, drew attention to herself, he would look at her dully and wonder what was to become of her. What if Tatyana should happen to come in and find her here? What was he to do with her? He felt as dizzy as if he had breathed in charcoal fumes. When he felt the need of sleep he climbed down off the window-sill and stretched out on the floor beside the bed with his coat rolled under his head as a pillow. He dreamed that Masha had died and was lying on the dirt floor of a barn surrounded by young ladies in pink and blue and white frocks who were singing over her body. When they sang sad songs they all laughed discordantly, and when they sang gay ones they wept and shook their heads, wiping their eyes on dainty white handkerchiefs. It was dark and damp in the barn, and in one corner Savel, the smith, was forging an iron grating, striking loudly with his hammer on the red-hot metal. Someone was walking on the roof of the barn and shouting:

“Ilya! Il—ya—a—a!”

But he, too, was lying in the barn, bound so tightly that he could not speak or move.

“Ilya! Get up! Please do!”



He woke up and saw Pavel Grachov sitting on a chair and giving him little kicks. A bright ray of sunlight came through the window and fell on the boiling samovar that was standing on the table. Ilya narrowed his eyes against the dazzling light.

"Listen, Ilya . . ."

Pavel's voice was as husky as if he had been on a prolonged bout, his face was yellow, his hair ruffled. The sight of him made Ilya spring to his feet.

"What is it?" he said under his breath.

"She's been caught," said Pavel with a shake of his head.

"What? Who? Where is she?" asked Ilya, leaning over and taking him by the shoulder. Pavel tottered.

"They've put her in jail," he murmured.

"What for?" said Ilya.

Masha woke up, and at the sight of Pavel she started and fixed frightened eyes on him.

"They say she stole a purse . . . from some merchant."

Ilya gave his friend a little push and walked away.

"And she struck a policeman in the face."

"Oh, of course," said Ilya with a hard little laugh.

"If you've got to go to jail, go in with both feet."

As soon as Masha was sure the talk was not about her, she smiled.

"If they'd only put *me* in jail!" she said softly.

Pavel glanced first at her, then at Ilya.

"Don't you remember her?" said Ilya. "Masha. Perfishka's daughter. Have you forgotten?"

"Oh," said Pavel indifferently, and turned away, missing the smile Masha gave him when she found out who he was.

"Ilya," said Pavel unhappily, "what if she did it for my sake?"

Ilya, uncombed and unwashed, sat down on the bed at Masha's feet and looked from one to the other, appalled by this new trouble.

"I was sure this story would have a bad ending," he said slowly.

"She wouldn't listen to me." Pavel's tone was despondent.

"Humph!" said Ilya scornfully. "So it all happened just because she wouldn't listen to you, eh? What had you to tell her?"

"I loved her."

"What the hell did she want with your love?"

The stories of these two people, Pavel and Masha, made him indignant, and, having no other target, he vented his feelings on them. "Don't everybody want to live decent and enjoy themselves? She's no different from anybody else, and all you can say is: 'I love you,' meaning: live with me and do without everything. A fine thing!"

"What ought I to have done?" asked Pavel meekly.

The question took some of the wind out of Ilya's sails. Involuntarily he fell to thinking.

Gavrik poked his head through the door.

"Shall I open the shop?" he said.

"To hell with the shop!" cried Ilya impatiently. "As if I could run the shop now!"

"Is it me who's in the way?" asked Pavel.

He was sitting with his elbows on his knees staring at the floor. A vein in his temple was throbbing with strain.

"You?" exclaimed Ilya, glancing at him. "No, you're not in my way, and Masha's not in my way. But there's something in the way of all of us—you and me and Masha. I may be talking nonsense, but there's one thing sure: none of us has the ghost of a chance to live like a human being had ought. I'm sick of seeing dirt and trouble—crime and muck of all sorts—and yet, here I am myself. . . ."

He broke off and went pale.

"You're always talking about yourself," observed Pavel.

"And you? Who are you always talking about?" asked Ilya sarcastically. "Everybody's sick with his own sores and groans with his own voice. It's not about myself but about everybody I talk, because everybody comes and tells me their troubles."

"I'm going," said Pavel, rising heavily.

"Rats!" said Ilya. "You must understand what I say and not take it as a personal offence."

"I feel as if I'd been hit on the head with a brick. Poor Vera! What's to be done?"

"Nothing's to be done," said Ilya decisively. "You can write her down as done for. They're sure to give her a sentence."

Pavel sat down again.

"What if I say she stole the money for me?" he asked.

"Who are you—a prince? Go ahead and say it; all they'll do is put you in jail too. Well, we'd better make ourselves look decent. Pavel and I will go into the shop, Masha, and you get up and tidy the room. Pour us out some tea."

Masha gave a little start and lifted her head off the pillow.

"Must I go home?" she asked Ilya.

"Home? Home's any place where a person can hope to have a little peace."

Ilya and Pavel went out.

"What do you want with her? She looks half dead," said Pavel when they were in the shop.

Ilya told him briefly what had happened. To his surprise, Masha's story infused new life into Pavel.

"The old devil!" he said about her husband, and even went so far as to smile.

Ilya was standing next to him gazing round at his shop.

"Not long ago you said I'd get no joy out of all this,"

he said, indicating the shop with a wave of his hand. "Well, you were right," and he nodded his head sardonically. "What good do I get out of standing here selling stuff all day long? It's cost me my freedom. I daren't leave the place. Used to be I'd go where I liked, up and down the streets. If I come to an inviting spot I'd sit down and enjoy it. But now I'm locked up in here day after day."

"Vera'd make a good shop assistant for you," said Pavel.

Ilya darted him a quick glance and said nothing.

"Come and have tea," called Masha.

All three of them drank their tea without speaking. The sun was shining outside, the bare feet of street urchins went slapping past the window, vegetable vendors strolled by. Everything spoke of spring, of fine warm days, but the little room in which they were sitting smelt of dampness, the occasional words exchanged were uttered in low dreary voices, and the samovar hissed monotonously, giving back a lone ray of sun.

"It's as if we'd just come home from a funeral," said Ilya.

"Vera's funeral," added Pavel. "I sit here wondering if it's my fault she's in jail."

"Probably," said Ilya mercilessly.

Pavel stared at him.

"You're a hard-hearted creature," he said.

“Has anything ever been done to make me soft-hearted?” shouted Ilya. “Has anybody ever patted my head for me? True, there was one person who may have really loved me, and she was a whore.”

The blood rushed to his cheeks and into his eyes in a sudden wave of burning indignation; he sprang up, possessed of a longing to swear and shout and bang his fists on wall and table.

The terrified Masha began to wail loudly and plaintively, like a little child.

“I’m going away—let me go,” she whispered through her tears, bobbing her head as if trying to hide it in a hole.

Ilya was silenced. He saw that Pavel, too, was looking at him in disapproval.

“What are you crying about?” Ilya said testily. “It wasn’t you I was shouting at. And there’s nowhere for you to go. It’s me who’ll go away. Pavel will sit here with you. Gavrik! If Tatyana Vlasyevna comes . . . who’s that?”

Someone was knocking at the door leading into the courtyard. Gavrik looked inquiringly at his master.

“Open the door,” said Ilya.

Gavrik’s sister was standing in the doorway. For a few seconds she stood erect and motionless, her head thrown back as she took in the gathering with narrowed eyes. Presently a look of disgust came upon her cold, homely

face, and, without acknowledging Ilya's bow, she said to her brother:

"I want to speak to you for a minute, Gavrik. Come out here."

Ilya was furious; the insult sent such a sudden spurt of blood to his head that it stung his eyes.

"Be so good as to bow back when you're bowed to," he said with cold restraint.

She lifted her head higher and drew her eyebrows together. Tight-lipped, she swept Ilya with a glance and said not a word. Gavrik, too, glanced angrily at his master.

"It's not among drunks or thieves you find yourself," went on Ilya, twitching all over. "You've been treated with respect, and as an educated young woman, you ought to return the compliment."

"Drop it, Sonya," said Gavrik suddenly, in a conciliatory tone, and he went over to his sister and took her hand.

An uncomfortable pause ensued. Ilya and the girl stared at each other defiantly and seemed to be waiting for something. Masha crept into a corner. Pavel blinked his eyes foolishly.

"Well, speak up, Sonya," said Gavrik impatiently. "Do you think he meant to hurt your feelings? Oh, no!" His face broke into a smile. "It's just that he's sort of . . . sort of queer."

His sister gave his hand a jerk.

"What do you want of me?" she asked Ilya brusquely.

"Nothing . . . only. . ."

Suddenly he had an inspiration. He took a step towards her and said as politely as he could:

"Be so kind . . . you see . . . here we are, the three of us . . . dark, ignorant people . . . and you . . . you're a young lady of education. . ."

He was in too much of a hurry to express his idea, and the girl's stern, level gaze distracted him—seemed to repulse him. He dropped his eyes.

"I can't say it all at once like this," he murmured, annoyed and embarrassed. "If you've got a minute to spare . . . if you'd come in and sit down. . ."

He stepped back to make way for her.

"Stay where you are, Gavrik," said the girl, and left her brother standing at the door while she came into the room. Ilya pushed a stool towards her. She sat down. Pavel went into the shop, Masha cringed in the corner beside the stove, Ilya stood motionless two paces in front of Gavrik's sister, unable to begin.

"Well?" she said.

"Well . . . this is how it is. . ." said Ilya, taking a deep breath. "See that girl? . . . or rather, a married woman . . . married to an old man. He's . . . he's a brute . . . and she ran away, all bruised and pinched. Ran here to me. Maybe



you suspect something bad? You're wrong if you do."

He spoke incoherently, becoming tangled up in his words, anxious to tell Masha's story and give his own view of the matter at the same time. It was his own ideas he was especially anxious to tell this girl, and as she watched him her glance softened.

"I understand," she interrupted. "And you don't know what to do? First of all you must show her to a doctor. Let him examine her. There's a doctor of my acquaintance . . . would you like me to take her to him? Gavrik, look and see what time it is. Eleven? Good, he's receiving at this time. Call an izvozchik, Gavrik. And now introduce me to your friend."

But Ilya did not stir. He had not suspected that this stern, unapproachable girl could speak so gently. And he was astonished by the look on her face: she who had always held herself so proudly now showed nothing but anxiety, and although her nostrils were more dilated than ever, there was a look of kindness and simplicity in her face he had never seen there before. As he watched her he smiled shyly, self-consciously, without speaking.

She turned away from him and went over to Masha.

"Don't cry, dear," she said softly, "and don't be afraid. The doctor's a kind man; he'll not do anything but examine you and give you a paper. And I'll bring you back here. Come, there's a dear, don't cry."

She put her hands on Masha's shoulders with the intention of drawing her over.

"Oh, it hurts!" groaned Masha softly.

"What hurts?"

Ilya smiled as he listened.

"Why, it's . . . it's an outrage!" cried the girl, recoiling. Her face was white and her eyes were flashing with horror and indignation. "How dreadfully you've been injured!"

"So now you see the sort of life we live!" cried Ilya, his anger reviving. "And I can give you another example if you care to have it. There he is! Allow me to introduce you to my friend Pavel Savelyevich Grachov."

Pavel held out his hand without looking at her.

"My name is Sonya Medvedeva," she said, studying Pavel's glum face; then, turning to Ilya: "And you, I think, are Ilya Lunyev?"

"Yes," said Ilya eagerly, grasping her hand tightly in his own and holding it as he went on, "If *that's* the sort you are . . . that is . . . once you're willing to help her, maybe you'd do the same thing for him. There's a noose to be cut here, too."

As she gazed gravely into his handsome, agitated face she made a timid effort to free her hand. But he was so carried away by what he had to tell her about Vera and Pavel that he kept a tight hold on it and even shook it as he talked:

“He used to write poetry, and what poetry! But he’s burnt out. And she, too . . . perhaps you think that because she was . . . er . . . that sort, that that’s all there was to her? Oh, no; you mustn’t think that. Nobody’s all good or all bad.”

“What?” said the girl.

“What I mean is, if a person’s bad, there’s sure to be some good in him; and if he’s good, there’s sure to be some bad in him. We’ve all of us got speckled hearts—all of us!”

“What you say is very true,” said the girl, nodding her head in approval. “But do let go of my hand if you don’t mind. You’re hurting me.”

Ilya apologized, but she had already turned to instruct Pavel:

“It’s shameful not to do anything. You must take measures—find a lawyer to defend her. I’ll find one if you want me to. Do you? And nothing will happen to her, they’re sure to acquit her; they are indeed.”

Her face was flushed, her hair was falling in wisps about her temples, and her eyes were shining.

Masha, who was standing next to her, looked at her with the trusting curiosity of a child. Ilya looked triumphantly now at Masha, now at Pavel, proud that this girl was in his room.

“If you really can do anything to help, please do,” said Pavel in a trembling voice.

"Will you come to my house at seven this evening? Gavrik will tell you how to get there."

"I will. I don't know how to thank you."

"Nonsense. People are expected to help each other."

"And how they do!" exclaimed Ilya ironically.

The girl quickly turned to him, but Gavrik, evidently feeling himself to be the one sane person in this excited company, pulled his sister by the hand and said:

"Time for you to be going, isn't it?"

"Yes. Put on your things, Masha."

"I haven't any," said Masha.

"Oh. Well, it doesn't matter. Come along. And you won't forget to come, Pavel Savelyevich? Good-bye, Ilya Yakovlevich."

The two friends shook her hand deferentially and without speaking, and she went out leading Masha by the arm. When she reached the door she turned round and, tossing her head high into the air, said to Ilya:

"I forgot. I didn't bow to you when I came in. That was horrid of me and I apologize."

The colour rushed to her face and she dropped her eyes. Ilya's heart sang to hear her say this.

"I'm very sorry. At first I thought you were ... er ... drinking."

She stopped and swallowed before she went on:

"And when you reproached me I thought it was as my

... as my brother's master you were speaking, but I was mistaken. I'm awfully glad. It was the sense of your own worth that prompted you to say what you did."

Suddenly her face lit up with a lovely smile and she said with delight, as if the pronouncing of the words gave her untold pleasure:

"I'm terribly glad it all turned out like this—terribly, terribly glad!"

And she went out smiling, reminding Ilya of a little grey cloud touched by the sunrise. The two boys stood gazing after her. The faces of both of them were ecstatic, if a bit comic. Presently Ilya looked about the room.

"Clean?" he said, giving Pavel a little nudge. Pavel laughed softly. "That's a somebody for you!" Ilya sighed. "What do you think of her, eh?"

"Swept everything before her like the wind!"

"You saw it too?" said Ilya gloatingly, running a hand through his curly hair. "Hear how she apologized? That's what's meant by being *really* educated: there's nobody you can't respect, but there's nobody you'll be the first to bow to. Just remember that!"

"A very nice lady," said Pavel with a smile.

"Bright and shining, like a star."

"Uh-huh. Didn't take her long to decide who was to do what."

Ilya laughed excitedly. He rejoiced to discover that the

proud young lady was actually the soul of simplicity, and he was pleased with himself for upholding his dignity in her presence.

Gavrik fidgeted, anxious to be up and doing.

"Gavrik," said Ilya, taking him by the shoulder, "that's a fine sister you've got."

"She's good enough," said the boy condescendingly. "Are we going to open the shop today? Maybe we'll call it a holiday, eh? I'd go off for a tramp in the fields."

"Quite right—no work today! Not for you and me!"

"I'm going to police headquarters," said Pavel, who was feeling depressed again. "Maybe they'll let me see her."

"Well, I'm taking the day off," said Ilya.

In buoyant spirits he strolled down the street, his mind filled with thoughts of the girl, whom he contrasted with everyone else of his acquaintance. He could not forget her face, every feature of which expressed an unwavering aspiration towards some high purpose, and he recalled the words of her apology.

But how she cut me off at first! he thought with a smile, and he racked his brains to discover why, before she had exchanged a single serious word with him, she should have been so proud and antagonistic.

Life was humming all about him. Some laughing students came down the street, loaded carts rattled past, carriages spun along on their tyres, a beggar hobbled over the

pavement on a wooden leg, two prisoners with an armed escort carried a full tub swinging from a pole on their shoulders, a little dog jogged along with its tongue lolling out. The rattle, the bang, the shouts, and the footsteps, all merged in a lively and invigorating roar of sound. Warm dust filled the air and tickled the nostrils. The sun blazed out of a deep, clear sky, conferring a hot shine upon all earthly objects. Ilya gazed about him with a pleasure he had not experienced in a long time. Everything looked new and extraordinarily interesting. Swiftly down the street comes a pretty girl with rosy cheeks and a pert manner, and she gives Ilya a bright, pleasant glance, that seems to say:

“What an attractive fellow you are!”

Ilya smiles at her.

A shop-boy runs out into the street with a copper kettle whose lid rattles merrily as he empties out the cold water, splashing the legs of the passers-by. It is hot and stuffy and noisy in the street, and some old limes growing in the town graveyard lure Ilya into the coolness and quiet of their shade. Behind the white stone wall of the ancient graveyard the foliage rises in mighty green waves whose crests are ornamented, foam-like, by a delicate tracery of leaves. There, high in the air, each separate leaf is etched distinctly against the deep blue of the sky and quivers as if about to melt into the ether.

Ilya enters through the gate and makes his way down a broad lane of limes, breathing deeply of their fragrance. Between the trees, in the shade of their branches, stand gravestones of marble and granite—stolid, heavy, moss-grown. Here and there among the mysterious shadows gleam gilt crosses and half-erased inscriptions. Honey-suckle, acacia, hawthorn, and elder bushes grow within the grave enclosures, hiding the mounds with their foliage. An occasional wooden cross protrudes above the green waves and is entwined on all sides by tender vines. Through the network of leaves glisten the velvety-white trunks of young birches; shy and retiring, they seemed to have shrunk purposely into the shadow, the better to be seen there. The green mounds are bright with flowers, wasps buzz in the silence, two white butterflies chase each other through the air, gnats flit soundlessly in the sunshine. On every hand the grass and bushes push strongly up out of the earth towards the light, screening the melancholy mounds. All the verdure of the graveyard is charged with an urgency to grow and expand, to consume light and air, to transform the juices of this rich earth into colour and scent and beauty, to delight the eye and the heart of man! Everywhere life is triumphant! Always life will triumph.

Ilya enjoyed walking here in the stillness, filling his lungs with the fragrance of the flowers and the limes. He, too, felt quiet and untroubled; he found peace for his soul and



rest for his mind, basking in the joy of a solitude he had long yearned for.

He turned out of the lane into a little path on the left, and as he walked along he read the inscriptions on the crosses and gravestones. All about him were grave enclosures made of wrought iron, rich and elaborate.

"*Beneath this cross lie the remains of God's servant Bonifanty,*" he read with a smile. The name was amusing. An enormous monument of grey granite was raised over the remains of Bonifanty. Next to him, behind another enclosure, lay Pyotr Babushkin, twenty-eight years old.

Very young, thought Ilya.

On a modest column of white marble he read:

*Earth is the poorer by one sweet flower;  
Heaven is the richer by one bright star.*

Ilya reflected on these lines and found them very touching. Suddenly it was as if someone had stabbed him in the heart. He staggered and closed his eyes. But even through closed eyes he could see the inscription that had been as a knife-thrust. The gold letters cut into brown stone were branded upon his mind:

"*Here lies the body of Vasily Gavrilovich Poluektov, Merchant of the Second Guild.*"

The next moment he was frightened by his fright;

quickly he opened his eyes and glanced furtively about. No one was in sight, but in the distance he heard a funeral service being sung. Through the silence came a tenor voice:

*To thee, oh Lord. . . .*

And a bass voice responded querulously:

*We beg for mercy. . . .*

Very soft, almost inaudible, was the click of the swinging censer.

Ilya leaned against the trunk of a maple and gazed at the grave of the man he had murdered. His cap, the back of which was pressed against the tree, rose off his forehead. His brows were drawn and his lips quivered and parted, exposing his teeth. He thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets and dug his feet into the earth.

Poluektov's tombstone was in the form of a sarcophagus, with representations of an open book and a skull and cross-bones on the lid. Beside it, within the same enclosure, was another and smaller sarcophagus whose inscription said that here lay the remains of Yevpraksia Poluektova, twenty-two years old.

His first wife, thought Ilya.

The thought flashed in that tiny area of his brain that alone remained free of the intense labour of recollection. His whole being was absorbed in remembrances of Poluektov—his first encounter with him, the act of stran-

gling him, the drip of the old man's saliva on his hand. But as Ilya revived all this in his mind, he felt neither fear nor regret; it was hate and pain and resentment that the sight of the grave inspired in him. And a great indignation surged up in his heart as he silently addressed the money-lender, deeply convinced of the truth of his words:

I've ruined my whole life on your account, God damn you! On your account, do you hear? You fiend, you! How am I going to go on living now? I'll wear the stain of you to my dying day!

He wanted to shout at the top of his voice; indeed, he had difficulty in repressing this wild longing. In his mind's eye he saw the spiteful, wizened face of Poluektov, the stern image of Strogany with his bald pate and red eyebrows, the self-complacent Petrukha, the stupid Kirik, the grey-haired Khrenov with his pug nose and pig eyes—a whole gallery of portraits of people he knew. There was a roaring in his ears and he fancied that these people had surrounded him and were inescapably closing in on him.

He pushed himself away from the tree. His cap fell off. As he stooped down to pick it up he could not take his eyes off the grave of Poluektov, money-lender and dealer in stolen goods. He felt sick and breathless, the blood rushed to his head, his eyes ached with strain. With a great effort he tore them away from the monument, went over to the enclosure, seized it in his hands, and, with a shudder of hate,

spat on the grave. And as he walked away he struck his feet hard upon the ground, as if he meant to do it injury.

He did not want to go home. His heart was heavy and he was weighed down by misery. He walked slowly, looking at nothing, interested in nothing, thinking of nothing. On coming to the end of the street he instinctively turned the corner, and suddenly realized that he was in the vicinity of Petrukha's pub. This made him think of Yakov. When he reached the gate he felt he ought to go in, though he had no desire to. He climbed the steps of the back entrance.

"Good people!" came Perfishka's voice, "take pity on your hands and spare my ribs!"

Ilya stopped in the doorway. Through a haze of dust and tobacco smoke he caught sight of Yakov standing behind the counter. His hair was plastered down smoothly and he was wearing a tight jacket with short sleeves. Quickly he filled teapots, counted out lumps of sugar, poured out vodka, pulled the cash drawer noisily in and out. Waiters came running up to him, calling out as they tossed their checks on the counter:

"Half a pint!" "Two beers!" "Ten kopeks' worth of stew!"

He's got into the trick, thought Ilya with malicious satisfaction as he noticed the deftness with which his friend's red hands dispensed food and drink.

“You!” exclaimed Yakov when Ilya came up to the counter, but instantly he glanced uneasily at the door behind him. His forehead was beaded with sweat, his face was sallow, with red spots on his cheek-bones. He seized Ilya’s hand and shook it hard, but the effort brought on a dry cough.

“How are you getting on?” asked Ilya, forcing himself to smile. “So they’ve put you in harness?”

“Can’t be helped.”

Yakov’s shoulders sagged and he seemed to shrink.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you,” he said, gazing at Ilya with his sad, kind eyes. “I’d like to have a chat with you—oh, yes, my father’s out today. Wait: step in here and I’ll ask my stepmother to take my place.”

He opened the door into his father’s room and called out in respectful tones:

“Mama! Could you come here a minute?”

Ilya went into the room he had once shared with his uncle and examined it carefully. The only changes he noticed were that the wallpaper had grown darker, there was only one bed in the room instead of two, and a bookshelf hung over it. The place where Ilya’s bed had stood was now taken up by a big, clumsy, box-like piece of furniture.

“Well, I’m free for an hour,” exclaimed Yakov happily, coming in and locking the door behind him. “Want some

tea? Good. Iva-an! Tea!" he shouted. The shout brought on his cough, and he coughed for a long time, all bent over as if trying to expel something from his lungs.

"A fine cough you've got!" said Ilya.

"Consumption. My, but I'm glad to see you! You've got to look so . . . so important! Well, how's life treating you?"

"Oh, all right," said Ilya after a pause. "I'm still alive, but it's you I'd like to hear something about."

Ilya was loath to speak about himself, or to speak at all. Yakov's wasted appearance roused his pity. But it was a cold pity—a barren sort of emotion.

"I go on bearing my life somehow," said Yakov softly.

"That father of yours has sucked all the blood out of you."

On the other side of the wall Perfishka was playing his accordion and singing:

*A ruble will not last you long,  
Be my sweetie for a song.*

"What's that box-like affair?" asked Ilya.

"That? It's a harmonium. Father bought it for me for twenty-five rubles. He says I'm to learn to play it and then he'll buy me a good one and put it in the pub so's I can play to the customers. He says it's the only chance of getting

any good out of me. I know why he wants it: all the other pubs have organs in them—ours is the only one without. I like playing it, though.”

“The son-of-a-bitch,” said Ilya with a little laugh.

“What makes you say that? I really am not the least use to him.”

Ilya darted him a hard glance and said indignantly:

“Here’s what you should tell him, ‘When I die, dear Papa, drag my body into the pub and take five kopeks a snout from the pigs who would like to get a look at me.’ That’s how you’ll be of some use to him.”

Yakov laughed uneasily and went off into another fit of coughing, clutching frantically at his throat and chest.

Meanwhile Perfishka was reciting trippingly:

*He ate no butter, ate no meat,  
Never got enough to eat,  
His empty belly ached and cried,  
But oh, he was so clean inside!*

“Who-o-o-p!” and his accordion festooned the words of the song with wild trills.

“How do you get on with your stepbrother?” asked Ilya when the spell of coughing was over.

“He doesn’t live with us,” said Yakov, lifting a face blue

from choking. "His master won't let him. After all, this is a public house and he's learning to be a gentleman." Yakov lowered his voice and went on sadly, "Remember that book? The brown one? He took it away from me. Said it was rare and worth a lot of money. So he took it. I begged him not to, but he wouldn't listen to me."

Ilya laughed. Then the two friends had tea together. The wallpaper had split in places and through the cracks in the wall came sounds and smells from the pub. At one point all other sounds were drowned out by a voice crying excitedly:

"Mitry Nikolayevich! Don't be a low-down cheat and make me out as saying something I didn't."

"I'm reading a certain book now," said Yakov. "It's called *Julia, or the Underground Castle of Mazzini*. Very interesting. Are you doing any reading these days?"

"To hell with your underground castles! I'm pretty well underground myself," said Ilya gloomily.

Yakov looked at him in sympathy.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Ilya wondered whether he should tell him about Masha or not, but before he had made up his mind Yakov went on:

"You're always like that—huffed up—with a chip on your shoulder, I don't think it's worth it. After all, nobody's really to be blamed for things."

Ilya drank his tea without replying.



"It's been said: 'Everyone gets his own deserts,' and that's the truth. Take my father—he's a hard one, no denying that. And then all of a sudden along comes that new wife of his, Fyokla Timofeyevna, and puts him under her thumb. What a life she leads him! He's even taken to drink. And they haven't been married long. And there's some Fyokla Timofeyevna waiting for every man, to punish him for his sins."

Ilya found this talk tiresome. He pushed his cup away impatiently and, to his own surprise, suddenly said:

"What are you waiting for?"

"What do you mean?" asked Yakov quietly, opening wide his eyes.

"What are you . . . er . . . that is, in the future; what are you waiting for?"

Yakov dropped his head and became lost in thought.

"Well?" said Ilya in a low voice. He was desperately uneasy and wanted to get away as soon as possible.

"What's there for me to wait for?" asked Yakov quietly, without looking up. "Nothing. I'll die soon—and that's all." Then he threw back his head and there was a happy smile on his harassed face. "I've been seeing blue dreams. Everything blue—not only the sky, but the earth and the trees and the flowers and the grass—everything. And all so still. As still as if there was nothing there. And everything blue. And me walking through it all, on and on,

without end, never getting the least bit tired. And I'm never quite sure whether it's really me or not. So pleasant and easy. Blue dreams—that means I'll die soon."

"Well, I'm off," said Ilya, getting up.

"But why? Stay a little longer."

"No, I'm going. Good-bye."

Yakov got up too.

"Well, then, good-bye."

Ilya squeezed his hot hand and stared for a moment into his eyes without finding anything to say in parting. And he wanted to say something, wanted to badly, so badly that it hurt.

"And Masha? I've heard she's having a bad time of it," said Yakov sadly.

"She is."

"Looks as if we're all cut out for the same end. You don't seem to be enjoying life particularly, are you?"

Yakov smiled faintly as he spoke, and his voice and his words—everything about him—was somehow bloodless and colourless. Ilya relaxed his grip and Yakov's hand fell limply to his side.

"Well, good-bye, Yakov. Forgive me if I've—"

"God's the one who forgives. Will you come again?"

Ilya went out without replying.

Once out in the street he felt better. He clearly understood that Yakov would die soon, and he felt that some-

one was cruelly to blame for it. He was not sorry that Yakov would die, for he could not imagine so meek a creature getting on in this world. For a long time he had looked upon Yakov as one doomed to extinction. But the thought that incensed him was: Why should anyone so inoffensive be made to suffer so, and be driven out of the world before his time? And the thought strengthened and increased the resentment that had become the foundation of his being.

He could not sleep that night. Despite the open window, his room was suffocating. He went out into the yard and lay on the ground under an elm growing by the fence. He lay on his back gazing up into the night sky, and the longer he gazed, the more stars he discovered. The Milky Way was like a silver scarf thrown across the sky from one end to the other. The sight of it seen through the branches of the trees induced a feeling at once pleasant and sad. The sky, in which nobody lived, was hung with stars, but what was there to adorn the earth? Ilya narrowed his eyes and had the illusion that the branches of the tree were rising higher and higher. Against the blue velvet of the starry sky the black tracery of the branches looked like hands stretched toward the sky in the longing to reach it. Ilya recalled Yakov's blue dreams, and the image of Yakov himself rose before him, a blue Yakov, frail and transparent, with kindly eyes as bright as stars.

There he was, being driven into the grave because he was so meek and humble, whereas those who drove him did whatever they pleased . . .

Gavrik's sister now came to the shop almost every day. She was always in a hurry to be about her business, and after giving Ilya a firm handshake and exchanging a few words with him she would be off, leaving him with something new to think about. One day she said to him:

“Do you like selling things?”

“Oh, I wouldn't say I like it particularly,” he replied with a shrug of his shoulders, “but I have to make a living somehow.”

Her grave eyes looked at him searchingly and her face seemed to be straining towards him.

“Have you never tried making a living by your own labour?” she asked.

Ilya did not understand.

“What did you say?”

“Have you ever worked?”

“Always. All my life. You see how I work here in the shop,” he said in some perplexity.

She smiled, and there was something hurtful about her smile.

“Do you think selling things is honest labour? Don't you see the difference?”

“Why, is there a difference?”

A glance into her face told Ilya she was in earnest.

“Indeed there is,” she said with a condescending smile. “Labour is when a person makes something by expending his own strength; when he makes things like tape, ribbons, chairs, cupboards—do you see?”

Ilya nodded and blushed: he was ashamed to admit that he did not.

“As for trade—how can that be called labour? It doesn’t give people anything,” she said with conviction, studying Ilya’s face as she spoke.

“That’s right,” conceded Ilya slowly and cautiously. “It isn’t hard to trade . . . once you’re used to it . . . . But of course it does give people something. If it didn’t give them profit, they wouldn’t trade.”

She dropped the subject and turned to speak to her brother, and soon she went out, taking leave of Ilya with a slight nod, and her face was proud and cold, just as it had been before the affair with Masha. Ilya wondered if anything he had said could have offended her. He went back in his mind over all his remarks, but could discover nothing offensive. Then he recalled what she had said, and began to ponder over it. What difference could she find between labour and trade?

He could not understand why she should look so angry and defiant, when she was really very kind-hearted and

not only pitied people, but did everything in her power to help them. Pavel had visited her at her house and had gone into ecstasies over her and the way she lived.

“Whenever you go to her house it’s: ‘Glad to see you!’ If they’re having dinner, be so good as to have it with them, or if it’s tea, have tea. Just like that. And lots of people. All singing and shouting and arguing about books. Very gay and lively. And the number of books! Like in a bookshop. The house isn’t big—everybody gets in everybody else’s way, but they just laugh. They’re all educated folk. One’s a lawyer, another’ll be a doctor soon, and then there’s students and such like. But you soon forget you’re beneath them and laugh and smoke along with them. A fine lot. Lively and earnest.”

“I don’t suppose she’ll invite me,” said Ilya gloomily. “She’s too proud.”

“Her?” exclaimed Pavel. “I tell you she’s as simple as can be. Don’t wait to be asked—go yourself. Once you’re there, you’re there. Their house is like a pub, honest to goodness. Everybody’s welcome. Look at me—who am I compared to them? But I feel right at home, even if I’ve only been there twice. Interesting people. They enjoy life.”

“How’s Masha?” asked Ilya.

“Seems to be coming out of it. Sits around with a smile on her face. They’re taking good care of her—making

her drink milk and take medicine. Khrenov's going to get his, all right! The lawyer says they'll make the old devil answer for what he's done. They take Masha to the Public Investigator. And they're doing something for Vera, too—trying to speed up the trial. Oh, yes, you'd like her house. Just a little one—as jammed with people as a stove with logs, and gives off just as much heat and light.”

“And her? What about her?”

Pavel spoke about her with the same reverence with which he had spoken in childhood of the prisoners who had taught him to read and write. He grew very excited, and his sentences became exclamatory.

“Her? Oh, she's somebody, I tell you! Bosses everybody around, and if a person says anything he shouldn't—grrrr! She's like a tiger!”

“Don't I know that!” said Ilya with a sardonic laugh.

He envied Pavel. He wanted dreadfully to pay a visit to this formidable young girl, but his pride prevented his going without an invitation.

As he stood behind the counter he would think to himself: There are lots of people in this world, and each of them does his best to get some good out of his neighbour, but she don't. What good does she get out of helping Masha and Vera? She's poor. Every crumb counts in that house. In other words, she's got a big heart. And

yet, look how she talks to me. Why am I any worse than Pavel?

He was so absorbed in these meditations that everything else became of little importance to him. It was as if a chink had been made in the darkness of his life, and through this chink he felt, rather than saw, the distant gleam of something he had never yet made contact with.

“You’ve got to order some more of this narrow woollen tape,” said Tatyana Vlasyevna in a crisp tone. “And you’re almost out of lace edging, too. And black cotton—number fifty. A certain firm wants to sell us pearl buttons. Their agent came to see me. I sent him to you. Has he been here?”

“No,” said Ilya curtly. He had come to heartily dislike this woman. He suspected that she was living with Korsakov, who had recently been promoted to Chief of Police. She rarely made appointments with Ilya any more, although she was as tender and jocular with him as ever, and whenever she did try to see him he would find some way of getting out of it. That this did not provoke her made him despise her the more.

The slut! The whore! he would say to himself.

He found her particularly objectionable when she came to the shop to check the stock. She would whirl about like a top, jump up on the counter, take boxes down



from the top shelves, sneeze from the dust, and shake back her hair. She was perpetually nagging at Gavrik:

“A shop-boy ought to be quick and obliging. He doesn't get paid for sitting in the doorway and picking his nose. And when his mistress speaks to him he ought to listen attentively and not glower at her.”

But Gavrik was a man of character. He took her scoldings complacently and spoke rudely to her, without the least sign of respect for her status as his mistress. When she went out he said to Ilya:

“The peewit's gone.”

“You mustn't speak like that of your mistress,” said Ilya, restraining a smile.

“Mistress, my eye!” said Gavrik. “All she does is hop in, chirp, and hop out. You're my boss.”

“And her,” put in Ilya weakly, loving the lad for his bluntness and independence of spirit.

“Well, she's a peewit, and that's that,” said Gavrik.

Once Tatyana Vlashevna said to Ilya:

“You don't train the boy properly. And on the whole, I find it my duty to say that of late our affairs have been carried on ... er ... how shall I put it? without enthusiasm—without love for the business.”

Ilya made no reply, but he hated her with all his heart and thought to himself: I wish you'd sprain an ankle hopping about in here, you harpy.

He got a letter from Uncle Terenty, saying he had been not only to Kiev, but to the Troitsko-Sergiyevsky Monastery and had almost made a trip to the famous monastery on the Solovki Islands in the White Sea, but had got only as far as the monastery on Balaam Island in Lake Ladoga and would soon be home.

That's something to look forward to, thought Ilya with vexation. He'll probably want to live with me.

Some customers came in, and while he was waiting on them Gavrik's sister entered. She was so tired she could hardly stand up, and as soon as she had greeted him she nodded towards the door leading to his room and said:

"Is there any water in there?"

"I'll fetch it in just a second," said Ilya.

"No, I will."

She went into the room and stayed there until Ilya finished his business and joined her. He found her standing in front of the "Phases of a Man's Life." She turned her head as he entered and said, indicating the picture with her eyes:

"How vulgar!"

He was somewhat taken aback by her remark and gave a guilty smile, as if it were his fault that the picture was vulgar. But before he could ask her for an explanation she had gone.

A few days later she brought her brother his clean linen

and scolded him for tearing and soiling his clothes so carelessly.

"There she goes!" said Gavrik impudently. "Tatyana Vlasyevna is for ever pulling my ear, and you're almost as bad."

"Is he very naughty?" the girl asked Ilya.

"No naughtier than he knows how to be," said Ilya with a smile.

"I behave quite all right," said Gavrik staunchly.

"The only trouble with him is that he wags his tongue too much," said Ilya.

"Do you hear?" said the girl to her brother frowning.

"I hear, all right," said Gavrik belligerently.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," put in Ilya. "A person who can answer back has an advantage over them that can't. When a fellow who can't is given a beating he keeps his mouth shut, and so they beat him into the grave."

An expression that seemed to be approval passed over the girl's face as she listened to him. Ilya noticed this.

"There's something I wanted to ask you," he said in some embarrassment.

"What is it?"

She came close and looked straight at him. His eyes dropped under her gaze.

"Did I understand that you don't like people who are in trade?"

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because they live by other people's labour," said the girl very definitely.

Ilya threw back his head and lifted his brows; he was more astonished than offended by her words. And she had pronounced them so simply, so emphatically.

"That's . . . not true," said Ilya after a pause.

A change came over her face and she reddened.

"How much did you pay for those ribbons?" she asked coldly.

"Those? Seventeen kopeks an *arshin*."

"And how much do you sell them for?"

"Twenty."

"See? The three kopeks you take belongs to the people who made the ribbons and not to you. Do you understand?"

"No," confessed Ilya frankly.

At this her eyes flashed with hostility. He saw this clearly and cringed before her, but he hated himself for his cringing.

"I suppose it is hard for you to understand such a simple thing," she said, and made for the door. "But supposing you were a workingman and had made all this."

She indicated all the goods in the shop with a sweep of her hand and went on to tell how labour enriches

the lives of all except those who labour. At first she spoke in her usual manner—drily and precisely—and her homely face was without expression; but soon her brows quivered and drew together, her nostrils dilated, she threw back her head and hurled hard words at him charged with a youthful and adamant faith in their truth.

“The tradesman stands between workers and customers. He raises the price on goods without adding the slightest value to them. Trade is nothing but legalized theft.”

Ilya felt insulted but could find no means of refuting this bold girl who called him a thief and a do-nothing straight to his face. He clenched his teeth as he listened, but he did not believe what she said; he could not believe it. As he searched his mind for an answer that would instantly annihilate her contentions and force her to be silent, he found himself unwittingly admiring her for her boldness. And her words, hurtful and unexpected, gave rise to a disturbing question: What have I done to deserve it?

“It’s not at all as you say,” he interrupted in a loud voice when he could be silent no longer. “You’re wrong. I don’t agree with you.”

A storm of protest rose in his breast and his face broke out in red blotches.

“Then answer me back,” she said calmly, sitting down on a stool and drawing her long plait over her shoulder to toy with.

Ilya avoided her hostile gaze.

"I will," he shouted, unable to contain himself. "My life's my answer. I ... for all you know I may have committed some great crime to get where I am."

"All the worse for you. And still that's no answer," she said in a tone that was like a dash of cold water in his face. He put his hands on the counter and leaned forward as if about to spring over it. Shaking back his curly hair he stared at her in silence for a few seconds, wounded by her words, amazed by her serenity. Her calm gaze and immobile face confounded him and acted as a check on his anger. He sensed something fearless and unrelenting in her manner, and the words he needed would not come.

"Well, why don't you say something?" she said challengingly; then, with a gloating little laugh, "There's nothing you can say, for what *I* said was the truth."

"Nothing?" echoed Ilya hollowly.

"Nothing. What could you say?"

Once more she gave him a condescending smile.

"Good-bye," she said, and went out, her head held high.

"That's not true. It's a lot of foolishness!" called Ilya after her, but she did not turn round.

He sank down on a stool. Gavrik, who was standing at the door, must have been pleased with his sister's be-

haviour, for the look he turned on his master was proud and triumphant.

"What are you staring at?" asked Ilya brusquely, wincing under the boy's gaze.

"Nothing," said Gavrik.

"Watch yourself!" admonished Ilya, adding after a pause, "Go out for a walk."

But even when he was alone he could not collect his thoughts. He was smarting so much under her words that he could not penetrate their meaning.

What have I ever done to her? She comes, gives me a piece of her mind, and goes away—just like that. Well, come again, young lady, and you'll get your answer—see if you don't!

He threatened her, and at the same time he tried to discover why she should have been so insulting. He remembered how Pavel had praised her for her cleverness and simplicity.

I don't suppose she hurts Pavel's feelings, he thought.

Raising his head, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. His black moustache was twitching, his large eyes had a tired look, two red spots were burning on his cheeks. Even now, agitated and depressed as he was, there was something coarsely handsome about him and his face could certainly not be compared with the yellow, sickly, bony face of Pavel Grachov.

Does she really like Pavel better than me? he thought. But what the hell does she care what I look like? I'm not her suitor.

He went into his room, drank a glass of water, and glanced about. The bright colours of the "Phases of a Man's Life" caught his eye and held it.

It's all a cheat. Is that the way people really live? he said to himself. And if they did, what a bore it would be.

He went over to the wall, tore the picture off, and took it into the shop. There he spread it out on the counter and made a more thorough study of it, regarding it cynically and staring until the colours all ran together. Presently he snatched it up, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it under the counter. But it rolled out and got under his feet. Annoyed, he picked it up, crumpled it tighter, and threw it out of the door into the street.

The street was noisy. A man with a walking-stick was coming down the opposite pavement; the striking of the stick did not coincide with his footsteps, and this gave the impression of his having three legs. Pigeons were cooing. There was a thumping upon metal—a chimney-sweep must be walking across a roof. An izvozchik drove past the shop; he was drowsing on his box, his head swinging to the bouncing of the vehicle. Everything seemed to be swinging. Ilya picked up his abacus and marked off twenty kopeks on it. He subtracted seventeen. Three were left.



He flipped the beads with his finger; they spun round on the wires with a low hum, separated, came to a standstill.

Ilya gave a sigh and put down the abacus. Then he leaned with his chest on the counter and lay there listening to his heartbeats.

Next day Gavrik's sister came back. She was the same as usual, wearing the same worn dress and the same expression on her face.

So here you are! thought Ilya hostilely as he watched her from his room.

He replied to her bow with a stiff little nod. Suddenly her face broke into a cordial smile and she said to him gently:

"Why are you looking so pale? Don't you feel well?"

"Quite all right," answered Ilya brusquely, trying to conceal the emotion evoked by her solicitude. It was a fine, glad emotion; her smile and her words had brushed tenderly against his heart, but he resolved to display his umbrage in the secret hope that this would induce her to smile again and to speak other words as gentle. This was his resolve, and he waited, sulking, his eyes averted.

"You seem to have taken offence at what I said," she remarked in a firm voice. The tone was so different from the one she had just used that Ilya looked up in alarm. Again she was her usual self, with a proud, overbearing look in her dark eyes.

"I'm used to having people offend me," said Ilya, laugh-

ing defiantly, but his heart was chilled with disappointment.

So you're trying to play with me? he thought. First pat me on the back, then slap me in the face? Oh, no you don't!

"I didn't mean to offend you," she said.

"You'd have a hard time doing that," he retorted with loud arrogance. "I know your kind! Birds like you don't fly high!"

She drew herself up and looked at him in astonishment. But Ilya was beyond noticing; possessed of a mad desire to pay her back, he hurled jagged words at her with calculated precision.

"That pride of yours and those airs you put on don't cost much. Anybody can get them in that gymnasium you go to. But if it wasn't for the gymnasium you'd be just an ordinary seamstress or a parlour-maid. You're too poor to be anything else, aren't you?"

"Mind what you're saying!" she said softly.

Ilya looked into her face and was glad to see her nostrils dilating and her cheeks burning.

"I say what I think, and what I think is that those airs of yours are damned cheap—not worth a straw."

"I don't put on airs," cried the girl in a ringing voice. Her brother ran up and seized her hand.

"Let's get out of here, Sonya," he cried in his turn, looking angrily at his master.

Ilya swept them with a glance and said with icy hatred: "That's it—get out. I have no more use for you than you have for me."

The two of them flickered oddly in his sight for a second and went out. He laughed in their wake.

Left alone, he stood without moving for a few minutes, drinking in the sweetness of revenge. Deep in his mind was engraved the girl's face—indignant, uncomprehending, slightly frightened.

But the boy...! was the thought that kept buzzing in his head. Gavrik's behaviour had unsettled him and taken the edge off his joy.

That's flying off the handle for you! he thought with a little laugh. If Tatyana should come in now I'd give it to her, too—for good measure.

He had an irresistible desire to thrust everyone away from him—roughly, hurtfully, mercilessly.

But Tatyana did not come. He spent the whole day alone, and the day seemed endless. When bedtime came he felt exceedingly lonely, and more injured by his loneliness than by the girl's words. He closed his eyes and listened into the stillness of the night. The slightest sound made him start up in fright, lift his head off the pillow and stare into the darkness with his eyes wide open. He lay awake until morning, waiting for something with a sensation of one locked up in a cellar, oppressed by the heat as well as

by his groping, disconnected thoughts. He got up with a throbbing head. He intended to heat the samovar but did not; he merely drank a dipperful of water when he had washed himself, then went in to open the shop.

At about noon he was visited by a scowling, acrimonious Pavel. Without so much as greeting Ilya, he said:

“What makes you act so high and mighty?”

Ilya caught the implication and shook his head hopelessly, without answering.

He, too, is against me, he thought.

“What right had you to be rude to Sophia Nikonovna?” went on Pavel, planting himself in front of his friend. Ilya could read a judgment passed on him in Pavel’s lowering face and reproachful glance, but he was indifferent to it.

“You’d do better to say hullo before you start talking. And take your cap off—there’s an icon in the corner.”

Pavel seized his cap by the peak and pulled it more tightly down on his head, twisting his lips scathingly, and began to speak quickly, hotly, in a shaking voice.

“Go ahead and puff yourself up! You’re rich now! Got a full belly! Remember how you once said, ‘There’s nobody we can look up to’? And as soon as one comes along you drive her away. Bah! You money-grubber!”

A feeling of dull apathy kept Ilya from answering back. Impassively he gazed at Pavel’s excited, scornful face, aware

that his jibes did not hurt him. The yellow hairs on Pavel's chin and upper lip were like mould growing on his lean face, and as Ilya stared at them he thought indifferently: Did I really hurt her so? I could have said worse things.

"She understands everything, she can explain everything, and you go and—oh, damn you!" said Pavel, peppering his speech with exclamations as usual.

"Don't try to teach me," said Ilya. "I'll do as I like. And I'll live as I like. I'm sick of all of you—going about preaching. . . ." He leaned heavily against one of the shelves and said, as if to himself, "What have you to say that's worth saying?"

"*She* has something," said Pavel with deep conviction, lifting a hand as if taking oath. "Those people know everything."

"Then go and join them," said Ilya tranquilly. He found what Pavel said and the excitement with which he said it equally disagreeable, but he had no wish to argue with him. He was submerged in a heavy, viscous apathy that kept him from speaking or thinking.

"I'm going!" said Pavel in the tone of a threat. "I'm going to them, because I know that's the only place I can live. I can get everything I need from them—everything!"

"Don't shout," said Ilya weakly.

A girl came in and asked for a dozen buttons for a

man's shirt. Ilya waited on her unhurriedly, took the twenty-kopek piece she gave him and rubbed it between his fingers, then handed it back, saying:

"I have no change. Pay me the next time."

There was change in his cash-box, but the key was in his room, and he did not feel like fetching it. Pavel did not resume their conversation when the girl had gone. He stood at the counter striking his knee with the cap he had at last removed, looking at Ilya as if he expected something of him. But Ilya turned his head and whistled softly through his teeth.

"Well?" said Pavel challengingly.

"Well what?" asked Ilya after a pause.

"Haven't you anything to say?"

"For God's sake leave me alone!" exclaimed Ilya impatiently.

Pavel tossed his cap on his head and went out. Ilya followed him with his eyes and began to whistle again.

A big brown dog looked in at the door, wagged its tail, and went away. It was followed by an old beggar-woman with a big nose.

"Be so kind, in the name of the Lord. . . ." she murmured, bowing low.

Ilya turned her away with a shake of his head. The hot street was filled with the bustle of the working day. It was like an enormous stove in which the logs crackled

and gave off stifling fumes as the fire consumed them. A clatter of metal announced that some ironmongers were coming down the street; long rods hanging off the end of their cart rasped and screeched as if in pain as they scraped over the cobble-stones. A knife-grinder was at work, filling the air with jarring sibilant sounds.

Every minute gave birth to something new and unexpected. Life was perpetually astounding the imagination by the variety of its cries, the tirelessness of its movement, and the force of its ceaseless creative urge. But within Ilya's soul, all was still and dead: everything seemed to have come to a standstill—no thoughts, no longings, nothing but a great weariness. In such a state he spent the rest of the day and the night that followed, a night haunted by nightmares. And many other days and nights. Customers came, bought what they wanted, and went away, and as he watched them he thought bitterly: They have no need of me, nor I of them. I'll live by myself.

Gavrik's task of heating the samovar was now performed by the landlord's cook, a thin, dour woman with a red face and colourless immobile eyes. Sometimes as he watched her, Ilya would think resentfully: Will I never enjoy any of the good things of life?

He was used to having his days filled with new impressions which, while they irritated and excited him, made life interesting. People brought him these impres-

sions. And now there were no people; they had all disappeared, leaving only customers. But often his sense of loneliness and his yearning for a better way of life was drowned in a vast indifference to all things, and then the days would drag on endlessly, in an atmosphere of stifling monotony.

One morning when Ilya had just waked up and was sitting on the edge of the bed wondering how he was to live through this new day, someone gave a short, quick knock on the back door.

Thinking the cook had come for the samovar, he got up, opened the door, and found himself face to face with the hunchback.

"Tsck, tsck," said Terenty, smiling and shaking his head. "Nine o'clock, and our young merchant hasn't opened up shop yet."

Ilya, too, smiled as he stood in front of him, barring the way into the room. Terenty's face was sunburnt, his eyes had a joyful, energetic shine, and on the whole he seemed rejuvenated. Sacks and bundles lay at his feet, and he himself looked like a bundle as he stood among them.

"Ain't you going to let me in?" he said.

Without a word Ilya set about carrying in the bundles while Terenty, fixing his gaze on the icon, bowed and crossed himself.



"Thank the Lord I'm home again," he said. "Well, good morning to you, Ilya."

As Ilya hugged his uncle he felt that the hunchback's body had grown firm and strong.

"I want a wash," said Terenty, glancing about the room. His wanderings with a sack on his back seemed to have pulled down his hump.

"How is life treating you?" he asked his nephew as he splashed some water over his face.

Ilya was glad to find his uncle in such good spirits, but the answers he gave to the older man's questions as he busied himself at the table getting breakfast ready were cautious and restrained.

"How is it treating *you*?"

"Me? Fine!" Terenty closed his eyes and smiled blissfully. "You wouldn't believe what a wonderful journey I had! I drank of the living waters. In a word...."

He sat down at the table, wound his beard round his finger, cocked his head on one side, and began his account:

"I visited Afanasy the Seated, and the Pereyaslavsky Miracle-Workers, and Mitrofani of Voronezh, and Tikhon of Zadon. I even got as far as Balaam's Isle—oh, it's many a verst I travelled on foot over this land, and it's many a holy man I prayed to. I've just come from S. Peter and Favronia in Murom...."

He appeared to get untold satisfaction out of listing

the names of saints and towns, for there was a benign smile on his lips and a proud look in his eye. He spoke in the singsong tone in which experienced story-tellers recount fairy-tales or the lives of the saints.

“In the catacombs of the Sacred Abbey there’s the silence of death and the darkness of the grave, and in the darkness the icon-lamps wink like the eyes of little children, and over all hangs the odour of incense...”

Suddenly the rain came pouring down. There was a swish and a roar outside the window, the pelting of drops on tin roofs, and the gurgle of rivulets draining off them. The air was threaded with taut and quivering steel wires.

“Hm,” drawled Ilya. “Well, do you feel better now?”

Terenty was silent for a moment, then he leaned over and said in a lowered voice:

“It’s like this: that sin of mine pinched my heart like a tight boot pinches your toes. But it was not a sin of my own doing—not of my own, because if I hadn’t listened to Petrukha he’d have thrown me out. He would, wouldn’t he?”

“He would,” admitted Ilya.

“But the weight fell off my heart soon as I set out on that pilgrimage. I says to myself as I walked along, See, Lord, it’s to the holy men I’m making my way, to Thy holy men.”

“So you’ve settled accounts?” said Ilya with a smile.

"I can't say if the Lord will accept my prayers," said the hunchback, rolling up his eyes.

"But your conscience—is it resting easy now?"

Terenty considered for a moment, wearing the look of one listening for something.

"Yes, it's easy," he said.

Ilya got up and went to the window. Wide streams of turbid water went rushing down the gutters, little puddles had formed among the cobble-stones, the water in the puddles quivered under the lashing of the rain and the road itself seemed to be trembling. The house opposite Ilya's shop stood wet and frowning and the window-panes were so dimmed with rain that no plants could be seen behind them. Empty and silent was the street, except for the swish of the rain and the gurgle of the streams. A lone pigeon huddled under a cornice. Everything looked wet and cheerless.

Autumn has come, said Ilya to himself.

"How's us to find forgiveness but in praying for it?" said Terenty as he untied his sack.

"It's all so simple: sin, pray, and the slate's clean," said Ilya glumly, without looking at his uncle. "And you can start sinning all over again."

"But why should you? Live pure."

"What for?"

"To have a clean conscience."

"What's the good of that?"

"Hm," murmured Terenty disapprovingly, "a fine thing to say!"

"I'm ready to repeat it," insisted Ilya, standing with his back to his uncle.

"It's a sin to say such things."

"I don't care."

"You'll be punished."

"No I won't."

He turned away from the window and looked at Terenty. For some time the hunchback worked his lips in the effort to find words of rebuttal, and when he found them his utterance was impressive:

"You will. Look at me—I sinned and was punished."

"How?" asked Ilya sullenly.

"By my fear. All the time I kept thinking: What if somebody finds out?"

"Well, I sinned and I'm not afraid," announced Ilya with a scornful laugh.

"You're crazy."

"I'm not afraid. But it's a rotten sort of life I live."

"Aha!" said the hunchback triumphantly. "So *that's* your punishment!"

"Punishment for what?" shouted Ilya, beside himself. His jaw was trembling. Terenty looked at him in fright and shook a rope in the air as if holding him off.

“Don’t shout, don’t shout!” he whispered excitedly.

But Ilya did shout. It had been a long time since he had spoken to anyone, and now he emptied his soul of all that had accumulated in it during his days of loneliness.

“You can not only steal, you can even commit murder and nothing will happen to you. There’s nobody to punish you. It’s only the bunglers that get punished, but the slick ones—they can get away with anything. Anything at all.”

Suddenly there was a crash outside and something rolled with a great racket over the ground, coming to a halt at the door. Both men gave a start and stopped talking.

“What was that?” whispered the hunchback.

Ilya strode over to the door, opened it, and glanced out into the yard. The wind rushed into the room with a screech, a whistle, and a rustle.

“Some boxes and canisters fell down,” said Ilya, closing the door and going over to the window again.

Terenty sat down on the floor to unpack his bundles.

“Think what you’re saying, lad,” he admonished. “To utter such words—tsck, tsck, tsck! Your godlessness can’t do God no harm, but it can bring about your own ruin. There was a certain man I met on my travels—a wise man. All the wisdom as come out of his mouth!”

And again he launched upon an account of his experiences, and as he spoke he cast sidelong glances at his

nephew. But to Ilya what he said was as the sound of the rain; the boy was engrossed in thoughts of how he was to live with his uncle.

As a matter of fact they lived together quite comfortably. Terenty made himself a bed of boxes between the stove and the door, in the corner where the shadows gathered most densely at night. As soon as he had observed Ilya's way of life, he took upon himself the tasks Gavrik had once fulfilled: he heated the samovar, cleaned the shop and the room, and went to the pub to fetch dinner, and as he did all these things he kept murmuring the acathisti to himself. In the evenings he would recount to his nephew how the wife of Hallelujah rescued Christ from his enemies by throwing her baby into the stove and taking up Christ in her arms instead; how a monk had listened to the singing of the birds for three hundred years at a stretch; how Kirik and Ulita had served the Lord, and many other things. As Ilya listened to him his mind would be filled with his own thoughts. Often in the evenings he would go for a walk, and he was always lured to the fields outside of the town, where everything was as still and dark and empty as his own soul.

A week after his arrival, Terenty went to see Petrukha Filimonov. He returned crushed and crestfallen, but when Ilya asked him what was the matter, he said hurriedly:

"Oh, nothing, nothing. I went and saw everybody, and ... well ... had a talk."

"How's Yakov?" asked Ilya.

"Yakov's bad. Yakov's not long for this world—white as a ghost, and coughs."

Terenty grew silent and sat staring into the corner, a mournful, pitiable figure.

Life went on in an even, monotonous way. One day was as much like the next as coins of the same minting. Sombre resentment lay coiled in the depths of Ilya's soul like a great snake that gobbled up all his enjoyment of life. None of his old friends came to see him any more: Pavel and Masha had evidently struck out on different paths; a horse had run over Matitza and she had died in hospital; Perfishka had vanished into thin air. Ilya intended going to see Yakov, but he kept putting it off, aware that he had nothing to say to his dying friend. In the morning he read the paper, in the afternoon he sat in his shop watching the autumn wind drive yellow leaves down the street. Sometimes the leaves were borne into the shop.

"Blessed Father Tikhon, intercede on our beha-a-alf," chanted Terenty in a voice like the rustle of dry leaves as he tidied up the room.

One Sunday, on picking up the paper, Ilya's eyes fell on a verse called "The Past and the Present" dedicated to S.N.M. and signed "Pavel Grachov."

*In ignorance and deepest gloom  
I spent the precious days of youth,  
Nor ever asked, "Where art thou bound?  
Where is the path that leads to truth?"*

*The darkness wrapt my soul about,  
Bedimmed my mind, bedimmed my sight,  
Yet day and night unceasingly  
I hungered for a glimpse of light.*

*Then sudden you appeared to me,  
A vision radiant as the dawn;  
The darkness shuddered and dissolved,  
And all the fears of night were gone.*

*Oh, cursed be the darkness drear!  
Released from sable bond, I see  
That I, at last, have found a friend,  
At last I know my enemy.*

When he had read it, Ilya threw the paper down angrily.

Write poems. Make pretty speeches! Friends, enemies! If you're slow, anyone's your enemy! and he gave a crooked smile. But suddenly, as if a different being within him were asserting itself, he thought: What if I should go and see them—just go and say, "Well, here I am, begging your pardon. . . ."

And then the first voice: But what for? Why should you?



The dialogue ended in the firm conviction that he would only be thrown out.

Once more he read the poem, his heart filled with pain and envy. And once more he thought of the girl: She's so proud. She'd look down her nose at me, and . . . well . . . I'd have lowered myself for nothing.

Among the notices in the same paper he found one saying that on the twenty-third of September the circuit court was to hear the case of Vera Kapitanova, accused of theft. It filled him with malicious exultation.

Spend your time writing poetry, do you? while she's still in prison!

"Dear God! Have mercy on me, a sinner," murmured Terenty with a sigh, shaking his head sorrowfully. He glanced up at his nephew, who was rustling the newspaper.

"Ilya," he said.

"Well?"

"Petrukha . . ." The hunchback broke off and gave a piteous smile.

"What about him?" said Ilya.

"He's robbed me," said Terenty softly and guiltily, then began muttering to himself.

Ilya glanced at him unfeelingly.

"How much did the two of you steal?"

Terenty pushed his chair away from the table, lowered

his head, and, his hands on his knees, wriggled his fingers to assist himself in mental calculation.

"How much?" repeated Ilya. "Ten thousand?"

The hunchback threw up his head.

"Ten?" he said, aghast. "Are you mad? Altogether three thousand six hundred and something. Ten! Who ever heard of such a sum!"

"Grandad Yeremei had more than ten thousand," snorted Ilya.

"That's a lie!"

"You think so? He told me so himself."

"As if he could count!"

"No worse than you and Petrukha."

Terenty dropped his head again and became lost in thought.

"How much has Petrukha held back?" asked Ilya.

"About seven hundred," said Terenty with a sigh. "So you say he had more than ten thousand? Where could he have hid so much money? I thought we'd taken everything. Maybe Petrukha fooled me, eh?"

"You'd do better to shut up about the whole business," said Ilya harshly.

"True, there's no sense in talking about it now," agreed Terenty with a deep sigh.

Ilya fell to reflecting on human greed, on the evil men commit for love of money. Suddenly he fancied himself

with tens, with hundreds of thousands of rubles. Oh, wouldn't he show people, just! He'd make them crawl on all fours in front of him. He'd. . . Carried away by a lust for vengeance, he struck the table with his fist. The sound startled him and he glanced at his uncle, who was looking at him with his mouth hanging open and fear in his eyes.

"I was just thinking," said Ilya peevishly, getting up.

"I see," said the hunchback.

Terenty watched him go into the shop, and Ilya, although he did not see him, felt his suspicious eyes on his back. For some time he had noticed that his uncle was watching him as if there were something he wanted to ask, something he wanted to have cleared up. This made the boy avoid any converse with him. The presence of his uncle annoyed him increasingly as the days went by, and he kept asking himself: How long can this keep up?

It was as if an abscess were coming to a head inside of him; life was becoming more and more unbearable. The worst of it was that there was nothing he wanted to do and nowhere he wanted to go. At times he had the vivid sensation of being sucked down slowly into a black and bottomless pit.

Tatyana Vlashevna, who had been on a short trip to the country, came to the shop not long after the return of Terenty. On seeing the coarse-looking hunchback in

his brown fustian blouse, she pursed her lips squeamishly and said:

“Is that your uncle?”

“Yes,” said Ilya tersely.

“Is he going to live with you?”

“He most certainly is.”

The defiance in his tone kept her from making further comment. Terenty, who was occupying Gavrik's place at the door, gazed with interest at this slim, grey-clad little woman. Ilya, too, stood watching her hop sparrow-like about the shop, and he hoped she would ask another question so that he could wound her with a harsh answer. But the sidelong glimpses she caught of his face prevented her from doing this. She just stood behind the counting-desk leafing through the account-book and chattering about how pleasant it was to live in the country, how little it cost, and how beneficial it was for the health.

“There was a little river there—the sweetest, quietest little river! And such gay companions! One of them—a telegraph operator—played the violin beautifully. I learned to row. But the peasant children! You can't imagine what pests they are! Like mosquitoes—keep buzzing about begging—give us this, give us that. Their mothers and fathers teach them to.”

“They do not,” said Ilya drily. “Their mothers and

fathers work all day long and there's nobody to look after the children. You're quite mistaken."

Tatyana Vlashevna looked at him in surprise and opened her mouth as if to say something, but before she had a chance Terenty smiled deferentially and said:

"There ain't no more gentlefolk in the village nowadays. Used to be every village had its squire that lived there all the time. Nowadays they just come for visits."

Tatyana turned her eyes upon him, then upon Ilya, and without a word returned to her book. Terenty began plucking at his blouse uneasily. For a few minutes no one said a word. The only sound to disturb the silence was the rustle of turned pages and the scraping of cloth as Terenty rubbed his hump against the door-jamb.

"You boor," Ilya suddenly broke out in a calm dry voice. "Before you speak to your betters you want to ask permission. 'Begging your pardon, would you be so kind as to allow me. . . .' That's what you want to say. And get down on your knees to say it."

Tatyana Vlashevna dropped her book and it slid down the desk, but she caught it, slapped it shut with a bang, and burst out laughing. Terenty dropped his head and slipped out into the street. Seeing this, Tatyana stole a look at Ilya's black face and asked softly:

"Are you angry? What for?"

Her look was sly and tender and there was an impish

sparkle in her eyes. Ilya stretched out his hand and grasped her shoulder. He was suddenly filled with hate for her and a bestial longing to embrace her, to crush her against his chest and hear the crunching of her frail bones. Baring his teeth, he drew her to him, but she seized his arm and tried to free herself.

"Stop . . . let me go . . . are you mad?" she whispered. "You can't make love to me here. And listen . . . you can't let your uncle live with you . . . he's a hunchback . . . people will be afraid of him . . . let me go. You must find another place for him . . . stop!"

But he already had her in his arms and was slowly bending his head over her face with its dilated eyes.

"What are you doing? Not here . . . let me go!"

Suddenly, with the slipperiness of a fish, she escaped from his arms. Through the hot haze blinding him, Ilya saw her standing at the street door.

"How coarse you are!" she said as she pulled her blouse together with shaking hands. "Can't you wait?"

There was a roaring as of a dozen streams inside his head. He stood motionless behind the counter, his fingers clenched tightly, staring at her as if in her alone he saw all the evil and suffering of his life.

"It's a good thing to be passionate, but one must know how to control oneself."

"Get out!" said Ilya.

"I am going. I can't see you today, but the day after tomorrow—the twenty-third—is my birthday. Will you come?"

She fingered the brooch at her neck as she spoke and did not look at Ilya.

"Get out!" he repeated, trembling with the desire to seize and torture her.

She went away. Instantly Terenty appeared.

"Is that your ... er ... partner?" he asked diffidently. Ilya nodded and gave a sigh of relief.

"Look at that now! So little, and yet..."

"So lewd," said Ilya thickly.

"Mm," murmured Terenty sceptically. Ilya felt his uncle's eyes probing him.

"What are you staring at?" he asked angrily.

"Me? Merciful heavens! Why, nothing."

"I know what I'm saying. Lewd, that's what she is. I could say something worse and it would be just as true."

"So that's how it is," drawled the hunchback in a voice full of sympathy.

"How?" snapped Ilya.

"In other words—"

"In other words, what?"

Terenty shifted from one foot to the other, frightened and hurt by Ilya's tone. There was an abject look in his blinking eyes.

"In other words ... you know best," he said after a pause.

The weather was depressing. For several days running it had been raining. The clean grey cobble-stones gazed cheerlessly up at the grey sky, and the faces of the people were just as grey and cheerless. The crevices between the stones were filled with mud that marred their cold cleanliness. A trembling, like that preceding death, had seized the yellow leaves on the trees. Someone was beating the dust out of furs or carpets, and the sound came in quick little thuds through the air. Heavy grey and white clouds rose up over the house-tops at the end of the street. In enormous billows they climbed one on top of the other, higher and higher, constantly changing form, now resembling the smoke of a fire, now mountains, now the turbid waves of a river, and it seemed as if they were mounting into those grey heights with the sole purpose of crashing down with the greater force upon the houses, trees, and earth beneath. As Ilya contemplated the living wall of cloud above him he shivered with cold and despair, and said to himself:

I've got to drop everything ... the shop and everything else ... my uncle can carry on with Tatyana ... and I'll go away....

In his mind's eye he had a picture of vast wet fields, a wide sky covered by grey clouds, a broad road with



birches on either side, and himself making his way down the road, his feet sinking in the mud, his face lashed by the cold rain. And not another living soul in the fields or on the road. Not even jackdaws in the trees. Nothing but leaden clouds moving soundlessly overhead.

I'll kill myself, he thought indifferently.

On waking up in the morning two days later he noticed the black figure "23" on the open calendar, and remembered that this was the day of Vera's trial. He was glad of an excuse to escape the shop, and he was also deeply concerned about the girl's fate. When he had hastily swallowed a glass of tea, he rushed off to the courthouse. It was as yet too early to be admitted, and he found a group of people clustered about the entrance waiting for the doors to be opened. Ilya joined them, standing with his back against the wall. The courthouse faced on a large square with a church in the middle. A pale and weary sun glanced in and out of the clouds. Scarcely a minute passed but a shadow fell upon the far end of the square and came crawling over the trees and cobble-stones, a shadow so heavy that the boughs bent beneath its weight; it crept up upon the church, enveloping it slowly from steps to cross, and when it had tumbled over this mass of stone it stole noiselessly towards the courthouse and the people waiting at the doors.

The people were drab-looking, with hungry faces.

They turned weary eyes upon each other and their speech was slow. One of them, a man with long hair and wearing a crumpled hat and a thin overcoat buttoned up to his chin, kept twisting his pointed red beard in chilled red fingers and stamping his feet in gaping boots. Another, in a patched sheepskin and a cap pulled down low over his eyes, stood with his head on his chest, one hand thrust inside his sheepskin, the other in his pocket. He seemed to be drowsing. A black-haired man in a jacket and knee-boots looked like a beetle. He was a restless creature; he kept lifting his pale sharp-featured face to the sky, whistling to himself, knitting his brows, and catching at his moustache with his tongue. He talked more than anybody else.

“Unlocking the door?” he cried, cocking his head and listening. “Not yet. Hm. It must be time. Have you been to the library, *mon cher*?”

“No. Too soon,” came the answer that sounded like three blows on a gong. It was made by the man with the long hair.

“Damn it all, it’s cold out here.”

The man with the long hair gave a sympathetic grunt, then said pensively:

“Where would we go to get warm if it wasn’t for the libraries and courts?”

The black-haired man shrugged his shoulders without

commenting. Ilya watched them and listened to their talk. He saw that they were men who lived by going from door to door with letters soliciting aid, or by underhand means, such as cheating peasants by drawing up worthless documents for them.

A pair of pigeons lighted on the pavement near the entrance. The male, a fat bird with a bulging breast, strutted round and round its mate, cooing loudly.

“Shoo!” cried the black-haired man. The man in the sheepskin gave a start and lifted his head. His face was puffy and had a darkish tinge and his eyes were glassy.

“I can’t bear pigeons,” cried the black-haired man as he watched the birds fly away. “They’re so fat . . . like rich shopkeepers. And they have such a disgusting way of cooing. Are you being brought up for trial?” he suddenly asked Ilya.

“No.”

The black-haired man swept him from top to toe with his eyes.

“Strange,” he drawled in a nasal tone.

“What’s strange about it?” asked Ilya.

“You look as if you ought to be,” said the man quickly.

“Ah, they’re opening. . . .”

He was the first to plunge through the open doors. Ilya, piqued by his remark, followed him in and bumped against the man with the long hair.

“Not so fast, you ignorant fellow,” said the man tranquilly. But in his turn he bumped Ilya and got ahead of him.

Ilya was more amazed than offended by his behaviour.

Funny, he thought; he pushes ahead as if he was a great gent, but just take a look at him.

It was quiet and dreary in the courtroom. Everything was weighty and awe-inspiring: the long table covered by green felt, the high-backed chairs, the gilt picture frames, the life-sized portrait of the tsar, the maroon-coloured chairs of the jury, the big wooden bench behind bars. The windows were deep-set in the thick grey walls; over them hung curtains in heavy folds and the glass of the panes was dim. The massive doors opened noiselessly, and just as noiselessly padded the feet of uniformed attendants. As Ilya gazed about him he felt a great dread, and when the clerk announced, “The Court is coming!” he gave a start and leaped to his feet before anyone else did, though he was unaware that court custom demanded his getting up. One of the four men who entered the courtroom was Gromov, the man who lived in the house opposite Ilya’s shop. He took the middle chair, ran both his hands over his hair, ruffled it, and straightened his collar, which was heavily embroidered in gold. The sight of his face somewhat reassured Ilya; it was as red and genial as ever but the moustaches had been given an upward twist. On his right sat a pleasant-looking old

man in spectacles, with a little white goatee and a turned-up nose; on his left—a man with a bald head, a parted red beard, and a sallow, wooden-like face. A youthful judge with a close-cropped bullet head and protruding black eyes took his place behind the standing desk. Their entrance was followed by a pause during which they glanced through the papers on the table and Ilya watched them in awe, expecting that presently one of them would get up and give loud utterance to something vastly important.

Suddenly, on turning his head to the left, Ilya caught sight of the fat, familiar, lacquer-shiny face of Petrukha Filimonov. He was sitting in the first row of maroon-coloured chairs, resting his head on the back and gazing serenely out over the public. Twice his eyes slid over Ilya's face, and each time Ilya was seized by a desire to jump up and say something to Petrukha or Gromov or the court in general.

You thief! Do they know how you beat your son? were the words that flashed through Ilya's mind, and at the same time he had a burning sensation in his throat.

"The charge brought against you..." Gromov was saying in a gentle tone, but Ilya did not see the person addressed; his eyes were fixed on Petrukha's face and he was overwhelmed by the dreadful incongruity of finding Petrukha here to pass judgment on others.

"Will the prisoner be so kind as to tell us," said the

public prosecutor in a languid voice as he rubbed his forehead with his hand, "whether he actually did say to shopkeeper Anisimov, 'Just you wait! I'll pay you back!':"

A small ventilation window swung on its hinges with a piercing screech:

"Ee-ee-ee!"

Ilya discovered two other acquaintances among the jury. Behind and above Petrukha sat a plasterer named Silachov, who had his own business. He was a brawny fellow of peasant stock with long arms and a harsh little face; he was a friend of Petrukha's and often played draughts with him. Rumour had it that once, during an altercation with one of his men, he pushed the latter off the scaffolding, and eventually the man died of his injuries. In the front row, next but one to Petrukha, sat Dodonov, owner of a large haberdashery. Ilya often bought goods from him and knew that he was cruel and greedy, for on two occasions he had declared bankruptcy and paid ten kopeks a ruble.

"Witness! When you saw that Anisimov's house was on fire. . . ."

"Ee-ee-ee!" screeched the window, and something inside Ilya screeched too.

"The fool!" whispered Ilya's neighbour. Ilya glanced round; it was the black-haired man, and his lips were twisted in a contemptuous smile.

"Who?" whispered Ilya, staring at him dully.

"The prisoner. He had an excellent opportunity to show up that witness, but he let it slip through his fingers. If it had been me, now...."

Ilya glanced at the prisoner. He was a tall muzhik with an angular head. His face expressed fright and ignorance, and his teeth were bared in the manner of a tired, hunted dog that is driven into a corner and surrounded by enemies it no longer has the strength to combat. Petrukha, Silachov, Dodonov, and others, turned on him the serene gaze of the well-fed. Ilya fancied they were saying to themselves: If he got caught, he must be guilty.

"Very dull," whispered his neighbour. "An uninteresting case. The prisoner's stupid, the prosecutor's a rag, the witnesses are blockheads, as usual. If I was the prosecutor, I'd have cooked his goose for him in ten minutes."

"Is he guilty?" whispered Ilya, shivering from a sort of chill.

"Hardly. But he'll get a sentence. He doesn't know how to put up a defence. None of your muzhiks do. They're a worthless lot. Plenty of flesh and bone, but as for cunning—not a drop!"

"Tru-ue...."

"Have you got twenty kopeks?" asked the man suddenly.

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

Ilya took out his purse and gave him the money before

he had time to consider whether he ought to or not. Then he glanced at him sideways and thought, with involuntary admiration: *He's cunning all right!*

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the prosecutor in soft, impressive tones, "look at the face of this man. It is more eloquent than the evidence of the witnesses, which has irrefutably established his guilt. As you look at this face, you cannot but be convinced that before you stands a typical criminal, an enemy of the law, an enemy of society...."

The fact that the "enemy of society" was said to be standing when he was actually sitting seemed to cause him discomfiture, for he got slowly to his feet. His head drooped, his arms hung limply at his sides, and his whole form, long and grey, was bent over, as if he were preparing to dive into the gaping jaws of justice.

When Gromov announced a break, Ilya and the black-haired man went out into the corridor. The man took a crushed cigarette out of the pocket of his jacket and said, as he straightened it out:

"Swears he's innocent, the fool. Says he didn't set fire to it. No use in swearing here; just take down your trousers and present your hind parts. Once a shopkeeper's been wronged, he'll get satisfaction at any cost."

"Do you think he's really guilty?" asked Ilya thoughtfully.



"He probably is, because he's stupid. Clever people are never guilty," cut in the man in his quick, detached manner as he puffed importantly on his cigarette.

"There are men sitting on the jury . . ." began Ilya in a low, tense voice.

"Not men—shopkeepers, most of them," said the black-haired man.

Ilya threw him a quick glance. "I know some of them," he said.

"Do you?"

"A fine lot!"

"Highway robbers," prompted the man in a loud voice.

He threw away his cigarette, pursed up his lips, and began to whistle, staring arrogantly at everyone. And his whole body, every single bone in it, kept jerking and heaving hungrily.

"The usual thing. On the whole, our so-called justice is in most cases a light comedy—a farce," he said, wriggling his shoulders. "The well-fed find exercise for their minds by attempting to rectify the vicious tendencies of the hungry. I spend a great deal of time in court, but I have yet to see a case of the hungry condemning the well-fed. If it so happens that the well-fed condemn one of their own, their action is prompted by greed. It is an object lesson, teaching the victim not to grab everything, to leave something for them."

“‘The well-fed can never understand the hungry,’ as the saying goes,” remarked Ilya.

“Nonsense. They understand only too well—that’s what makes them so strict.”

“If they’re well-fed and honest, it doesn’t matter,” said Ilya in a low voice, “but when they’re well-fed and rascals, how can they pass judgment on others?”

“Rascals are the strictest judges of all,” observed the black-haired man serenely. “Well, now we’re going to hear a case of robbery.”

“The prisoner’s an acquaintance of mine,” said Ilya softly.

“You don’t say,” said the man, with a quick glance at him. “Well, let’s have a look at this acquaintance of yours.”

Ilya’s mind was in a state of confusion. There were many things he wanted to ask this wiry man who poured out his words like peas out of a basket, but there was something disagreeable and frightening about him that kept Ilya from asking. Yet the knowledge that Petrukha was here in the role of a judge was a weight that bore down upon him and eclipsed everything else. It was like an iron band squeezing everything else out of his heart.

As he was entering the courtroom he caught sight of the back of the head and the small ears of Pavel Grachov. Rejoicing, he gave the sleeve of Pavel’s coat a tug and

grinned broadly into his face. Pavel grinned back, but reluctantly, uneasily.

For a few seconds they stood facing each other without speaking, and each must have felt something that made them break into speech at the same time.

"Have you come to watch?" asked Pavel with a crooked smile.

"Is she here?" asked Ilya in embarrassment.

"Who?"

"That Sophia of yours."

"She's not mine," cut in Pavel drily.

They were in the courtroom now.

"Let's sit together," suggested Ilya.

Pavel hesitated.

"You see . . . I'm with some friends. . . ."

"Oh, that's all right."

"Good-bye."

Pavel walked away quickly. As Ilya watched him go he felt as if Pavel had brutally knocked against a wound on his body. A great pain shot through him. It hurt him to see Pavel in a good new coat, and to see that in the last few months his face had taken on a clean, wholesome look. Gavrik's sister was sitting on the bench to which Pavel went. He said something to her and she quickly looked in Ilya's direction. Ilya turned away at the sight of that tense, forward-straining face, and the hurt, the

anger he felt, wrapped themselves more tightly about his heart.

Vera was led in. She stood behind the bars in her grey prison garb with a white kerchief on her head. Ilya saw her in profile; a lock of golden hair hung over her temple, her cheek was pale, her lips compressed, and she was gazing gravely and sternly at Gromov.

"Yes ... yes ... no...." Her words sounded vaguely in his ears.

Gromov looked at her kindly and spoke to her as softly as a cat purrs.

"Kapitanova, do you confess that on the night of...." his rich, flexible voice seemed crawling on its belly to Vera's ears.

Ilya glanced at Pavel, who was sitting all bent over, his head hanging, crushing his cap in his hands. The girl beside him held herself erect, and the look on her face said that she was passing judgment on everyone there: Vera, the judges, the jury, and the public. She kept turning her head from side to side, her lips were drawn into a disdainful line, and there was a hard, cold glint in the proud eyes that looked out from under bent brows.

"I confess," said Vera. There was a tremulous ring to her voice; it suggested the sound given off by cracked china when struck by a spoon.

Two jurymen—Dodonov and his neighbour, a red-

headed, smooth-faced man—put their heads together and moved their lips soundlessly, and their eyes smiled as they took in the girl. Petrukha Filimonov leaned forward with his whole body, his face grew redder than ever, and his whiskers twitched. A few of the other jurymen stared at Vera, all of them with particular attention; Ilya knew the reason for this and he found it revolting.

They're her judges, and yet they themselves are feeling her body with their eyes, he thought, clenching his teeth. He longed to cry out to Petrukha, "Hey, you bastard! What thoughts are going through your mind?"

A lump rose in his throat, cutting off his breath.

"Tell me ... er ... Kapitanova," said the public prosecutor, moving his tongue thickly and rolling up his eyes like a ram suffering from the heat, "Have you been engaged in prostitution long?"

Vera ran her hand over her face as if the question clung to her flushing cheek.

"Yes."

Her answer was firm. A whisper, like the rustle of a snake, passed over the audience. Pavel bent his head even lower, as if trying to hide it, and he kept on crushing his cap.

"Just exactly how long?"

Vera did not answer, she just stood with her grave stern eyes fixed on Gromov.

"One year? Two? Five?" insisted the prosecutor.

Still she did not answer. She might have been hewn of stone, so grey and motionless was she, except for the stirring of the ends of her kerchief on her bosom.

"You have a right to refuse to answer if you wish," said Gromov, stroking his moustache.

At this her lawyer jumped up. He was a lean man with a sharp chin and almond-shaped eyes. His nose was long and thin and the back of his head was broad, giving him a hatchet-like appearance.

"Tell the jury what forced you to adopt that profession, Kapitanova," he said in a loud sharp voice.

"Nothing forced me," said Vera, looking straight at her judges.

"Hm. That is not quite so. I, you see, am aware . . . that is, you yourself told me. . . ."

"You are aware of nothing," said Vera. She turned and looked at him sternly and there was anger in her voice, "I told you nothing." With one swift glance at the public, she faced her judges and said, with a little nod in the direction of her lawyer, "May I ignore him?"

Again the snake rustled, this time louder and more openly.

Ilya trembled with excitement and looked at Pavel. He expected something of him, expected it very surely. But Pavel sat glancing out from behind the back of the

man in front of him and said not a word, did not even stir. Gromov smiled and uttered a few unctuous words, after which Vera began to speak in a low firm voice:

"I just wanted to get rich. I took the money and that's all there is to it. And I've always been like that."

The jurymen exchanged whispers and frowns fell upon their faces. The faces of the judges, too, expressed displeasure. It was very quiet in the courtroom. From outside came the dull, measured tread of feet on cobble-stones: soldiers were marching by.

"Seeing that the prisoner has confessed, I suggest. . . ." said the public prosecutor.

Ilya felt he could not sit there another second, and he got up and started out.

"Sh!" warned the usher loudly.

He sat down again and, like Pavel, dropped his head. He could not bear to see Petrukha's red face, now all puffed up as if his pride had suffered injury. And in the gentle Gromov, the self-complacent judge, he saw a cheery gentleman who was as used to passing judgment on his fellowmen as a carpenter to plane boards. And a horrifying thought came to him:

If I should get up and confess, they'd do the same thing to me. Petrukha would give me a sentence. I'd be sent into exile, and he'd go on living just as before.

His mind became fixed on this idea and he sat looking at no one and hearing nothing.

"I... I won't have you talk about that!" cried Vera in a hurt, trembling voice, and then she began to wail, clutching at her throat and snatching the kerchief off her head.

A dull hum filled the room; everyone was thrown into confusion by the girl's cries. She flung herself up and down behind the bars, sobbing in a heart-rending way.

Ilya leaped up and tried to push ahead, but the people were all going in the opposite direction and before he knew it he found himself out in the corridor.

"They stripped her soul bare," came the voice of the black-haired man.

Pavel Grachov, pale and dishevelled, stood leaning against the wall, his jaw trembling. Ilya went over and gave him a malign stare.

"Well, how did you like it?" he said.

Pavel glanced up and opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it.

"Ruined her, have you?" said Ilya. Pavel started up as if struck by a whip. Putting one hand on Ilya's shoulder, he said in an agitated voice:

"Me? Why me? We're going to lodge a complaint...."

Ilya shook off his hand and wanted to say to him:



You! I didn't hear you tell the judges it was for you she stole the money. But instead of this he said:

"Petrukha Filimonov passed sentence on her. And that's considered right," he sneered.

Pavel drew himself up. He turned red and began to say something hastily, but Ilya walked off without listening. With the sneer still on his face, he went outside and slowly, like a homeless dog, walked the streets all day long, until darkness settled down and he felt sick with hunger.

Lights were lit in the windows of the houses, throwing out long fingers of yellow light patterned by the shadows of plants standing on the window-sills. Ilya stopped to contemplate these patterns, which reminded him of the plants on Gromov's window-sills, and of Gromov's wife, so like a queen from a fairy-tale, and of the guests in Gromov's house who sang mournful songs, yet laughed with such gusto.

A cat crossed the street with cautious little steps.

I'll go to a pub, decided Ilya, and struck out into the middle of the street.

"Watch out!" came a warning cry. The dark head of a horse whisked past him, leaving the warm sensation of its breath on his face. He leaped aside with the izvozchik's curse in his ears and walked away from the pub.

It's not a dray-horse—wouldn't have killed me, he thought calmly. But I've got to eat something.... Vera

will go to the dogs for sure now.... She's a proud one, too.... Didn't want to mention Pavel.... She could see there was no one to tell her story to.... She was worth more than anyone there.... If it had been Olimpiada, now.... But no, Olimpiada's just as good.... If it had been Tatyana....

This reminded him that today was Tatyana's birthday. At first he shrank from the idea of attending her party, but the next instant he had a sudden impulse to go.

He hailed an izvozchik and set out, and a few minutes later he was standing in the doorway of the Avtonomovs' dining-room, narrowing his eyes against the light, smiling vaguely at the people seated closely about the table in the large room.

"Ah, so you've come!" cried Kirik. "Bring some chocolates? What? No present for the birthday-girl? How's that, friend?"

"Where have you been?" asked his hostess.

Kirik seized his arm and led him round the table, introducing him to the guests. Ilya squeezed their warm hands, but their faces merged in his mind into one long grinning face with big teeth. His nostrils were tickled by the smell of roast pork, his ears were full of the cackling of women's voices, his eyes felt hot and he saw nothing but hazy spots of colour. On sitting down he was aware that his feet were aching with weariness and hunger was sucking at his vitals.

Without a word he took a slice of bread and began to eat. One of the guests gave a loud snort and Tatyana Vlashevna said to him:

“Why don’t you congratulate me? A very polite guest, I must say! Comes in and starts eating without a word of greeting!”

She gave him a little kick under the table and bent over the teapot as she poured water into it.

Ilya put down his bread, rubbed his hands together, and said in a loud voice:

“I’ve spent the whole day in court.”

His voice rose distinctly above the hum of conversation. The guests stopped talking. Ilya felt embarrassed as he became aware of their eyes on his face, and he stared back from under lowered brows. Their glances were sceptical, as if they doubted that this broad-shouldered, curly-headed young man could tell them anything of interest. A strained silence filled the room. Fragments of thoughts, vague and disconnected, went round and round inside his head, then vanished, swallowed up in the darkness of his soul.

“One can sometimes hear curious stories in court,” observed Felizata Gryzlova in a pettish voice as she picked up a box of gumdrops and pushed the sweets about with the tongs.

Two red spots flared up on the cheeks of Tatyana Vlashevna and Kirik blew his nose loudly.

"Don't swing your arm if you don't mean to strike," he said. "So you spent the day in court? . . ."

They don't like it, thought Ilya, and his lips parted in a slow smile. The guests broke into conversation in many keys.

"I once heard a murder case," said the young telegraph operator, a pale, black-eyed fellow with a little moustache.

"I just adore to read and hear about murders!" exclaimed Travkin's wife.

Her husband gazed round at the guests and said:

"Public trials are a public blessing."

"The prisoner was a friend of mine named Yevgenev," went on the telegraph operator. "Once when he was standing guard over a chest of money he started playing with a little boy and suddenly shot him."

"How simply awful!" exclaimed Tatyana Vlasyevna.

"Shot him dead," added the telegraph operator with a smack of relish.

"Once I was called up as witness in a certain case," said Travkin in his dry rustle of a voice, "and while I was there I heard a man tried who had committed twenty-three robberies. Not bad, eh?"

Kirik gave a loud guffaw. The guests divided into two groups: those who were listening to the telegraph operator tell about the murder of the boy, and those who were listening to Travkin's boring account of the man who had

committed twenty-three robberies. Ilya kept his eyes fixed on the hostess, aware that something within him was slowly catching fire; as yet it gave no illumination, but it was burning gradually into his heart. As soon as Ilya realized how frightened the Avtonomovs were lest he say something to shock their guests, his mind grew more lucid.

Tatyana Vlashevna was busy in the other room at a table piled high with bottles. Her blouse of crimson silk was a bright patch against the white paper of the walls, and she flitted like a butterfly about the room, her face radiating the pride of an able housewife whose affairs are in excellent order. Twice Ilya caught her making subtle signs for him to join her, but he did not go, and it gave him a certain satisfaction to see that this annoyed her.

"What are you sitting there like a dummy for?" Kirik said to him. "Don't be afraid, say anything you like. These are all educated people—they won't hold it against you."

Ilya instantly began in a loud voice:

"Today they tried a girl of my acquaintance. She's a loose lady, but a good sort for all that."

Once more he was the centre of attention; once more all eyes were on him. Felitzata Yegorovna bared her teeth in a wide and mocking grin; the telegraph operator covered his mouth with his hand as he stroked his moustache; everyone tried to look grave and attentive. The

clatter of knives and forks which Tatyana Vlasyevna suddenly emptied upon the table resounded like martial music in Ilya's heart. Calmly he ran his eyes over the assembled guests before he resumed:

"What are you laughing at? There's some very fine girls among them."

"There are, there are," put in Kirik hastily, "but don't . . . er . . . don't be too outspoken. . . ."

"These are all educated people," said Ilya. "They won't hold it against me if I make a slip."

Suddenly he felt something like a bomb burst inside of him. He gave a mordacious little smile and his heart fairly stood still as reckless words clamoured for utterance.

"Well, this girl stole some money from a certain merchant."

"Thicker and thicker," cried Kirik, pulling a comic face and giving a doleful shake of his head.

"You yourselves can guess when and where she could have stole it. And maybe she didn't steal it at all; maybe it was a present."

"Tatyana!" called Kirik. "Come here! Ilya's telling stories! A perfect scream!"

But Tatyana was already at Ilya's side.

"I don't see anything funny about it," she said with a forced smile and a little shrug of her shoulders. "A very ordinary story. You've heard hundreds like it. And there

aren't any innocent young girls here. But we'll go on with that later. Come in the other room for drinks and *hors-d'oeuvres* now."

"Please do, and I'll have a bite too—ho, ho! How's that for po-etry? It may not be good, but it's funny."

"Whets the appetite," said Travkin, stroking his throat.

They all turned away from Ilya. He could see they were disinclined to listen to him because their hosts did not want them to, and this excited him the more. He got up and addressed them all:

"And would you believe it—the people who tried this girl used her themselves more than once. I know some of them. They're worse than thieves."

"Come, come," said Travkin sternly, raising a finger. "That's no way to talk. They're members of the jury, and I myself—"

"That's it, members of the jury," cried Ilya. "How can they be fair judges when they themselves—"

"I beg your pardon! The institution of trial by jury is, so to speak, a reform introduced by His Majesty Alexander II for the public weal. Who are you to cast a slur on so great a state institution?"

He wheezed into Ilya's face, his fat clean-shaven cheeks shook, and his eyes rolled from right to left and back again. Some of the guests pressed round them, others

lingered in the doorway, all agog with the pleasant anticipation of a scene. The hostess, pale and trembling, plucked at the sleeves of those nearest her:

"Oh, do drop it!" she cried. "It's a bore! Kirik, lead the way."

Kirik blinked dazedly and said:

"Come along, friends. To hell with these reforms and proforms and such like philosophy."

"Not philosophy, but politics," wheezed Travkin. "And people who say such things are politically suspect, are dangerous characters."

Ilya was all aflame. It was great fun to confront this fat little man with the moist lips and the clean-shaven face and see his rage. And he was overjoyed to have confounded the Avtonomovs in front of their guests. His nerves grew calmer, and the longing to pit himself against these people, to insult them and make them wild was like a steel spring inside of him, lifting him to a height he found agreeably breath-taking. His voice became calmer and firmer:

"You can call me whatever you like—you're an educated man—but that won't make me take back my words. Can the well-fed understand the hungry? The hungry may be thieves, but so are the well-fed."

"Kirik Nikodimovich!" wheezed Travkin. "This is a disgrace! It's a . . . a . . ."



But Tatyana Vlasyevna took him by the arm and, drawing him after her, said to him in a loud voice:

“Come, your favourite sandwiches: herring, hard-boiled eggs and green onions mixed with butter. . . .”

“Mm . . . I know his kind! . . .” muttered Travkin in injured tones, smacking his lips loudly. His wife gave Ilya a withering look as she took her husband’s other arm.

“Don’t get so upset over nothing, Anton,” she said.

“Pickled sterlets and tomatoes,” went on Tatyana Vlasyevna, eager to soothe her precious guest.

Suddenly Travkin dug his feet into the floor and turned round to look at Ilya. “Very remiss of you, young man,” he said in a tone of condescending rebuke. “You ought to appreciate, you ought to understand—”

“Well, I don’t understand,” exclaimed Ilya. “That’s why I say: why should Petrukha Filimonov stand on top of other people?”

The guests walked past him with an obvious effort not to touch him. But Kirik came right up to him and said roughly, and in a tone that showed he was angry:

“Damn it all, you’re a blockhead, that’s what you are.”

Ilya gave a start and everything went black before his eyes, as if he had been struck over the head. He clenched his fists and made for Kirik. But the latter, not noticing his movement, strode quickly into the other room where

the *hors-d'oeuvres* were set out on the table. Ilya heaved a deep sigh.

From where he stood in the doorway he saw the backs of the people clustered closely about the table and heard the smacking of lips. The reflection of the hostess's crimson blouse was like a film over his eyes, tinging everything with bright colour.

"Mm," purred Travkin. "What a marvellous dish! Marvellous!"

"Would you like some pepper?" asked the hostess sweetly.

I'll show you some pepper, resolved Ilya with cold malice, and, throwing back his head, he strode over to the table. He snatched up somebody's glass of wine and held it out to Tatyana Vlasyevna, saying with a precision that turned each word into a blow:

"Here's to you, old girl!"

The effect was stunning—as if there had been a deafening crash, or as if the lights had suddenly gone out, plunging the room in utter darkness, and in this darkness everyone stood frozen to the spot. The open mouths with the chewed food in them were like running sores on the frightened, dumbstruck faces.

"Come on, have a drink. Kirik Nikodimovich, tell my mistress to have a drink with me. What's the matter? Why should we do our dirty work on the sly? Let's come

out in the open. That's what I've decided to do—come out in the open.”

“You beast!” came Tatyana's shrill voice.

Ilya saw her swing her arm, and he just had time to ward off the plate she aimed at his head.

The crash of china stunned the guests the more. Slowly and silently they backed away from the table, leaving the Avtonomovs to face Ilya alone. Kirik—pale, stupid, contemptible—stood holding a fish by the tail and blinking his eyes. Tatyana Vlashevna was trembling all over and shaking her fist at Ilya. Her face was as red as her blouse and her tongue had difficulty in enunciating her words:

“It's a lie, what you say!” she hissed, thrusting out her neck.

“Shall I tell them what you look like naked?” retorted Ilya complacently. “You've shown me all your pretty birth-marks—your husband will know whether I'm lying or not.”

There was a ripple of suppressed laughter. Tatyana Vlashevna threw up her hands, clutched her throat, and fell without a sound into a chair.

“Call the police!” cried the telegraph operator.

Kirik turned to him and suddenly, lowering his head, advanced upon Ilya like a bull.

Ilya gave him a push.

"Where are you going?" he said roughly. "You're rickety—if I hit you once you'll fall to pieces. But listen—and all you others, you listen too. It's not often you'll have the truth told to you."

But Kirik, recovering from the push, lowered his head and made for Ilya a second time. The guests watched in silence. Everyone remained where he was except Travkin, who tiptoed into the corner and sat down on the sofa, slipping his hands with the palms pressed together between his knees.

"Watch out, or I'll hit you," warned Ilya. "I have no reason to hurt you. You're stupid and harmless. You've never done me any wrong. Get away."

He gave him another push, stronger this time, and retreated to the wall, from where he surveyed the guests.

"Your wife threw herself into my arms," he went on. "She's a very smart lady, and the lowest of the low. But you, too—all of you—you're all rotters. I've spent the day in court and learnt to judge my fellowmen."

There was so much he wanted to say that he could not bring his thoughts into line and tossed them out haphazardly, like stones.

"It's not Tatyana I want to drag out into the light. That just came of itself, somehow. Everything seems to just come of itself with me. I even murdered a man by chance. I had no intention of doing it, but there you

are. Tatyana! You and I keep shop on the money I took from the man I murdered.”

“He’s mad!” cried Kirik happily, and he rushed from one guest to another, shouting in happy excitement: “See? He’s mad! Ah, Ilya, poor chap! poor chap!”

Ilya burst out laughing. He felt even more calm and easy now that he had confessed to the murder. It was as if there were no floor under his feet, as if he were suspended in air, and he had the sensation of rising higher and higher. Strong and sturdy, he threw back his head and thrust out his chest. His curly hair fell over his broad white forehead and his eyes had a mocking, malicious glint in them.

Tatyana got up and tottered over to Felitzata Yegorovna.

“I’ve noticed it for a long time,” she said in a shaking voice. “For a long time. That wild look in his eyes. Oh, it’s dreadful!”

“If he’s gone out of his mind we ought to call the police,” said Felitzata weightily, staring hard at Ilya.

“He’s mad! He’s mad!” cried Kirik.

“He’ll murder us all yet,” whispered Gryzlov, glancing furtively about. No one dared leave the room; Ilya was standing beside the door and no one could have left without passing him. He kept on laughing. He was glad these people were afraid of him; he noticed that the guests did not feel sorry for the Avtonomovs, that they would

gladly have listened to him insult them all evening, but for their fear of him.

"I'm not mad," he said, drawing his brows together menacingly. "But stay where you are. I won't let anyone out. And if anybody throws himself at me I'll strike him. I'll kill him. I'm very strong."

He held up a long arm with a hard fist at the end and shook it in the air. Then he let it fall.

"Tell me this: what sort of creatures are you anyway? What's the good of you? Miserable scavengers. Bastards, that's what you are."

"Shut your mug!" shouted Kirik.

"Shut your own. I'm going to speak my mind. I can't help marvelling when I look at you—all you do is drink and stuff your bellies and pull the wool over each other's eyes, and there's nobody you have any real feeling for. What are you after? I tried to find a clean, decent sort of life, but it's not to be found. I only got spoilt in the seeking. A decent person can't live among you—you drive decent folk into the grave. Look at me—I'm strong and a fighter, but among you I'm as helpless as a cat set upon by rats in a dark cellar. It's you who are the judges and the law-makers and the bosses. But actually you're a bunch of slimy toads."

At this point the telegraph operator bounced away from the wall and rushed out of the room, slipping past Ilya.

"Blast! I let one get away!" laughed Ilya.

"I'm going for the police!" called the telegraph operator.

"Go ahead, it doesn't matter," said Ilya.

Tatyana Vlashevna staggered past him without looking at him, as if she were walking in her sleep.

"I knocked her out," said Ilya, nodding in her direction. "Serves her right, the snake."

"Hold your tongue!" cried Kirik, who was on his knees in the corner rummaging in a drawer of the commode.

"Don't shout, you simpleton," said Ilya, sitting down and folding his arms on his chest. "What are you shouting about? I ought to know her—I lived with her. And I killed a man—Poluektov, the money-lender. Remember how many times I asked you about Poluektov? That was because I killed him. And I swear to God it was on his money I opened my shop."

Ilya gazed round the room. Frightened, insignificant people were standing silently against the wall. He felt an enormous contempt for them and was angry with himself for having told them about the murder.

"Do you think I'm telling you this because I repent?" he shouted. "Oh, no, nothing of the kind. I'm laughing at you, that's what I'm doing."

Kirik jumped to his feet, red, dishevelled, wild-eyed, and waved a revolver.

“You won’t make your escape now!” he shouted. “So it’s you who killed him, is it?”

The women gasped. Travkin, still sitting on the sofa, swung his feet and wheezed:

“Gentlemen! I can’t stand any more of this. Let me go. It doesn’t concern me, it’s a family affair.”

But Kirik did not hear him. He leaped about Ilya, pointing the revolver at him and screaming:

“You’ll get it! It’ll be hard labour for you!”

“I don’t suppose that little gun of yours is loaded, is it?” said Ilya indifferently, gazing at him with weary eyes. “What are you so excited about? I’m not trying to run away. There’s no place to run to. Hard labour? So let it be hard labour. What difference does it make?”

“Anton, Anton!” came the loud whisper of Travkin’s wife. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t, my dear.”

She took him by the arm and lifted him up, and the two of them walked past Ilya with lowered eyes. In the next room Tatyana Vlasyevna was making little gurgling sounds as she sobbed.

Suddenly Ilya felt a great emptiness within him, a dark, cold emptiness with a bleak question suspended in it, like a faint moon in an autumnal sky: What will happen next?



"And with this my whole life comes to an end," he said softly and pensively.

"Don't try to make us feel sorry for you," cried Kirik.

"I'm not trying to. To hell with you. I myself would sooner feel sorry for a dog than for you. If I could, I'd wipe you all out—every last one of you. Get out of my way, Kirik; I can't stand the sight of you."

One by one the guests crawled out of the room, casting frightened glances at Ilya as they went. For him they were only little grey spots that inspired no thoughts or feelings. The emptiness in his soul expanded, encompassing him completely. He sat silent for a minute or two, listening to Kirik's shouts, and then he said with a little laugh:

"Let's wrestle, shall we, Kirik?"

"I'll send a bullet through your head," shrieked Kirik.

"Your gun isn't loaded," laughed Ilya, adding "I'd be sure to get the better of you in a tussle." Then he glanced at the remaining guests and said very simply, without raising his voice, "I wish I knew what force was great enough to wipe you out, but I don't."

He said nothing more after this—merely sat without stirring.

In a little while two policemen and a police officer came in. Behind them appeared Tatyana Vlashevna, who pointed at Ilya and gasped out:

"He just confessed... that he killed... Poluektov, the money-lender... remember?"

"Can this be confirmed?" asked the officer quickly.

"Why not? I can confirm it," said Ilya with a calm weariness.

The officer sat down at the table and began to write, while the two policemen took up their stand on either side of Ilya. Ilya looked at them, gave a deep sigh, and dropped his head. Only the scraping of the pen on paper broke the silence in the room, and the darkness outside was a solid black wall against the windows. Kirik stood at one of them, gazing out into the night. Suddenly he tossed his revolver into the corner and said to the officer:

"Savelyev! Give him a good punch and let him go. He's crazy."

The officer looked at Kirik, considered a moment, and said:

"Can't. Not with an accusation like this."

"Too bad," sighed Kirik.

"You're too soft-hearted, Kirik Nikodimovich," said Ilya mockingly. "There are dogs like that—beat them and they come back for a petting. Or maybe it's not because you feel sorry for me—maybe it's just because you're afraid I'll tell about your wife at the trial? Have no fear, I wouldn't do that. I'm ashamed even to think of her, let alone talk about her."

Kirik went quickly into the next room and sat down.

"Now then," said the officer, turning to Ilya, "can you sign this paper?"

"I can."

Without reading it, he wrote in large letters: Ilya Lunyev. On raising his head he saw the officer staring at him in amazement. For a few seconds they gazed without speaking into each other's eyes, the one with avid interest and gratification, the other with calm indifference.

"Was it your conscience that troubled you?" asked the officer.

"I have no conscience," said Ilya definitely.

Again they were silent. Presently Kirik's voice came from the next room:

"He's gone out of his mind."

"Come along," said the officer with a perplexed lift of his shoulders. "I won't tie your hands, but... er... don't try to run away."

"Where would I run to?" asked Ilya briefly.

"Well, swear you won't, anyway. Swear to God.

"I don't believe in God."

The officer gave a hopeless wave of his hand. "Come along, fellows," he said.

As soon as Ilya felt himself encompassed by the darkness and dampness of the night, he drew in a deep breath, stopped, and gazed up at a sky so black and low that it

suggested the sooty ceiling of a small and stuffy room.

"Come along," said the officer.

He went. Like great boulders stood the houses on either side of the street. The mud splashed under his feet, the road led downhill, into a darkness even denser. Ilya stumbled over a stone and almost fell. One question kept vibrating insistently in the emptiness of his soul: What will happen next? Will Petrukha try me?

The question conjured up a picture of the trial he had just witnessed—Gromov's unctuous voice, Petrukha's red face. . . .

He felt a pain in the toes that had stumbled and slowed his steps. In his ears sounded the crisp retort of the black-haired man to the saying about "the well-fed": "They understand only too well—that's what makes them so strict."

Then he heard again the smooth voice of Gromov: "Do you confess? . . ."

And the drawling voice of the public prosecutor:

"Tell us this, prisoner. . . ."

He saw the frown on Petrukha's red face and the working of his thick lips.

An anguish beyond words and sharp as a blade took possession of him. Leaping forward, he ran with all his might, pushing hard with his feet against the cobblestones. The wind whistled in his ears, his breath came

in gasps, he swung his arms to propel his body further and further ahead into the darkness. Behind him came the thumping steps of the police. A warning whistle cut through the air and a deep voice bawled:

“Hold him!”

Everything about Ilya—the houses, the road, the sky—reeled and quaked and bore down upon him in a solid black mass. He plunged forward unaware of exhaustion, driven on by his dread of seeing Petrukha. Something flat and grey loomed out of the shadows ahead, feeding his desperation. He remembered that the road turned at right angles to the right and led out into the main street. There would be people there... he would be caught....

“Go ahead and catch me!” he shouted at the top of his voice as he lowered his head and accelerated his pace. In front of him rose a grey stone wall. A blow like the breaking of a wave sounded in the darkness of the night. One brief dull blow, followed by silence.

Two other dark figures ran up to the wall. For a moment they bent over the third one on the ground. Other people came running down the hill. Cries. A pounding of feet. A piercing whistle.

“Is he dead?” gasped one of the policemen.

The other lighted a match and squatted down. At his feet lay a tightly clenched fist that was slowly relaxing.

“Why . . . why, his head’s split wide open.”

“Look. Brains.”

Black forms kept springing out of the dark.

“The poor devil,” murmured the policeman who was standing. The other straightened up, crossed himself, and said in a tired and breathless voice:

“Well, anyway—may his soul rest in peace.”