



THE LITTLE DEMON

FYODOR SOLOGUB

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THE LITTLE DEMON

**BY
FYODOR SOLOGUB**

TRANSLATED BY
JOHN CURNOS AND RICHARD ALDINGTON

1916

The Little Demon By Fyodor Sologub.

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CONTENTS

Translators' Preface

Author's Preface To The Second Russian Edition, 1908

Author's Preface To The Fifth Russian Edition, 1909

Dialogue To The Seventh Russian Edition, May 1913

Author's Introduction To The English Edition

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

TRANSLATORS' PREFACE

"The Little Demon" is a successful and almost imperceptible merging of comedy with tragedy. It is in fact a tragedy in which the comic forms an integral part and is not sandwiched in superficially merely to please the reader. The method resembles in a measure that of Gogol's "Dead Souls," with which "The Little Demon" was compared upon its first appearance in 1907.

It is a work of art—and it is a challenge; and this challenge is addressed not to Russia alone, but to the whole world.

"What a sad place Russia is!" exclaimed Pushkin when Gogol read his story to him. But what the world knows to-day is that Gogol gave us a portrait of the human soul, and that only the frame was Russian. Prince Kropotkin assures us that there are Chichikovs in England, and Professor Phelps of Yale is equally emphatic about their presence in America.

And this is also true of Peredonov, of "The Little Demon."

In spite of its "local colour" and its portrayal of small town life in Russia, this novel has the world for its stage, and its chief actor, Peredonov, is a universal character. He is a Russian—an American—an Englishman. He is to be found everywhere, and in every station of life. Both translators agree that they have even met one or two Peredonovs at London literary teas—and not a few Volodins, for that matter.

Certainly there is a touch of Peredonov in many men. It is a matter of degree. For the extraordinary thing about this book is that nearly all the characters are Peredonovs of a lesser calibre. Their Peredonovism lacks that concentrated intensity which lifts the unfortunate Peredonov to tragic—and to comic—heights in spite of his pettiness; or perhaps because his pettiness is so gigantic.

"The Little Demon" is a penetration into human conscience, and a criticism of the state of petty "provinciality" into which it has fallen.

"The Kingdom of God is within you." So is the kingdom of evil. That is the great truth of "The Little Demon." And in Peredonov's case, the inner spirit takes possession of external objects, and all the concrete things that his eyes see become symbols of the evil that is within himself. More than that: this spirit even creates for him a "little grey, nimble beast"—the Nedotikomka—which is the sum of the evil forces of the world, and against which he has to contend.

The author enters his "hero's" condition so deeply that even people and objects and scenery are rendered, as it were, through Peredonov's eyes—and the mood created

by this subjective treatment helps to inveigle the reader into comprehending the chief character.

The beautiful Sasha-Liudmilla episode relieves the Peredonovian atmosphere as a dab of vermilion relieves grey. But what the author shows us is that even such an idyllic love episode is affected by contact with this atmosphere, and that its beauty and innocence become obscured under the tissue of lies as under a coat of grey dust. This, as well as other aspects of "The Little Demon," are dealt with at length in my article on Feodor Sologub in "The Fortnightly Review" (September, 1915), and if I refrain from going over the ground again, it is because I hope that the tale is simple and clear enough to provide its own comment.

Finally, I may be pardoned for speaking of the difficulties of translating "The Little Demon." Not only is the original extraordinarily racy in parts and rich in current Russian slang—at times almost obscure in meaning, but the characters occasionally indulge in puns or speak in rhymes—rhyme-speaking is not uncommon among the peasant classes in Russia. In every case the translators have striven to give the English equivalent; where the difficulty was of a nature rendering this impossible, the translators have had to make use of absolutely unavoidable footnotes. The translators have also made every effort to preserve the mood of Sologubian descriptive prose, which is not always an easy matter, when you consider the natural pliancy of Russian and the comparatively rigid nature of English.

JOHN CURNOS

December 1915

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND RUSSIAN EDITION, 1908

This novel, "The Little Demon," was begun in 1892 and finished in 1902. It originally appeared in 1905 in the periodical "Voprosi Zhizni," but without its final chapters. It was first published in its complete form in March, 1907, in the "Shipovnik" edition.

There are two dissenting opinions among those I have seen expressed in print as well as among those I have chanced to hear personally:

There are some who think that the author, being a very wicked man, wished to draw his own portrait, and has represented himself in the person of the instructor Peredonov. To judge from his frankness it would appear that the author did not have the slightest wish to justify or to idealise himself, and has painted his face in the blackest colours. He has accomplished this rather astonishing undertaking in order to ascend a kind of Golgotha, and to expiate his sins for some reason or other. The result is an interesting and harmless novel.

Interesting, because it shows what wicked people there are in this world. Harmless, because the reader can say: "This was not written about me."

Others, more considerate toward the author, are of the opinion that the Peredonovstchina portrayed in this novel is a sufficiently widespread phenomenon.

Others go even further and say that if every one of us should examine himself intently he would discover unmistakable traits of Peredonov.

Of these two opinions I give preference to the one most agreeable to me, namely, the second. I did not find it indispensable to create and invent out of myself; all that is episodic, realistic, and psychologic in any novel is based on very precise observation, and I found sufficient "material" for my novel around me. And if my labours on this novel have been rather prolonged, it has been in order to elevate to necessity whatever is here by chance; so that the austere Ananke should reign on the throne of Aisa, the prodigal scatterer of episodes.

It is true that people love to be loved. They are pleased with the portrayal of the nobler, loftier aspects of the soul. Even in villains they want to see a spark of nobility, "the divine spark," as people used to say in the old days. That is why they do not want to believe the picture that confronts them when it is true, exact, gloomy, and evil. They say: "It is not about me."

No, my dear contemporaries, it is of you that I have written my novel, about the Little Demon and his dreadful Nedotikomka, about Ardalyon and Varvara Peredonov,

Pavel Volodin, Darya, Liudmilla, and Valeria Routilov, Aleksandr Pilnikov and the others. About you.

This novel is a mirror—very skilfully made. I have spent a long time in polishing it, I have laboured over it zealously.

The surface of my mirror is pure. It has been remeasured again and again, and most carefully verified; it has not a single blemish.

The monstrous and the beautiful are reflected in it with equal precision.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FIFTH RUSSIAN EDITION, 1909

I once thought that Peredonov's career was finished, and that he was not to leave the psychiatric hospital where he was placed after cutting Volodin's throat. But latterly rumours have begun to reach me to the effect that Peredonov's mental derangement has proved to be only temporary, and that after a brief confinement he was restored to freedom. These rumours sound hardly plausible. I only mention them because even in our days the unplausible happens. Indeed, I have read in a newspaper that I am preparing to write a sequel to "The Little Demon."

I have heard that Varvara has apparently succeeded in convincing someone that Peredonov had cause for behaving as he did—that Volodin uttered more than once objectionable words, and had betrayed objectionable intentions—and that before his death he said something amazingly insolent which led to the fatal catastrophe. I am told that Varvara has interested the Princess Volchanskaya in this story, and the Princess, who earlier had neglected to put in a word for Peredonov, is now taking a keen interest in his fate.

As to what happened to Peredonov after he had left the hospital, my information is rather vague and contradictory. Some people have told me that Peredonov has entered the police department, as he had been advised to do by Skouchayev, and has served as a councillor in the District Government. He has distinguished himself in some way or other, and is making a fine career.

I have heard from others, however, that it was not Ardalyon Borisitch who served in the police, but another Peredonov, a relative of our Peredonov. Ardalyon Borisitch himself did not succeed in entering the service, or else he did not wish to; instead, he has taken up with literary criticism. His articles reveal those qualities which distinguished him before.

This rumour strikes me as being even more unlikely than the first.

In any case, if I should succeed in receiving precise information about the latest doings of Peredonov, I will try to relate it in all its adequate detail.

DIALOGUE TO THE SEVENTH RUSSIAN EDITION, MAY 1913

"My soul, why are you thus dismayed?"

"Because of the hate that surrounds the name of the author of 'The Little Demon.' Many people who disagree upon other things are agreed on this."

"Accept the malice and the abuse submissively."

"But is not our labour worthy of gratitude? Why then this hate?"

"This hate is rather like fear. You waken the conscience too loudly, you are too frank."

"But isn't there some use in my truth?"

"You want compliments! But this is not Paris."

"Oh, no, it is not Paris!"

"My soul, you are a true Parisienne, a child of European civilisation. You have come in a charming dress and in light sandals to a place where they wear smocks and greased boots. Do not be astonished if the greased boot sometimes steps rudely on your tender foot. Its possessor is an honest fellow."

"But what a morose, what an awkward fellow!"

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

It is quite natural for the author of a novel to experience pleasure and pride upon learning that his work is about to become accessible to a new circle of readers. Upon learning, however, that Mr. John Cournos was translating my novel, "The Little Demon," into English I experienced not a little apprehension. In days of Anglo-Russian rapprochement, in days of great stress, when a common danger unites the two great nations, it seemed to me perhaps unseasonable to acquaint England with this sombre picture. It occurred to me that there was a danger of my new readers accepting this novel as a precise and characteristic portrayal of Russian life. But my friends told me that Mr. John Cournos was fulfilling his task with great love and care, and this gives me the hope that the true meaning of my work will be also understood in the translation, reproducing so accurately the original.

In any case, I should like to warn my readers against the temptation of seeing only Russian traits in this novel. The portrait of Peredonov is an expression of the all-human inclination towards evil, of the almost disinterested tendency of a perverse human soul to depart from the common course of universal life directed by one omnipotent Will; and, taking vengeance upon the world for its own grievous loneliness, to bring into the world evil and abomination, to mutilate the given reality and to defile the beautiful dreams of humanity.

This inclination towards evil, raging in the hearts of mankind in all latitudes and longitudes, invests itself only outwardly with an appearance of selfish expedience. A soul marred by this tragic affliction, that of a morose separation from the world, is borne along by a sovereign justice, which rules worlds and hearts, upon disastrous paths, towards madness and towards death.

The afflicted soul does not rejoice at its gains, to such a degree visionary, to such a degree worthless. A foreboding of ultimate destruction torments it with a gnawing sadness.

Where then, in what blessed land, is not man tormented with this agonising sadness, these true tokens of the same morose and sombre affliction? The Russian "khandra" and the English spleen are the expression of one and the same malady of the spirit. Even in more noble souls, these harsh visitors, so familiar to both Englishmen and Russians, have been created by the omnipotent Will not without a beneficent design. They incessantly remind the soul, succumbing in the life struggle, that the enemy is near, cunning and strong.

I would be glad if my new readers should appraise not only the detestable sinfulness and perversity of a soul warped by the force of evil, but also the great yearning of

this soul—the evil evil atones to a certain degree in this truly human feeling; and in this feeling the afflicted man also communes with each one of us.

This novel will not be accepted by you in condemnation of my country—my country has not a few enchantments, which make her beloved not only by her own, but also by the observant stranger. Perhaps the attentive reader will find even in this sombre novel certain reflections of enchanting Russian nature, and of the live Russian soul.

FEODOR SOLOGUB

January 1916

CHAPTER 1

After Mass the members of the congregation scattered to their homes. A few stopped to talk under the old maples and lindens near the white stone walls, within the enclosure. All were in holiday dress and looked at one another cheerily. It appeared as if the inhabitants of this town lived peacefully and amicably—even happily. But it was only in appearance.

Peredonov, a schoolmaster in the *gymnasia*, stood among his friends, and as he looked at them gravely out of his small, stealthy eyes, across the golden rims of his spectacles, he remarked:

"Princess Volchanskaya herself made the promise to Vara. 'As soon,' she said, 'as you marry him, I'll hunt up an inspector's job for him.'"

"But how can you think of marrying Varvara Dmitrievna?" asked the red-faced Falastov. "She's your first cousin."

Everyone laughed. Peredonov's usually rosy, unconcerned, somnolent face showed anger.

"Second cousin," he said gruffly, as he looked angrily past his companions.

"Did the Princess give you the promise herself?" asked Rutilov, a tall, pale, smartly dressed man.

"She didn't give it to me, but to Vara," answered Peredonov.

"Of course, you are ready to believe all she tells you," said Rutilov with animation. "It's easy enough to make up a tale. Why didn't you see the Princess herself?"

"This is how it was: I went with Vara, but we didn't find her in, missed her by just five minutes," explained Peredonov. "She had gone to the country, and wouldn't be back for three weeks or so. I couldn't wait for her, because I had to be back here for the exams."

"It sounds suspicious," laughed Rutilov, showing his yellow teeth.

Peredonov grew thoughtful. His companions left him; Rutilov alone remained.

"Of course," said Peredonov, "I can marry whom I like. Varvara is not the only one."

"You're quite right, Ardalyon Borisitch, anyone would be glad to marry you," Rutilov encouraged him.

They passed out of the gate, and walked slowly in the unpaved and dusty square. Peredonov said:

"But what about the Princess? She'll be angry if I chuck Varvara."

"What's the Princess to you?" said Routilov. "You're not going with her to a kitten's christening. She ought to get you the billet first. There'll be time enough to tie yourself up—you're taking things too much on trust!"

"That's true," agreed Peredonov irresolutely.

"You ought to say to Varvara," said Routilov persuasively, "First the billet, my dear girl, then I'll believe you.' Once you get your place, you can marry whom you like. You'd better take one of my sisters—your choice of the three. Smart, educated, young ladies, any one of them, I can say without flattery, a queen to Varvara. She's not fit to tie their shoe-strings."

"Go on," shouted Peredonov.

"It's true. What's your Varvara? Here, smell this."

Routilov bent down, broke off a fleecy stalk of henbane, crumpled it up in his hand, together with the leaves and dirty white flowers, and crushing it all between his fingers, put it under Peredonov's nose. The heavy unpleasant odour made Peredonov frown. Routilov observed:

"To crush like this, and to throw away—there's your Varvara for you; there's a big difference between her and my sisters, let me tell you, my good fellow. They are fine, lively girls—take the one you like—but you needn't be afraid of getting bored with any of them. They're quite young too—the eldest is three times younger than your Varvara."

Routilov said all this in his usual brisk and happy manner, smiling—but he was tall and narrow-chested, and seemed consumptive and frail, while from under his new and fashionable hat his scant, close-trimmed bright hair stuck out pitifully.

"No less than three times!" observed Peredonov dryly, as he took off his spectacles and began to wipe them.

"It's true enough!" exclaimed Routilov. "But you'd better look out, and don't be slow about it, while I'm alive; they too have a good opinion of themselves—if you try later you may be too late. Any one of them would have you with great pleasure."

"Yes, everyone falls in love with me here," said Peredonov with a grave boastfulness.

"There, you see, it's for you to take advantage of the moment," said Routilov persuasively.

"The chief thing is that she mustn't be lean," said Peredonov with anxiety in his voice. "I prefer a fat one."

"Don't you worry on that account," said Routilov warmly. "Even now they are plump enough girls, but they have far from reached their full growth; all this will come in good time. As soon as they marry, they'll improve, like the oldest—well, you've seen our Larissa, a regular fishpie!"

"I'd marry," said Peredonov, "but I'm afraid that Vara will make a row."

"If you're afraid of a row—I'll tell you what you ought to do," said Routilov with a sly smile. "You ought to make quick work of it; marry, say, to-day or to-morrow, and suddenly show up at home with your young wife. Say the word, and I'll arrange it for to-morrow evening? Which one do you want?"

Peredonov suddenly burst into loud, cackling laughter.

"Well, I see you like the idea—it's all settled then?" asked Routilov.

Peredonov stopped laughing quite as suddenly, and said gravely, quietly, almost in a whisper:

"She'll inform against me—that miserable jade!"

"She'll do nothing of the sort," said Routilov persuasively.

"Or she'll poison me," whispered Peredonov in fear.

"You leave it all to me," Routilov prevailed upon him, "I'll see that you are well protected——"

"I shan't marry without a *dot*," said Peredonov sullenly.

Routilov was not astonished by the new turn in the thoughts of his surly companion. He replied with the same warmth:

"You're an odd fellow. Of course, my sisters have a *dot*. Are you satisfied? I'll run along now and arrange everything. Only keep your mouth shut, not a breath, do you hear, not to anyone!"

He shook Peredonov's hand, and made off in great haste. Peredonov looked silently after him. A picture rose up in his mind of the Routilov girls, always cheerful and laughing. An immodest thought squeezed a degrading likeness of a smile to his lips—it appeared for an instant and vanished. A confused restlessness stirred within him.

"What about the Princess?" he reflected. "The others have the cash without her power; but if I marry Varvara I'll fall into an inspector's job, and later perhaps they'll make me a Head-Master."

He looked after the bustling, scampering Routilov and thought maliciously:

"Let him run!"

And this thought gave him a lingering, vague pleasure. Then he began to feel sad because he was alone; he pulled his hat down over his forehead, knitted his bright eyebrows, and quickly turned towards his home across the unpaved, deserted streets, overgrown with pearl grass and white flowers, and water-cress and grass that had been stamped down into the mud.

Someone called to him in a quick, quiet voice:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, come in to us."

Peredonov raised his gloomy eyes, and looked angrily beyond the hedge. In the garden behind the gate stood Natalya Afanasyevna Vershina, a small, slender, dark-skinned woman, black-browed and black-eyed, and all in black. She was smoking a cigarette, in a dark, cherry-wood mouthpiece, and smiling lightly, as though she knew something that was not to be said, but to be smiled at. Not so much by words, as by her light, quick movements, she asked Peredonov into her garden; she opened the gate and stood aside, smiled invitingly, and at the same time motioned persuasively with her hands, as if to say: "Enter, why do you stand there?"

And Peredonov entered, submitting to her witching, silent movements. But he soon paused on the sand path where a few broken twigs caught his eye, and he looked at his watch.

"It's time for lunch," he grumbled.

Though his watch had served him a long time, yet even now, in the presence of people, he would glance with satisfaction at its large gold case. It was twenty minutes to twelve. Peredonov decided that he would remain for a short time. He walked morosely after Vershina along the garden-path, past the neglected clumps of raspberry canes and currants with their red and black clusters.

The garden was growing yellow and variegated with fruits and late flowers. There were many fruit and other trees and bushes; low-spreading apple trees, round-leaved pear trees, lindens, cherry trees with smooth, glossy leaves, plum trees and honeysuckle. The elderberry trees were red with berries. Close to the fence was a dense growth of Siberian geraniums—small pale-rose flowers with purple veins. Thorny purple buds stood out with intense vividness among the bushes. A small, one-storey, grey, wooden house stood near by, and a path at its door opened out wide into the garden. It seemed charming and cosy. A part of the vegetable garden was visible behind it. The dry poppy heads rocked there, as well as the large, white-yellow caps of camomile. The yellow heads of sunflowers were beginning to droop with ripeness, while among the useful herbs, some hemlock lifted its white, and the hemlock geranium its pale purple umbrellas. Here bright yellow buttercups and small slipper flowers also flourished.

"Were you at Mass?" asked Vershina.

"Yes, I was," answered Peredonov gruffly.

"I hear Marta has just returned also," said Vershina. "She often goes to our church. I often laugh at her. 'On whose account,' I say to her, 'do you go to our church?' She blushes and says nothing. Let us go and sit in the summer-house," she added abruptly.

In the garden, in the shade of the spreading maples, stood an old, grey little summer-house. It had three small steps and a mossy floor, low walls, six roughly-cut posts, a sloping slate roof with six angles. Marta was sitting in the summer-house, still in her best clothes. She had on a brightly coloured dress with bows, which were very unbecoming to her. Her short sleeves showed her sharp, red elbows and her large, red hands. In other respects Marta was not unpleasant to look at. Her freckles did not spoil her face; she was even considered something of a beauty, especially by her own people, the Poles, of whom there were a number in the district. Marta was rolling cigarettes for Vershina. She was very anxious for Peredonov to see her and admire her. This desire gave her ingenuous face an expression of agitated affability. It was not that Marta was altogether in love with Peredonov but rather that Vershina wanted to get her a home—for her family was a large one. Marta was anxious to please Vershina, with whom she had lived several months, ever since the death of Vershina's old husband; not only on her own account but on that of her young brother, a schoolboy, who was also living with Vershina.

Vershina and Peredonov entered the summer-house. Peredonov greeted Marta rather gloomily, and sat down. He chose a place where one of the posts protected his back from the wind and kept the draught out of his ears. He glanced at Marta's yellow boots with their rose pompoms and thought that they were trying to entrap him into marrying Marta. He always thought this when he met girls who were pleasant to him. He only noticed faults in Marta—many freckles, large hands and a coarse skin. He knew that her father held a small farm on lease, about six versts from the town. The income was small and there were many children: Marta had left her preparatory school, his son was at school, the other children were still smaller.

"Let me give you some beer," said Vershina quickly.

There were some glasses, two bottles of beer and a tin box of granulated sugar on the table, and a spoon which had been dipped in the beer lay beside them.

"All right," said Peredonov abruptly.

Vershina glanced at Marta, who filled the glass and handed it to Peredonov. A half-pleased, half-timorous smile passed over her face as she did this.

"Put some sugar into the beer," suggested Vershina.

Marta passed Peredonov the tin sugar-box. But Peredonov exclaimed irritably:

"No, sugar makes it disgusting!"

"What do you mean?" said Vershina, "sugar makes it delicious."

"Very delicious," said Marta.

"I say disgusting!" repeated Peredonov, looking angrily at the sugar.

"As you please," said Vershina, and changing the subject at once, she remarked with a laugh:

"I get very tired of Cherepnin."

Marta also laughed. Peredonov looked indifferent: he did not take any interest in other people's lives—he did not care for people and he never thought of them except as they might contribute to his own benefit and pleasure. Vershina smiled with self-satisfaction and said:

"He thinks that I will marry him."

"He's very cheeky," said Marta, not because she thought so, but because she wished to please and flatter Vershina.

"Last night he looked into our window," related Vershina. "He got into the garden while we were at supper. There was a rain-tub under the window, full of water. It was covered with a plank. The water was hidden. He climbed on the tub and looked in the window. As the lamp on the table was lighted he could see us, but we couldn't see him. Suddenly we heard a noise. We were frightened at first and ran outside. The plank had slipped and he had fallen into the water. However, he climbed out before we got there and ran away, leaving wet tracks on the path. We recognised him by his back."

Marta laughed shrilly and happily like a good-natured child. Vershina told this in her usual quick, monotonous voice and then was suddenly silent, and smiled at the corners of her mouth, which puckered up her smooth, dry face. The smoke-darkened teeth showed themselves slightly. Peredonov reflected a moment and suddenly burst into a laugh. He did not always respond at once to what he thought was funny—his receptivity was sluggish and dull.

Vershina smoked one cigarette after another. She could not live without tobacco smoke under her nose.

"We'll soon be neighbours," announced Peredonov.

Vershina glanced quickly at Marta, who flushed slightly and looked at Peredonov with a timorous air of expectation, and then at once turned away towards the garden.

"So you're moving?" asked Vershina; "why?"

"It's too far from the *gymnasia*," explained Peredonov.

Vershina smiled incredulously.

It's more likely, she thought, he wants to be nearer Marta.

"But you've lived there for several years," she said.

"Yes," said Peredonov angrily. "And the landlady's a swine."

"Why?" asked Vershina, with an ambiguous smile.

Peredonov grew somewhat animated.

"She's repapered the rooms most damnably," he exclaimed, "one piece doesn't match another. When you open the dining-room door you find quite another pattern. Most of the room has bunches of large and small flowers, while behind the door there is a pattern of stripes and nails. And the colours are different too. We shouldn't have noticed it, if Falastov had not come and laughed. And everybody laughs at it."

"It certainly must be ridiculous," agreed Vershina.

"We're not telling her that we're going to leave," said Peredonov, and at this he lowered his voice. "We're going to find new apartments and we shall go without giving notice."

"Of course," said Vershina.

"Or else she'll make a row," said Peredonov, with a touch of anxiety in his eyes. "That means that we should have to pay her a month's rent for her beastly hole."

Peredonov laughed with joy at the thought of leaving the house without paying.

"She's bound to make a demand," observed Vershina.

"Let her—she won't get anything out of me," replied Peredonov angrily.

"We went to Peter¹ and we made no use of the house while we were away."

"But you had rented it."

"What then? She ought to make a discount; why should we have to pay for time when we weren't there? Besides, she is very impertinent."

"Well, your landlady is impertinent because she's yours—your cousin is particularly quarrelsome," said Vershina, with an emphasis on the "cousin."

Peredonov frowned and looked dully in front of him with his half-sleepy eyes. Vershina changed the subject. Peredonov pulled a caramel out of his pocket, tore

¹ St. Petersburg.

the paper off and began to chew it. He happened to glance at Marta and thought that she wanted a caramel.

"Shall I give her one or not?" thought Peredonov. "She's not worth it. I suppose I ought to give her one to show that I'm not stingy. After all, I've got a pocketful."

And he pulled out a handful of caramels.

"Here you are!" he said, and held out the sweets, first to Vershina and then to Marta.

"They're very good bonbons," he said, "expensive ones—thirty kopecks a pound."

Each of the women took a sweet.

"Take more," he said, "I've lots of them. They're very nice bonbons—I wouldn't eat bad ones."

"Thank you, I don't want any more," said Vershina in her quick, monotonous voice.

And Marta repeated after her the same words, but with less decision.

Peredonov glanced incredulously at Marta and said:

"What do you mean—you don't want them? Have another."

He took a single caramel for himself from the handful and laid the others before Marta. She smiled without speaking and bent her head a little.

"Little idiot!" thought Peredonov, "she doesn't even know how to thank one properly."

He did not know what to converse about with Marta. She had no interest for him, like all objects and people with which he had no well-defined relations, either pleasant or unpleasant.

The rest of the beer was poured into Peredonov's glass. Vershina glanced at Marta.

"I'll get it," said Marta.

She always guessed what Vershina wanted without being told.

"Send Vladya—he's in the garden," suggested Vershina.

"Vladislav!" shouted Marta.

"Yes?" answered the boy from so close that it seemed as if he had been listening to them.

"Bring some more beer—two bottles," said Marta, "they're in the box in the corridor."

Vladislav soon came back noiselessly, handed the beer to Marta through the window and greeted Peredonov.

"How are you?" asked Peredonov with a scowl. "How many bottles of beer have you got away with to-day?"

Vladislav smiled in a constrained way and said:

"I don't drink beer."

He was a boy of about fourteen with a freckled face like Marta's, and with uneasy, clumsy movements like hers. He was dressed in a blouse of coarse linen.

Marta began to talk to her brother in whispers. They both laughed. Peredonov looked suspiciously at them. Whenever people laughed in his presence without his knowing the reason he always supposed that they were laughing at him. Vershina felt disturbed and tried to catch Marta's eye. But Peredonov himself showed his annoyance by asking:

"What are you laughing at?"

Marta started and turned towards him, not knowing what to say. Vladislav smiled, looking at Peredonov, and flushed slightly.

"It's very rude," said Peredonov, "to laugh like that before guests. Were you laughing at me?"

Marta blushed and Vladislav looked frightened.

"Oh! no," said Marta. "We weren't laughing at you. We were talking about our own affairs."

"A secret?" exclaimed Peredonov angrily. "It is rude to discuss secrets before guests."

"It isn't at all a secret," said Marta, "but we laughed because Vladya hasn't all his clothes on and feels bashful about coming in."

Peredonov was mollified and began to think of jokes about Vladya and presently gave him a caramel.

"Marta, bring me my black shawl," said Vershina. "And at the same time look into the oven to see how that pie's getting on."

Marta went out obediently. She understood that Vershina wanted to talk with Peredonov, and felt glad of the respite.

"And you run away and play, Vladya," said Vershina, "there's nothing for you to chatter about here."

Vladya ran off and they could hear the sand crunching under his feet. Vershina gave a quick, cautious side-glance at Peredonov through the clouds of cigarette smoke she was ceaselessly puffing out. Peredonov sat solemnly and gazed straight in front

in a befogged sort of way and chewed a caramel. He felt pleased because the others had gone—otherwise they might have laughed again. Though he was quite certain that they had not been laughing at him, the annoyance remained—just as after contact with stinging nettles the pain remains and increases even though the nettles are left behind.

"Why don't you get married?" said Vershina very abruptly, "What are you waiting for, Ardalyon Borisitch. You must forgive me if I speak frankly, but Varvara is not good enough for you."

Peredonov passed his hand over his slightly ruffled chestnut-brown hair and announced with a surly dignity:

"There is no one here good enough for me!"

"Don't say that," replied Vershina, with a wry smile. "There are plenty of girls better than she is here and every one of them would marry you."

She knocked the ash off her cigarette with a decisive movement as if she were emphasising her remark with an exclamation point.

"Everyone wouldn't suit me," retorted Peredonov.

"We're not discussing everyone," said Vershina quickly, "you're not the kind of man who'd run after a *dot* if the girl were a fine girl. You yourself earn quite enough, thank God."

"No," replied Peredonov, "it would be more of an advantage for me to marry Varvara. The Princess has promised her patronage. She will give me a good billet," he went on with grave animation.

Vershina smiled faintly. Her entire wrinkled face, dark as if saturated with tobacco smoke, expressed a condescending incredulousness. She asked:

"Did the Princess herself tell *you* this?" She laid an emphasis on the word "you."

"Not me, but Varvara," admitted Peredonov. "But it comes to the same thing."

"You rely too much on your cousin's word," said Vershina spitefully. "But tell me, is she much older than you? Say, by fifteen years? Or more? she must be under fifty."

"Nonsense," said Peredonov angrily, "she's not yet thirty!"

Vershina laughed.

"Please tell me," she said with unconcealed derision. "Surely, she looks much older than you. Of course, it's not my business, it's not my affair. Still, it is a pity that such a good-looking, clever young man should not have the position he deserves."

Peredonov surveyed himself with great self-satisfaction. But there was no smile on his pink face and he seemed hurt because everybody did not appreciate him as Vershina did.

"Even without patronage you'll go far," continued Vershina, "surely the authorities will recognise your value. Why should you hang on to Varvara? And none even of the Routilov girls would suit you; they're too frivolous and you need a more practical wife. You might do much worse than marry Marta!"

Peredonov looked at his watch.

"Time to go home," he observed and rose to say good-bye.

Vershina was convinced that Peredonov was leaving because she had put to him a vital question and that it was only his indecision that prevented him from speaking about Marta immediately.

CHAPTER 2

Varvara Dmitrievna Maloshina, the mistress of Peredonov, awaited him. She was dressed in a slovenly fashion, and her face was powdered and rouged.

Jam tarts were being baked in the oven for lunch: Peredonov was very fond of them. Varvara ran about the kitchen on her high heels, preparing everything for Peredonov's arrival. Varvara was afraid that Natalya, the stout, freckled servant-maid, would steal one of the tarts and possibly more. That was why Varvara did not leave the kitchen and, as she habitually did, was abusing the servant. Upon her wrinkled face, which still kept the remains of beauty, there was a continual expression of discontented maliciousness.

A feeling of gloom and irritation came over Peredonov, as always happened when he returned home. He entered the dining-room noisily, flung his hat on the window-sill, sat down at the table and shouted:

"Vara! Where's my food?"

Varvara brought in the food, skilfully limping in her narrow, fashionable shoes, and waited upon Peredonov herself. When she brought the coffee Peredonov bent down to the steaming glass and smelt it. Varvara was disturbed and looked a little frightened; she asked:

"What's the matter with you, Ardalyon Borisitch? Does the coffee smell of anything?"

Peredonov looked morosely at her and said:

"I'm smelling to see whether you haven't put poison in it!"

"What's the matter with you, Ardalyon Borisitch?" said Varvara again. "God help you, how did you get that into your head?"

"You mixed hemlock with it, perhaps," he grumbled.

"What could I gain by poisoning you?" asked Varvara reassuringly. "Don't make a fool of yourself."

Peredonov continued smelling the coffee, but eventually became reassured.

"If it were poison," he said, "you'd be able to tell by the heavy smell, but you have to put your nose right into the steam!"

He was silent a while and then suddenly said, spitefully and sarcastically:

"The Princess!"

Varvara looked distressed.

"What about the Princess?" asked Varvara.

"The Princess," he said, "let her give me the job first and then I'll get married—you write her that."

"But you know, Ardalyon Borisitch," Varvara began in a persuasive voice, "that the Princess had made her promise on condition that I marry first. Otherwise, it is awkward for me to ask on your behalf."

"Write her that we're already married," said Peredonov, rejoicing in his sudden inspiration.

Varvara was for a moment disconcerted, but quickly recovered herself, and said:

"What's the use of lying, the Princess might investigate. You'd better arrange the date for the marriage; it's time to begin making the dress."

"What dress?" demanded Peredonov, gruffly.

"Could anyone get married in these rags?" shouted Varvara. "You had better give me some money, Ardalyon Borisitch, for the dress."

"Are you preparing yourself for your coffin?" asked Peredonov.

"You're a beast, Ardalyon Borisitch!"

Peredonov suddenly felt a desire to provoke her still further. He asked her:

"Varvara, do you know where I've been?"

"Where?" she inquired anxiously.

"At Vershina's," he said, and burst out laughing.

"Well, you were in nice company, I must say!"

"I saw Marta," Peredonov continued.

"She's covered with freckles," said Varvara, spitefully. "And she's got a mouth that stretches from ear to ear. You might as well sew up her mouth, like a frog's."

"Anyway, she's handsomer than you," said Peredonov. "I think I'll take her and marry her."

"You dare marry her," shouted Varvara, reddening and trembling with rage, "and I'll burn her eyes out with vitriol!"

"I'd like to spit on you," said Peredonov, quite calmly.

"Just try it!" said Varvara.

"Well, I will," answered Peredonov.

He rose, and with a sluggish and indifferent expression, spat in her face.

"Pig!" said Varvara, as quietly as if his spitting on her had refreshed her. And she began to wipe her face with a table napkin. Peredonov was silent. Latterly he had been more brusque with her than usual. And even in the beginning he had never been particularly gentle with her. Encouraged by his silence, she repeated more loudly:

"Pig! You are a pig!"

Just then they heard in the next room the bleating of an almost sheep-like voice.

"Don't make such a noise," said Peredonov. "There's someone coming."

"It's only Pavloushka," answered Varvara.

Pavel Vassilyevitch Volodin entered with a loud, gay laugh. He was a young man who, face, manners and all, strangely resembled a young ram; his hair, like a ram's, was curly; his eyes, protruding and dull; everything, about him, in fact, suggested a lively ram—a stupid young man. He was a carpenter by trade. He had first studied in a Manual Training School, but now was an instructor of the trade in the local school.

"How are you, old friend?" he said gaily. "You're at home, drinking coffee, and here am I! Here we are together again!"

"Natashka, bring a third spoon," shouted Varvara.

"Eat, Pavloushka," said Peredonov, and it was evident that he was anxious to be hospitable to Volodin. "You know, old chap, I shall soon get an inspector's billet—the Princess has promised Vara."

Volodin seemed pleased and laughed.

"And the future inspector is drinking coffee," he exclaimed, slapping Peredonov on the back.

"And you think it's easy to get an inspector's job," said Peredonov. "Once you're reported, that's the end of you."

"And who's going to report you?" asked Varvara.

"There are plenty to do that," said Peredonov. "They might say I'd been reading Pisarev.² And there you are!"

² Pisarev (1840-68), a revolutionary writer and a precursor of Nihilism.

"But, Ardalyon Borisitch, you ought to put Pisarev behind your other books," advised Volodin, sniggering.

Peredonov glanced cautiously at Volodin and said:

"Perhaps I've never even had Pisarev. Won't you have a drink, Pavloushka?"

Volodin stuck out his lower lip and made a significant face, like a man who was conscious of his own value, and bent his head rather like a ram:

"I'm always ready to drink in company," he said, "but not on my lonesome!"

And Peredonov was also always ready to drink. They drank their vodka and ate the jam tarts afterwards.

Suddenly Peredonov splashed the dregs of his coffee-cup on the wall-paper. Volodin goggled his sheepish eyes, and gazed in astonishment. The wall-paper was soiled and torn. Volodin asked:

"What are you doing to your wall-paper?"

Peredonov and Varvara laughed.

"It's to spite the landlady," said Varvara. "We're leaving soon. Only don't you chatter."

"Splendid!" shouted Volodin, and joined in the laughter.

Peredonov walked up to the wall and began to wipe the soles of his boots on it. Volodin followed his example. Peredonov said:

"We always dirty the walls after every meal, so that they'll remember us when we've gone!"

"What a mess you've made!" exclaimed Volodin, delightedly.

"Won't Irishka be surprised," said Varvara, with a dry, malicious laugh.

And all three, standing before the wall, began to spit at it, to tear the paper, and to smear it with their boots. Afterwards, tired but pleased, they ceased.

Peredonov bent down and picked up the cat, a fat, white, ugly beast. He began to torment the animal, pulling its ears, and tail, and then shook it by the neck. Volodin laughed gleefully and suggested other methods of tormenting the animal.

"Ardalyon Borisitch, blow into his eyes! Brush his fur backwards!"

The cat snarled, and tried to get away, but dared not show its claws. It was always thrashed for scratching. At last this amusement palled on Peredonov and he let the cat go.

"Listen, Ardalyon Borisitch, I've got something to tell you," began Volodin. "I kept thinking of it all the way here and now I'd almost forgotten it."

"Well?" asked Peredonov.

"I know you like sweet things," said Volodin, "and I know one that will make you lick your fingers!"

"There's nothing you could teach me about things to eat," remarked Peredonov.

Volodin looked offended.

"Perhaps," he said, "you know all the good things that are made in your village, but how can you know all the good things that are made in my village, if you've never been there?"

And satisfied that this argument clinched the matter, Volodin laughed, like a sheep bleating.

"In your village they gorge themselves on dead cats," said Peredonov.

"Permit me, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Volodin. "It is possible that in your village they eat dead kittens. We won't talk about it. But surely you've never eaten *erli*?"

"No, that's true," confessed Peredonov.

"What sort of food is that?" asked Varvara.

"It's this," explained Volodin, "You know what *koutia*³ is?"

"Well, who doesn't know?" said Varvara.

"Well, this is what it is," went on Volodin. "Ground *koutia*, raisins, sugar and almonds. That's *erli*."

And Volodin began to describe minutely how they cook *erli* in his village. Peredonov listened to him in an annoyed way.

"*Koutia*," thought Peredonov, "why does he mention that? Does he want me to be dead?"

Volodin suggested:

"If you'd like to have it done properly, give me the stuff, and I'll cook it myself for you."

"Turn a goat into a vegetable garden," said Peredonov, gravely.

"He might drop some poison-powder into it," thought Peredonov.

³ A kind of rice pudding eaten at funerals in Russia.

Volodin was offended again.

"Now if you think, Ardalyon Borisitch, that I shall steal some of your sugar, you're mistaken. I don't want your sugar!"

"Don't go on making a fool of yourself," interrupted Varvara. "You know how particular he is. You'd better come here and do it."

"Yes, and you'll have to eat it yourself," said Peredonov.

"Why?" asked Volodin, his voice trembling with indignation.

"Because it's nasty stuff."

"As you like, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Volodin, shrugging his shoulders. "I only wanted to please you, and if you don't want it, you don't want it."

"Now tell us about the reprimand the General gave you," said Peredonov.

"What General?" asked Volodin, and flushed violently as he protruded an offended lower lip.

"It's no use pretending. We've heard it," said Peredonov.

Varvara grinned.

"Excuse me, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Volodin, hotly. "Likely enough you've heard about it, but you haven't heard the right story. Now I'll tell you exactly what happened."

"Fire away," said Peredonov.

"It happened three days ago, about this time," began Volodin. "In our school, as you know, repairs are going on in the workroom. And here, if you please, comes in Veriga with our inspector to look around, and we are working in the back room. So far, good. It doesn't matter what Veriga wanted or why he came—that's no concern of mine. Suppose he is a nobleman? Still he's no connection with our school. But that's no concern of mine. He comes in, and we don't take any notice of him and go on working. When suddenly they come into our room, and Veriga, if you please, has his hat on."

"That was an insult to you," said Peredonov.

"But you must know," interrupted Volodin, eagerly. "There's an ikon in our room, and we had our hats off. And he suddenly appears like a Mohammedan dog. And I up and said to him quietly, and with great dignity: 'Your Excellency,' I say to him, 'Will you be good enough to take your hat off, because,' I say to him, 'there's an ikon in the room.' Now, was that the right thing to say?" asked Volodin, opening his eyes, questioningly.

"That was clever, Pavloushka," shouted Peredonov. "He got what he deserved."

"Yes, that was quite proper," chimed in Varvara. "People like that shouldn't be let off. You're a smart young fellow, Pavel Vassilyevitch."

Volodin, with an air of injured innocence, went on:

"And then he says to me: 'Each to his trade.' Then he turns and goes out. That's all there was to it and nothing else."

Volodin nevertheless felt himself a hero. Peredonov, to mollify him, gave him a caramel.

A new visitor arrived—Sofya Efimovna Prepolovenskaya, the wife of the forester, a fat woman, with a face half good-natured, half cunning—brisk in her movements. She sat down at the table and asked Volodin slyly:

"Pavel Vassilyevitch, why do you come so often to visit Varvara Dmitrievna?"

"I don't come to visit Varvara Dmitrievna," answered Volodin bashfully, "but to see Ardalyon Borisitch."

"You haven't yet fallen in love with anyone?" asked Prepolovenskaya with a laugh.

Everyone knew Volodin was looking for a wife with a dowry, offered himself to many and was always rejected. Prepolovenskaya's joke seemed to him out of place. In a manner resembling that of an injured sheep, he said in a trembling voice:

"If I fell in love, Sofya Efimovna, that wouldn't concern anyone except my own self and her. And in such an affair you wouldn't be considered."

But Prepolovenskaya refused to be suppressed.

"Suppose," she said, "that you fell in love with Varvara Dmitrievna, who would make jam tarts for Ardalyon Borisitch?"

Volodin again protruded his lips and lifted his eyebrows. He was at a loss what to say.

"Don't be faint-hearted, Pavel Vassilyevitch," Prepolovenskaya went on. "Why aren't you engaged? You're young and handsome."

"Perhaps Varvara Dmitrievna wouldn't have me," said Volodin, sniggering.

"Why shouldn't she? You're much too timid!"

"And perhaps I wouldn't have her," said Volodin, in desperation. "Perhaps I don't want to marry other people's cousins; perhaps I have a cousin of my own in my village."

He was already beginning to believe that Varvara would marry him. Varvara was angry; she considered Volodin a fool, and moreover, his wages were only three-quarters of Peredonov's.

Prepolovenskaya wanted to marry Peredonov to her sister, the fat daughter of a priest. That is why she tried to create a quarrel between Peredonov and Varvara.

"Why are you trying to marry us?" asked Varvara, in an irritated way. "You'd better try to marry your little fool of a sister to Pavel Vassilyevitch."

"Why should I take him from you?" said Prepolovenskaya, jokingly.

Prepolovenskaya's jests gave a new turn to Peredonov's slow thoughts, and the *erli* had already taken possession of his mind. Why did Volodin advise such a dish? Peredonov disliked thinking. He believed at once everything he was told; that was why he began to believe that Volodin was in love with Varvara. He thought: they would entangle Varvara, and then when he left for the inspector's job, they would poison him on the way with *erlis*, and Volodin would take his place; he would be buried as Volodin, and Volodin would become inspector. A clever trick!

There was a sudden noise in the passage. Peredonov and Varvara were frightened. Peredonov fixed his screwed-up eyes on the door. Varvara crept up to the parlour door, looked in, then, just as quietly, on tip-toe, balancing her arms and smiling in a distracted way, returned to the table. From the passage came a noise and shrill outcries as if two people were wrestling. Varvara whispered:

"That's Ershova, frightfully drunk. Natashka won't let her in and she's trying to get into the parlour."

"What shall we do?" asked Peredonov, fearfully.

"I suppose we'd better go into the parlour," decided Varvara, "so that she shan't get in here."

They entered the parlour and closed the door tightly behind them. Varvara went into the passage in the faint hope of restraining the landlady, or of persuading her to sit down in the kitchen. But the insolent woman kept pushing her way in, propped herself up against the door-post and poured out abusive compliments on the whole company. Peredonov and Varvara fussed about her and tried to make her sit down on a chair near the passage and farther from the dining-room. Varvara brought her from the kitchen, on a tray, vodka, beer and some tarts, but the landlady would not sit nor drink anything and kept on edging towards the dining-room, but she could not exactly find the door. Her face was red, her clothes were disordered, she was filthy and smelt of vodka, even at a distance. She shouted:

"No! You must let me sit at your own table. I'll not have it on a tray. I want it on a tablecloth. I'm the landlady and I will be respected. Never mind if I'm drunk. I'm at least honest and a good wife to my husband."

Varvara, smiling at once with contempt and fear, said: "Yes, we know."

Ershova winked at Varvara, laughed hoarsely and snapped her fingers defiantly. She became more and more arrogant.

"Cousin!" she shouted. "We know the sort of cousin you are. Why doesn't the Head-Master's wife come to see you, eh?"

"Don't make so much noise," said Varvara.

But Ershova began to shout even louder:

"How dare you order me about? I'm in my own house and I can do what I please. If I like I can have you thrown out so that there'd not even be a smell of you left behind. Only I'm too kind-hearted."

Meanwhile Volodin and Prepolovensky sat timidly at the window in silence. Prepolovensky smiled slightly, looking at the shrew out of the corner of her eye, but pretended that she was looking into the street. Volodin sat with an injured expression on his face.

Ershova eventually became more good-humoured and gave Varvara a friendly slap on the shoulder, saying with a drunken smile:

"Now listen to me. Put me at your table and treat me like a lady. Then give me some *zhamochni*⁴, and treat your landlady decently. Come, my dear girl!"

"Here are some tarts," said Varvara.

"I don't want tarts!" shouted Ershova. "I want some *zhamochni*." And she waved her hands. "The masters have them, and I want some too."

"I haven't any *zhamochni* for you," answered Varvara, growing bolder as the landlady became more good-tempered. "Now here's some tarts. Gorge yourself!"

Ershova suddenly perceived the door into the dining-room, and cried out furiously:

"Out of my way, viper!"

She pushed Varvara aside and threw herself towards the door. There was no time to restrain her. Lowering her head and clenching her fists, she broke into the dining-room, throwing back the door with a crash. There she paused just inside the door and saw the soiled wall-paper. She uttered a long "whew" of astonishment. She stood with her hands on her hips and her legs crossed, shouting with rage:

⁴ *Zhamochki*, an apparently invented word, meaning something particularly nice to eat.

"Then it's true that you're leaving!"

"Who put that into your head, Irinya Stepanovna?" said Varvara, trembling. "We've no such idea. Someone's been fooling you."

"We're not going anywhere," declared Peredonov. "We're quite contented here."

The landlady did not listen to them, she walked up to the panic-stricken Varvara, and shook her fist in her face. Peredonov got behind Varvara. He would have run away, but he wanted to see if Varvara and the landlady would come to blows.

"I will step on one of your legs," exclaimed the landlady, furiously, "and tear you in half with the other."

"Be quiet, Irinya Stepanovna," said Varvara, persuasively. "We have visitors."

"You can bring your visitors along too," said the landlady. "I'll do the same to them."

She reeled and made a dash into the parlour, and suddenly changing her demeanour and tactics she said quietly to Prepolovensskaya, bowing so low before her that she almost fell on the floor:

"My dear lady, Sofya Efimovna, forgive a drunken old woman; I have something I'd like to say to you. You come to visit these people and yet you don't know that they're gossiping about your sister. And who to, d'you suppose? Me! A bootmaker's drunken wife! And why? So I'd tell everyone—that's why!"

Varvara grew purple in the face and said:

"I said nothing of the sort."

"You didn't? Do you mean to deny it, you mean cat?" shouted Ershova, coming up to Varvara, with clenched fists.

"Be quiet, will you?" muttered Varvara, in confusion.

"No," said the landlady, spitefully, "I won't be quiet," and she turned again to Prepolovensskaya. "Do you know what she says, the little beast? She tried to make out that your sister is carrying on with your husband!"

Sofya's sly eyes gleamed angrily at Varvara; she rose and said with a feigned laugh:

"Thank you humbly, I didn't expect that."

"Liar!" screamed Varvara, turning on Ershova.

Ershova gave an angry exclamation, stamped her foot, shook her hand at Varvara, and turned again to Prepolovensskaya.

"Yes, and do you know what he says about you, ma'am? He makes out that you carried on before you met your husband. That's the sort of dirty people they are! Spit in their mugs, my good lady! It's no use having anything to do with such low creatures!"

Prepolovenskaya flushed, and went silently into the passage. Peredonov ran after her, trying to explain:

"She's lying, don't believe her. I only said once before her that you were a fool and that was in a spiteful mood. But more than that, honest to God, I never said anything. She invented it."

Prepolovenskaya reassured him:

"Don't think about it, Ardalyon Borisitch, I can see myself that she's drunk and babbling. Only, why do you permit this in your house?"

"Well, what's to be done with her?" asked Peredonov.

Prepolovenskaya, confused and angry, was putting on her jacket. Peredonov did not offer to help her. He kept on mumbling excuses, but she paid no attention to him. He returned to the parlour. Ershova began to reproach him loudly, while Varvara ran out on the verandah to try and mollify Prepolovenskaya:

"You know yourself what a fool he is, he sometimes says anything that comes into his head."

"All right, all right! Don't mention it," replied Prepolovenskaya. "A drunken woman might babble anything."

Tall, dense nettles grew in the yard near the verandah. Prepolovenskaya smiled slightly and the last shadow of displeasure vanished from her plump white face. She became affable again towards Varvara. She would be revenged without an open quarrel. Together they went into the garden to wait until the landlady's eruption was over.

Prepolovenskaya kept looking at the nettles which grew in abundance along the garden fence. She said at last:

"You have enough nettles here. Don't you find any use for them?"

Varvara laughed and answered:

"What an idea! What could I do with them?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take some with me, as I haven't any."

"What will you do with them?" asked Varvara, in astonishment.

"Oh, I'll find a use for them," said Prepolovenskaya, smiling.

"But, my dear, do tell me for what?" entreated Varvara, inquisitively.

Prepolovenskaya, bending towards Varvara, whispered in her ear:

"By rubbing your body with nettles, you keep fat. That's why my Genichka is so plump."

It was well known that Peredonov preferred fat women, and that he detested thin ones. Varvara was distressed because she was thin and was growing still thinner. How could she get a little plumper?—was one of her chief worries. She used to ask everyone: "Do you know any remedy for thinness?" And now Prepolovenskaya was convinced that Varvara would follow her suggestion and rub herself with nettles, and in this way be her own punisher.

CHAPTER 3

Peredonov and Ershova went out into the open. He growled:

"Come this way."

She shouted with all her might, though gaily. They were apparently getting ready to dance. Prepolovenskaya and Varvara passed through the kitchen into another room, where they sat down at the window to see what would happen.

Peredonov and Ershova embraced each other, and began to dance around the pear tree. Peredonov's face remained dull as before and did not express anything. Mechanically, as upon an automaton, his golden-rimmed spectacles sprang up and down his nose, and his hair flopped up and down on his head. Ershova screamed, shouted, waved her arms, and at times reeled.

She shouted to Varvara, whom she espied at the window:

"Hey you, don't be such a lady, come out and dance. Are you disgusted with our company?"

Varvara turned away.

"The deuce take you! I'm dead tired," shouted Ershova, and fell back on the grass, drawing down Peredonov with her.

They sat a while in each other's embrace, then got up and once more began to dance. This they repeated several times: now they danced, now they rested under the pear tree, upon the bench, or simply on the grass.

Volodin enjoyed himself thoroughly, as he watched the dancers from the window. He roared with laughter, made extraordinarily funny faces, and bent his body in two. He shouted:

"They're cracked! How funny!"

"Accursed carrion!" said Varvara angrily.

"Yes, carrion," agreed Volodin with a grin. "Just wait, my dear landlady, I'll show you something! Let's go and make a mess in the parlour too. She won't come back again to-day anyhow, she'll tire herself out and go home to sleep."

He burst into his bleating laughter and jumped about like a great ram. Prepolovenskaya encouraged him:

"Yes, go ahead, Pavel Vassilyevitch, and make a mess. We don't care a rap for her! If she does come back we can tell her that she did it herself when she was drunk."

Volodin, skipping and laughing, ran into the parlour and began to smear and rub his boots on the wall-paper.

"Varvara Dmitrievna, get me a piece of rope!" he shouted.

Varvara, waddling like a duck, passed through the parlour into the bedroom and brought back with her a piece of frayed, knotted rope. Volodin made a noose, then stood up on a chair in the middle of the room and hung the noose on the lamp-bracket.

"That's for the landlady," he explained. "So that when you leave she'll have somewhere to hang herself in her rage!"

Both women squealed with laughter.

"Now get me a bit of paper and a pencil," shouted Volodin.

Varvara searched in the bedroom and discovered a pencil and a piece of paper.

Volodin wrote on it: "For the landlady," and pinned the paper on the noose. He made ridiculous grimaces all the time he was doing this. Then he began to jump furiously up and down along the walls, kicking them every now and again with his boots, shaking with laughter at the same time. His squeals and bleating laughter filled the whole house. The white cat, putting back its ears in terror, peered out of the bedroom and seemed undecided where to run.

Peredonov at last managed to disengage himself from Ershova and returned to the house. Ershova really did get tired and went home to bed. Volodin met Peredonov with uproarious laughter:

"We've made a mess of the parlour too! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" shouted Peredonov, bursting into a loud, abrupt laugh.

The women also cried "Hurrah," and a general gaiety set in. Peredonov cried:

"Pavloushka! let's dance."

"Yes, let's, Ardalyosha!" replied Volodin, with a stupid grin.

They danced under the noose and kicked up their legs awkwardly. The floor trembled under Peredonov's heavy feet.

"Ardalyon Borisitch's got a dancing fit," said Prepolovensskaya with a smile.

"That's nothing new, he has his little whims," grumbled Varvara, looking admiringly at Peredonov nevertheless.

She sincerely thought that he was handsome and clever. His most stupid actions seemed to her perfectly fitting. To her he was neither ridiculous nor repulsive.

"Let's sing a funeral mass over the landlady," shouted Volodin. "Fetch a pillow here."

"What will they think of next?" said Varvara laughingly.

She threw out from the bedroom a pillow in a dirty calico slip. They put the pillow on the floor to represent the landlady and began to chant over it with wild discordant voices. Then they called in Natalya, and made her turn the ariston⁵; all four of them began to dance a quadrille with strange antics, kicking up their legs.

After the dance Peredonov felt generous. A dim, morose sort of animation lit up his plump face; he was inspired by a sudden, almost automatic decision, a consequence, perhaps, of his sudden muscular action. He pulled out his wallet, counted several notes, and with a proud self-laudatory expression, threw them towards Varvara.

"Here you are, Varvara!" he exclaimed. "Get yourself a wedding dress!"

The notes fluttered across the floor. Varvara eagerly picked them up; she was not in the least offended at the way the gift was made. Prepolovenskaya thought: "Well, we shall see who's going to have him." And she smiled maliciously. Volodin, of course, did not think of helping Varvara to pick up the money.

Soon Prepolovenskaya left. In the passage she met another visitor, Grushina.

Marya Ossipovna Grushina was a young widow, with a prematurely faded appearance. She was thin—her dry skin was covered with small wrinkles which looked filled with dust. Her face was not unpleasant, but her teeth were black and unbrushed. She had long hands, long grasping fingers and dirty finger-nails. At the first glance she not only looked dirty but gave the impression that she and her clothes had been beaten together. It really looked as if a column of dust would rise up into the sky if she were struck several times with a carpet beater. Her clothes hung upon her in crumpled folds; she might have been just released from a tightly-bound bundle. Grushina lived on a pension, on petty commissions, and by lending money on mortgages. Her conversation was mostly on immodest lines, and she attached herself to men in the hope of getting a second husband. One of her rooms was always let to some one among the bachelor officials.

Varvara was pleased to see Grushina. She had something to tell her. They began to talk immediately about the servant-maid in whispers. The inquisitive Volodin edged closer to them and listened. Peredonov sat morosely by himself in front of the table crumpling the corner of the tablecloth in his fingers.

Varvara was complaining to Grushina about Natalya. Grushina suggested a new servant, Klavdia, and praised her. They decided to go after her at once, to Samorodina where she was living in the house of an excise officer, who had just

⁵ A musical instrument.

been transferred to another town. Varvara paused when she heard the maid's name; and asked in a doubtful voice:

"Klavdia? What on earth shall I call her,—Klashka?"

"Why don't you call her Klavdiushka?" suggested Grushina. This pleased Varvara.

"Klavdiushka, diushka!" she said with a crackling laugh. It should be observed that in our town a pig is called a "diushka." Volodin grunted; everyone laughed.

"Diushka, diushenka," lisped Volodin between the laughter, screwing up his stupid face and protruding his underlip. And he kept on grunting and making a fool of himself until he was told that he was a nuisance. Then he left his chair, with an expression of injury on his face, and sat down beside Peredonov. He lowered his large forehead like a ram and fixed his eyes on a spot on the soiled tablecloth.

On the way to Samorodina Varvara decided that she would buy the material for her wedding dress. She always went shopping with Grushina who helped her to make selections and to bargain.

Unseen by Peredonov, Varvara had stealthily stuffed Grushina's deep pockets with sweets and tarts and other gifts for her children. Grushina surmised that Varvara was in great need of her services.

Varvara's narrow, high-heeled shoes would not allow her to walk much. She quickly became fatigued. It was for this reason that she usually took a cab, though the distances in our town are not great. Latterly, she had frequented Grushina's house. The cabbies had noticed this, for there were only about a score of them. When Varvara entered a cab they never asked her where she wanted to go.

They seated themselves in a drozhky and were driven to the house where Klavdia was servant-maid, in order to make inquiries about her. The streets were dirty almost everywhere although it had rained only the day before. The drozhky no sooner rattled on to a solid paved part of the road than it plunged again into the clinging mud of the unpaved sections. But, by way of compensation, Varvara's voice rattled on continuously, now and then accompanied by Grushina's sympathetic chatter.

"My goose has been to Marfushka's again," said Varvara.

Grushina answered in a sympathetic outburst: "That's how they're trying to catch him. And why not, he'd be a great catch, especially for Marfushka. She never dreamt of anyone like him."

"Really, I don't know what to do," confessed Varvara. "He's become so obstinate lately—it's simply awful. Believe me, my head's in a constant whirl. He'll really marry and then there's nothing for me but the streets."

"Don't worry, darling Varvara," said Grushina consolingly. "Don't think about it. He'll never marry anyone but you. He's used to you."

"He sometimes goes off in the evening, and I can't get to sleep afterwards," said Varvara. "Who knows? Perhaps he's courting some girl. Sometimes I toss about all night. Everyone has her eye on him—even those three Routilov mares of women—but of course they'd hang around any man's neck. And that fat Zhenka's after him too."

Varvara went on complaining for a long time, and all her conversation led Grushina to think that Varvara had some favour to ask of her, and she was gratified at the prospect of a reward.

Klavdia pleased Varvara. The excise officer's wife strongly recommended her. They engaged her and told her to come that evening, as the excise officer was leaving at once.

At last they came to Grushina's house. Grushina lived in her own house in a slovenly enough fashion. The three children were bedraggled, dirty, stupid and malicious, like dogs that have just come out of water.

Their confidences were just beginning.

"My fool, Ardalyosha," began Varvara, "wants me to write to the Princess again. It's a waste of time to write to her. She'll either not answer or she'll answer unsatisfactorily. We're not on very intimate terms."

The Princess Volchanskaya, with whom Varvara had lived in the past as a seamstress for simple domestic things, could have helped Peredonov, since her daughter was married to the Privy-Councillor Stchepkin, who held an important position in the department of Education. She had already written in answer to Varvara's petitions in the past year that she could not ask anything for Varvara's fiancé, but she might for her husband, if the opportunity offered. This letter did not satisfy Peredonov, since it expressed merely a vague hope, and did not definitely state that the Princess would actually find Varvara's husband an inspector's position. In order to clear up this doubt they had lately gone to St. Petersburg; Varvara went to the Princess and later she took Peredonov with her, but purposely delayed the visit so that they did not find the Princess at home: Varvara realised that at best the Princess would merely have advised them to get married soon, making a few vague promises which would not have satisfied Peredonov. And Varvara decided not to let Peredonov meet the Princess.

"I've no one to depend upon but you," said Varvara. "Help me, darling Marya Ossipovna!"

"How can I help, my dearest Varvara Dmitrievna?" asked Grushina. "Of course you know I'm ready to do anything I can for you. Shall I read your fortune for you?"

Varvara laughed and said: "I know how clever you are, but you must help me another way."

"How?" asked Grushina, with a tremulous, expectant pleasure.

"That's very simple," replied Varvara. "You write a letter in the Princess's handwriting and I'll show it to Ardalyon Borisitch."

"But, my dear, how can I do it?" said Grushina, pretending to be alarmed. "What would become of me if I should be found out?"

Varvara was not in the least disconcerted by her answer, but pulled a crumpled letter out of her pocket, saying:

"I've brought one of the Princess's letters for you to copy."

Grushina refused for a long time. Varvara saw clearly that Grushina would consent, but that she was bargaining for a bigger reward, while Varvara wanted to give less. She gradually increased her promises of various small gifts, among them an old silk dress, until Grushina saw that Varvara could not be persuaded to give any more. A stream of entreaties poured from Varvara's mouth, and Grushina finally took the letter, making it appear from the expression of her face that she did so out of pity.

CHAPTER 4

The billiard-room was full of tobacco-smoke. Peredonov, Routilov, Falastov, Volodin and Mourin were there. The last of these was a robust landed proprietor of stupid appearance; he was the owner of a small estate and a good business man. The five of them, having finished a game, were preparing to go.

It was dusk. The number of empty beer bottles on the soiled wooden table was increasing. The players had drunk a good deal during the game; their faces were flushed, and they were getting noisy. Routilov alone kept his usual consumptive pallor. He really drank less than the others and his pallor was only increased by heavy drinking.

Coarse words flew about the room. But no one was offended; it was all said among friends.

Peredonov had lost, as nearly always happened. He played billiards badly. But his face kept its expression of unperturbed moroseness and he paid his due grudgingly.

Mourin shouted out:

"Bang!"

And he aimed his billiard-cue at Peredonov. Peredonov exclaimed in fright and collapsed into a chair. The stupid idea that Mourin wanted to shoot him glimmered in his dull mind. Everyone laughed. Peredonov grumbled in irritation:

"I can't stand jokes like that."

Mourin was already regretting that he had frightened Peredonov. His son was attending the *gymnasia* and he considered it his duty to be affable to the *gymnasia* instructors. He began to apologise to Peredonov and treated him to hock and seltzer. Peredonov said morosely:

"My nerves are rather unstrung. I'm having trouble with the Head-Master."

"The future inspector has lost," exclaimed Volodin in his bleating voice. "He's sorry for his money."

"Unlucky in games, lucky in love," said Routilov, smiling slightly and showing his decaying teeth.

This was the last straw. Peredonov had already lost money and had a fright and now they were taunting him about Varvara.

He exclaimed:

"I'll get married and then Varka can clear out!"

His friends roared with laughter and continued provoking him:

"You won't dare!"

"Yes I will dare: I'll get married to-morrow!"

"Here's a bet!" said Falastov. "I'll bet ten roubles he doesn't do it!"

But Peredonov thought of the money; if he lost he would have to pay. He turned away and lapsed into gloomy silence.

At the garden gates they parted and scattered in different directions. Peredonov and Routilov went together. Routilov began to persuade Peredonov to marry one of his sisters at once.

"Don't be afraid. I've prepared everything," he assured Peredonov.

"But the banns haven't been published," objected Peredonov.

"I tell you I've prepared everything," argued Routilov. "I've found the right priest, who knows that you're not related to us."

"There are no bride-men," said Peredonov.

"That's quite true, but I can get them. All I have to do is to send for them and they'll come to the church immediately. Or I'll go after them myself. It wasn't possible earlier, your cousin might have found out and hindered us."

Peredonov did not reply. He looked gloomily about him, where, behind their drowsy little gardens and wavering hedges, loomed the dark shapes of a few scattered houses.

"You just wait at the gate," said Routilov persuasively, "I'll bring out the loveliest one—whichever one you like. Listen, I'll prove it to you. Twice two is four, isn't it?"

"Yes," assented Peredonov.

"Well, as twice two is four, so it's your duty to marry one of my sisters."

Peredonov was impressed. "It's quite true," he thought, "of course, twice two is four." And he looked respectfully at the shrewd Routilov. "Well, it'll come to marrying one of them. You can't argue with him."

The friends at that moment reached the Routilovs' house and stopped at the gate.

"Well, you can't do it by force," said Peredonov angrily.

"You're a queer fellow," exclaimed Routilov. "They've waited until they're tired."

"And perhaps I don't want to!" said Peredonov.

"What do you mean by that? You are a queer chap. Are you going to be a shiftless fellow all your life?" asked Rutilov. "Or are you getting ready to enter a monastery? Or aren't you tired of Varya yet? Think what a face she'll make when you bring your young wife home."

Peredonov gave a cackle, but immediately frowned and said:

"And perhaps they also don't want to?"

"What do you mean—they don't want to? You are an odd fellow," answered Rutilov, "I give you my word."

"They'll be too proud," objected Peredonov.

"Why should that bother you? It's all the better."

"They're gigglers."

"But they never giggle at your expense," said Rutilov comfortingly.

"How do I know?"

"You'd better believe me. I'm not fooling you. They respect you. After all you're not a kind of Pavloushka, who'd make anybody laugh."

"Yes, if I take your word for it," said Peredonov incredulously. "But no, I want to be convinced myself."

"Well, you are an odd fellow!" said Rutilov in astonishment. "But how would they dare laugh at you? Still, is there any way I can prove it to you?"

Peredonov reflected and said:

"Let them come into the street at once."

"Very well, that's possible," agreed Rutilov.

"All three of them," continued Peredonov.

"Very well."

"And let each one say how she'll please me."

"Why all this?" asked Rutilov in astonishment.

"I'll find out what they want, and then you won't lead me by the nose."

"No one's going to lead you by the nose."

"Perhaps they'll want to laugh at me," argued Peredonov. "Now if they come out and want to laugh, it is I who'll be able to laugh at them!"

Routilov reflected, pushed his hat on to the back of his head and then forward over his forehead, and said at last:

"All right, you wait here and I'll go in and tell them—but you're certainly an odd fellow. You'd better come into the front garden or else the devil'll bring someone along the street and you'll be seen."

"I'll spit on them," said Peredonov. Nevertheless, he entered the gate.

Routilov went into the house to his sisters while Peredonov waited in the garden.

All the four sisters were sitting in the drawing-room, which was situated in the corner of the house that could be seen from the garden. They all had the same features and they all resembled their brother; they were handsome, rosy and cheerful. They were Larissa, a tranquil, pleasant, plump woman, who was married; the quick, agile Darya, the tallest and the slenderest of the sisters; the mischievous Liudmilla, and Valeria who was small, delicate and fragile-looking.

They were eating nuts and raisins. They were obviously waiting for something and were therefore rather agitated and laughed more than usual as they recalled the latest town gossip. They ridiculed both their own acquaintances and strangers.

Ever since the early morning they had been quite prepared to be married. It was only necessary for one of them to put on a suitable dress with a veil and flowers. Varvara was not mentioned in the sisters' conversation, as though she did not exist. But it was sufficient that they, the pitiless gossips, who pulled everyone to pieces, should refrain from mentioning Varvara; this complete silence showed that the idea of Varvara was fixed like a nail in the mind of each.

"I've brought him," announced Routilov entering the drawing-room. "He's at the gate." The sisters rose in an agitated way and all began to talk and laugh at the same time.

"There's only one difficulty," said Routilov laughingly.

"And what's that?" asked Darya.

Valeria frowned her handsome, dark eyebrows in a vexed way.

"I don't know whether to tell you or not," hesitated Routilov.

"Be quick about it," urged Darya.

Routilov in some confusion told them what Peredonov wanted. The girls raised an outcry and they all began to abuse Peredonov; but little by little their indignation gave place to jokes and laughter. Darya made a face of grim expectation and said:

"But he's waiting at the gate!"

It was becoming an amusing adventure.

The girls began to peep out the window towards the gate. Darya opened the window and cried out:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, can we say it out of the window?"

The morose answer came back:

"No!"

Darya quickly slammed down the window. The sisters burst into gay, unrestrained laughter, and ran from the drawing-room into the dining-room so that Peredonov might not hear them. The members of this family were so constituted that they could easily pass from a state of the most intense anger into a state of merriment, and it was the cheerful word that usually decided a matter.

Peredonov stood and waited. He felt depressed and afraid. He thought he would run away, but could not decide. Somewhere from afar the sounds of music reached him: the frail, tender sounds poured themselves out in the quiet, dark, night air, and they awoke sadness, and gave birth to pleasant reveries.

At the beginning, Peredonov's reveries took on an erotic turn. He imagined the Routilov girls in the most seductive poses. But the longer he waited, the more irritated he became at being forced to wait. And the music, which had barely aroused his hopelessly coarse emotions, died for him.

All around him the night descended quietly, and rustled with its ill-boding hoverings and whisperings. And it seemed even darker everywhere because Peredonov stood in an open space lit up by the drawing-room lamp; its two streaks of light broadened as they reached the neighbouring fence, the dark planks of which became visible. The trees in the depth of the garden assumed dark, suspicious, whispering shapes. Someone's slow, heavy footsteps sounded near-by on the street pavement. Peredonov began to feel apprehensive that while waiting here he might be attacked, and robbed, even murdered. He pressed against the very wall in the shadow, and timidly waited.

But suddenly long shadows shot out across the streaks of light in the garden, a door slammed, and voices were heard on the verandah. Peredonov grew animated. "They are coming," he thought joyously, and agreeable thoughts about the three beauties stole softly once more into his mind—disgusting children of his dull imagination.

The sisters stood in the passage. Routilov walked to the gate and looked to see if anyone was in the street. No one was to be seen or heard.

"There's no one about," he whispered loudly to his sisters, using his hands as a speaking-trumpet.

He remained in the street to keep watch. Peredonov joined him.

"They're coming out to speak to you," said Routilov.

Peredonov stood at the gate and looked through the chink between the gate and the gate-post.

His face was morose and almost frightened, and all sorts of fancies and thoughts expired in his mind and were replaced by a heavy, aimless desire.

Darya was the first to come up to the open gate.

"What can I do to please you?" she asked.

Peredonov was morosely silent.

Darya said:

"I will make you the crispest pancakes piping hot—only don't choke over them."

Liudmilla cried over her shoulder:

"I'll go down every morning and collect all the gossip to tell you. That will make us jolly."

Between the two girls' cheerful faces showed for a moment Valeria's slender, capricious face, and her slight, frail voice was heard:

"I wouldn't tell you for anything how I shall please you—you'd better guess yourself."

The sisters ran away laughing. Their voices and laughter ceased directly they were in the house. Peredonov turned away from the gate; he was not quite satisfied. He thought: "They babbled something and then ran away." It would have been far better if they'd put it on paper. But he had already stood here waiting long enough.

"Well, are you satisfied?" asked Routilov. "Which one do you like best?"

Peredonov was lost in thought. Of course, he concluded at last, he ought to take the youngest. A young woman is always better than an older one.

"Bring Valeria here," he said decisively.

Routilov went into the house and Peredonov again entered the garden.

Liudmilla looked stealthily out of the window, trying to make out what they were saying, without any success. But suddenly there were sounds of someone approaching by the garden path. The sisters kept silent and sat there nervously. Routilov entered and announced:

"He's chosen Valeria, and he's waiting at the gate!"

The sisters grew noisy at once and began to laugh.

Valeria went slightly pale.

"Well, well," she said ironically, "I needed him very badly."

Her hands trembled. All three of the sisters began to fuss about her and to put finery on her. She always spent a lot of time over her toilette—the other sisters hurried her. Routilov kept continually babbling with pleasure and excitement. He was delighted that he had managed the matter so cleverly.

"Did you get the cabbies?" asked Darya with a worried air. Routilov answered with slight annoyance:

"How could I? The whole town would have heard of it. Varvara would have come and dragged him away by his hair."

"Well, what shall we do?"

"Why, we can go to the Square in pairs and hire them there. It's quite simple. You and the bride go first. Then Larissa with the bridegroom—now, mind you, not all together or we shall be noticed in town. Liudmilla and I will stop at Falastov's. The two of them will go together and I will get Volodin."

Once alone Peredonov became immersed in pleasant reveries. He imagined Valeria in all the bewitchment of the bridal night—undressed, bashful but happy. All slenderness and subtlety.

He dreamed, and at the same time he pulled out of his pocket some caramels that had stuck there and began to chew them.

Then he remembered that Valeria was a coquette. Now she'll want expensive dresses, he thought. That meant that he would not only be unable to save money every month but that he would have to spend what he had saved. She would be hard to please. She would never even enter the kitchen. Besides, his food might get poisoned; Varvara, from spite, would bribe the cook. And on the whole, thought Peredonov, Valeria is a slender doll. It's difficult to know how to treat a girl like that. How could one abuse her? And how could one give her an occasional push? How could one spit on her? It would end in tears and she would shame him before the whole town. No, it was impossible to tie oneself to her. Now Liudmilla was simpler; wouldn't it be better to take her?

Peredonov walked up to the window and knocked with his stick on the pane. After a few moments Routilov stuck his head out of the window.

"What do you want?" he asked anxiously.

"I've thought it over," growled Peredonov.

"Well?" exclaimed Routilov in apprehension.

"Bring Liudmilla here!" said Peredonov.

Routilov left the window.

"He's a devil in spectacles," he grumbled to himself and went to his sisters.

Valeria was glad.

"It's your happiness, Liudmilla," she said cheerfully.

Liudmilla began to laugh. She threw herself back in a chair and laughed and laughed.

"What shall I tell him?" asked Routilov. "Are you willing?"

Liudmilla could not speak for laughing, and only waved her hands.

"Of course she's willing," said Darya for her. "You'd better tell him at once, or else he may go off in a huff."

Routilov entered the drawing-room and said in a whisper through the window:

"Wait, she'll be ready at once."

"Let her make haste," said Peredonov angrily. "Why are they so long?"

Liudmilla was soon dressed. She was entirely ready in five minutes.

Peredonov began to think about her. She was cheerful and plump. But she was a giggler. She would always be laughing at him. That was terrible. Darya, though she was lively, was more sober. But she was quite handsome. He had better take her.

He knocked once more on the window.

"There! he's knocking again," said Larissa. "I wonder if he wants you now, Darya?"

"The devil!" said Routilov irritably, and ran to the window.

"What now?" he asked in an angry whisper. "Have you thought it over again?"

"Bring Darya," answered Peredonov.

"Well, just wait!" whispered Routilov in a rage.

Peredonov stood there and thought of Darya, and again his brief seductive vision of her was replaced by apprehension. She was too quick and impertinent. She would make life intolerable to him. "And what on earth's the good of standing here waiting," reflected Peredonov, "I might get a cold. And you can't tell, there may be someone

hiding in the ditch or behind the grass, who'll suddenly jump out and murder me." Peredonov grew very depressed. Then again none of them had any dowry to speak of. That could command no patronage in the department of Education. Varvara would complain to the Princess. As it was the Head-Master was sharpening his teeth for Peredonov.

Peredonov began to get vexed with himself. Why was he here, entangling himself with the Routilovs? It must be that Routilov had bewitched him. Yes, he must really have bewitched him! He must make a counter-charm at once.

Peredonov twirled round on his heels, spat on each side of him and mumbled:

*"Chure-churashki. Churki-balvashki, buki-bukashkii, vedi-tarakashki. Chure menya. Chure menya. Chure, chure, chure. Chure-perechure-raschiure."*⁶

His face wore an expression of stern attention, as if at the carrying out of a dignified ceremony. After this indispensable action he felt himself out of danger of Routilov's spells. He struck the window decisively with his stick and muttered angrily:

"I've had enough of this! I won't be enticed any further. No, I don't want to get married to-day," he announced to Routilov, whose head was thrust out of the window.

"What on earth's the matter with you, Ardalyon Borisitch? Why, everything's ready!" said Routilov persuasively.

"I don't want to," repeated Peredonov with decision. "You'd better come along with me and have a game of cards."

"The devil take you," exclaimed Routilov.

"He doesn't want to get married. He's funk'd it!" he announced to his sisters. "But I'll persuade the fool yet. He's asked me to play cards with him."

All the sisters cried out at once, abusing Peredonov loudly.

"And you're going out with this blackguard?" asked Valeria angrily.

"Yes, and I'll get even with him. He has not escaped us yet by any means," said Routilov, trying to keep a tone of assurance, but feeling very awkward.

The girls' anger with Peredonov soon gave place to laughter. Routilov left. The girls ran to the windows.

"Ardalyon Borisitch," exclaimed Darya. "Why can't you make up your mind. You shouldn't do things like this!"

⁶ This is an exaggeration of a Russian charm used against witchcraft. The word "chure" implies, "Hence! away!" and is addressed to the evil spirits. The whole charm is a jargon practically untranslatable.

"Kislyai Kislyaeitch! (Sour Sourson!)" exclaimed Liudmilla, laughingly.

Peredonov was angry. In his opinion the sisters ought to have wept with disappointment that he had rejected them. "They're pretending," he thought, as he left the garden silently. The girls ran to the windows facing the street and shouted gibes after him until he was lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER 5

Peredonov felt depressed. He had no more caramels in his pocket and this added to his depression and distress. Routilov was the only one to speak almost the whole way. He continued to laud his sisters. Only once did Peredonov break into speech, when he asked angrily:

"Has a bull horns?"

"Well, yes, but what of it?" asked the astonished Routilov.

"Well, I don't want to be a bull," explained Peredonov.

"Ardalyon Borisitch," said Routilov in tones of annoyance, "you will never be a bull, for you are a real swine."

"Liar," said Peredonov morosely.

"I'm not a liar—I can prove I'm not," said Routilov spitefully.

"Go ahead and prove it."

"Just wait, I'll prove it," said Routilov. They walked on silently. Peredonov waited apprehensively and his anger with Routilov tormented him. Suddenly Routilov asked:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, have you got a *piatachek*?"⁷

"I have, but I won't give it to you," answered Peredonov. Routilov burst out laughing.

"If you have a *piatachek*, then you are a swine," he exclaimed.

Peredonov in his apprehension grabbed his nose and exclaimed:

"You're lying! I haven't a *piatachek*—I've got a man's face," he growled.

Routilov was still laughing. Peredonov, angry and rather frightened, looked cautiously at Routilov and said:

"You've led me purposely to-day by the *durman*⁸ and you've *durmanised* me so as to lure me for one of your sisters. As if one witch wasn't enough for me—you tried to make me marry three at once."

"You are a queer fellow. And why didn't I get *durmanised*?" asked Routilov.

⁷ "Piatachek" means a "five kopek piece" and also a "pig's snout." Routilov puns on the word.

⁸ *Durman*, the thorn apple or datura, a very poisonous plant. The Russians have a verb "durmanised," meaning bewitched or stupefied by the *durman*.

"You've got some way or other," said Peredonov, "perhaps you breathed through your mouth instead of your nose, or you may have recited a charm. For my part, I don't know at all how to act against witchcraft. I don't know much about black magic. Until I recited the counter-charm I was quite *durmanised*."

Routilov laughed. "Well, and how did you make the exorcism?" he asked.

But Peredonov did not reply.

"Why do you tie yourself up with Varvara?" asked Routilov. "Do you think that you'll be happier if she gets the inspectorship for you? She'll rule the roost then!"

This was incomprehensible to Peredonov.

After all, he thought, she was really acting in her own interests. She herself would have an easier time if he became an important official, and she would have more money. That meant that she would be grateful to him and not he to her. And in any case she was more congenial to him than anyone else.

Peredonov was accustomed to Varvara. Something drew him to her—perhaps it was his habit, which was very pleasant to him, of bullying her. He would not find another like her however much he sought.

It was already late. The lamps were lit at Peredonov's house; the lighted windows were conspicuous in the dark street. The tea-table was surrounded with visitors: Grushina—who now visited Varvara every day—Volodin, Prepolovenskaya, and her husband Konstantin Petrovitch, a tall man, under forty, with a dull, pale face and black hair, a person of an amazing taciturnity. Varvara was in a white party dress. They were drinking tea, and talking. Varvara, as usual, was distressed because Peredonov had not yet returned home. Volodin, with his cheerful bleat, was telling her that Peredonov had gone off somewhere with Routilov. This only increased her distress.

At last Peredonov appeared with Routilov. They were met with outcries, laughter, stupid coarse jokes.

"Varvara, where's the vodka?" exclaimed Peredonov gruffly.

Varvara quickly left the table, smiling guiltily, and brought the vodka in a decanter of rudely cut glass.

"Let's have a drink," was Peredonov's surly invitation.

"Just wait," said Varvara; "Klavdiushka will bring the *zakouska*.⁹ You great lump," she shouted into the kitchen, "hurry up!"

But Peredonov was already pouring the liquor into the vodka glasses. He growled:

⁹ Zakouska, savoury salt eatables, rather like *hors d'oeuvres*, eaten with vodka.

"Why should we wait? Time doesn't wait!"

They drank their vodka and helped it down with tarts filled with black currant jam. Peredonov had always two stock entertainments for visitors—cards and vodka. But as they could not sit down to cards before the tea was served, only vodka remained. In the meantime the *zakouska* also were brought in so that they could drink some more vodka. Klavdia did not shut the door when she went out, which put Peredonov into a bad humour.

"That door is never shut!" he growled.

He was afraid of the draught—he might catch cold. This was why his house was always stuffy and malodorous.

Prepolovenskaya picked up an egg.

"Fine eggs!" she said. "Where do you get them?"

Peredonov replied:

"They're not bad, but on my father's estate there was a hen that laid two large eggs every day all the year round."

"That's nothing to boast of," said Prepolovenskaya; "now in our village there was a hen that laid two eggs every day and a spoonful of butter."

"Yes, yes, we had one like that too," said Peredonov, not noticing that he was being made fun of. "If others could do it, ours did it too. We had an exceptional hen."

Varvara laughed.

"They're having a little joke," she said.

"Such nonsense makes one's ears wither!" said Grushina.

Peredonov looked at her savagely and replied:

"If your ears wither they'll have to be pulled off!"

Grushina was disconcerted.

"Well, Ardalyon Borisitch, you're always saying something nasty," she complained.

The others laughed appreciatively. Volodin opened his eyes wide, twitched his forehead and explained:

"When your ears start withering it's best to pull them off, because if you don't they'll dangle and swing to and fro."

Volodin made a gesture with his fingers to indicate how the withered ears would dangle. Grushina snapped at him:

"That's the sort you are. You can't make a joke yourself. You have to use other people's."

Volodin was offended and said with dignity:

"I can make a joke myself, Maria Ossipovna, but when we're having a pleasant time in company, why shouldn't I keep up someone else's joke? And if you don't like it, you can do what you please. Give and take."

"That's reasonable, Pavel Vassilyevitch," said Routilov encouragingly.

"Pavel Vassilyevitch can stand up for himself," said Prepolovensky with a sly smile. Varvara had just cut off a piece of bread and, absorbed by Volodin's ingenious remarks, held the knife in the air. The edge glittered. Peredonov felt a sudden fear—she might suddenly take it into her head to slash him.

"Varvara!" he exclaimed. "Put that knife down!"

Varvara shivered.

"Why do you shout so? You frightened me," she said, and put the knife down. "He has his whims, you know," she went on, speaking to the silent Prepolovsky, who was stroking his beard and apparently about to speak.

"That sometimes happens," said Prepolovsky; "I had an acquaintance who was afraid of needles. He was always imagining that someone was going to stick a needle into him and that the needle would enter his inside. Just imagine how frightened he would get when he saw a needle——"

And once he had begun to speak he was quite unable to stop, and went on telling the same story with different variations until someone interrupted him and changed the subject. Then he lapsed again into silence.

Grushina changed the conversation to erotic themes. She began to relate how her deceased husband was jealous of her, and how she deceived him. Afterwards she told a story she had heard from an acquaintance in the capital about the mistress of a certain eminent personage who met her patron while driving in the street.

"And she cries to him: 'Hullo, Zhanchick!'" Grushina related, "mind you, in the street."

"I have a good mind to report you," said Peredonov angrily. "Is it actually permitted for such nonsense to be talked about important people?"

Grushina gabbled rapidly to try and appease him:

"It's not my fault. That's how I heard the story. What I've bought I sell."

Peredonov maintained an angry silence and drank tea from a saucer, with his elbows resting on the table. He reflected that in the house of the future inspector it

was unbecoming to speak disrespectfully of the higher powers. He felt annoyed with Grushina. This feeling was intensified by his suspicion of Volodin, who too frequently referred to him as "the future inspector." Once he even said to Volodin:

"Well, my friend, I see that you are jealous, but the fact is I'm going to be an inspector and you aren't!"

Volodin, with an insinuating look on his face, had replied:

"Each to his own. You're a specialist in your business and I in mine."

"Our Natashka," said Varvara, "went straight from us and got a place with the Officer of the gendarmes."

Peredonov trembled, and his face had an expression of fear.

"Are you telling a lie?" he demanded.

"Why should I want to tell you a lie about that?" answered Varvara. "You can go and ask him yourself, if you like."

This unpleasant news was confirmed by Grushina. Peredonov was stupefied with astonishment. It was impossible to know what she might say, and then the gendarmes would take up the matter and report it to the authorities. It was a bad look-out.

At the same second Peredonov's eyes rested on the shelf under the sideboard. There stood several bound volumes: the thin ones were the works of Pisarev and the larger ones were the "Annals of the Fatherland."¹⁰ Peredonov went pale and said:

"I must hide those books or I shall be reported."

Earlier Peredonov had displayed these books ostentatiously to show that he was a man of emancipated ideas, though actually he had no ideas at all and no inclination towards reflection. And he only kept these books for show, not to read. It was now a long time since he had read a book—he used to say he had no time—he did not subscribe to a newspaper. He got his news from other people. In fact there was nothing he wanted to know—there was nothing in the outside world he was interested in. He used even to deride subscribers to newspapers as people who wasted both time and money. One might have thought that his time was very valuable!

He went up to the shelf, grumbling.

"That's what happens in this town—you may get reported any minute. Lend a hand here, Pavel Vassilyevitch," he said to Volodin.

¹⁰ A journal of revolutionary tendencies, suppressed in 1881.

Volodin walked towards him with a grave and comprehending countenance and carefully took the books that Peredonov handed to him. Peredonov, carrying a heap of books, went into the parlour, followed by Volodin, who carried a large pile.

"Where do you mean to hide them, Ardalyon Borisitch "he asked.

"Wait and you'll see," replied Peredonov with his usual gruffness.

"What are you taking away there, Ardalyon Borisitch?" asked Prepolovensky.

"Most strictly forbidden books," answered Peredonov from the door. "I should be reported if they were found here."

Peredonov sat on his heels before the brick stove in the parlour. He threw down the books on the iron hearth and Volodin did the same. Peredonov began with difficulty to force book after book into the small opening. Volodin sat on his heels just behind Peredonov and handed him the books, preserving at the same time an air of profound comprehension on his sheepish face, his protruded lips and heavy forehead expressing his sense of importance. Varvara looked at them through the door. She said laughing:

"They've got a new joke!"

But Grushina interrupted her:

"No, dearest Varvara Dmitrievna, you shouldn't say that. Things might be very unpleasant if they found out. Especially if it happens to be an instructor. The authorities are dreadfully afraid that the instructors will teach the boys to rebel."

After tea they sat down to play Stoukolka [*a card game*], all seven of them around the card-table in the parlour. Peredonov played irritably and badly. After every twenty points, he had to pay out to the other players, especially to Prepolovensky, who received for himself and his wife. The Prepolovenskys won more frequently than anyone. They had certain signs, like knocks and coughs, by which they told each other what cards they held. That night Peredonov had no luck. He made haste to win back his money, but Volodin was slow in dealing and spent too much time in shuffling.

"Pavloushka, hurry up and deal," shouted Peredonov impatiently.

Volodin, feeling himself the equal of anybody in the game, looked important and asked:

"What do you mean by 'Pavloushka'? Is it in friendship? Or how?"

"Of course, in friendship," replied Peredonov carelessly. "Only deal quicker."

"Well, if you say it in friendship then I'm glad, very glad," said Volodin, laughing happily and stupidly as he dealt the cards. "You're a good fellow, Ardasha, and I'm

very fond of you. But if it weren't in friendship it would be another matter, but as it is in friendship I'm glad. I've given you an ace for it," said Volodin and turned up trumps.

Peredonov actually had an ace, but it wasn't the ace of trumps and he had to sacrifice it.

Routilov babbled on incessantly; told all sorts of tales and anecdotes, some of an exceedingly indelicate character. In order to annoy Peredonov, Routilov began to tell him that his older pupils were behaving very badly, especially those who lived in apartments: they smoked, drank vodka and ran after girls. Peredonov believed him, and Grushina confirmed what Routilov said. These stories gave her especial pleasure: she herself, after her husband's death, had wanted to board three or four of the students at her house, but the Head-Master would not give her the requisite permission, in spite of Peredonov's recommendations—Grushina's reputation in the town was not very good. She now began to abuse the landladies of the houses where the students had apartments.

"They're bribing the Head-Master," she declared.

"All the landladies are carrion!" said Volodin with conviction; "take mine, for instance. When I took my room, mine agreed to give me three glasses of milk every evening. For the first two months I got it."

"And you didn't get drunk?" asked Routilov.

"Why should I get drunk?" said Volodin in offended tones, "milk's a useful product. It's my habit to drink three glasses of milk every night. When all of a sudden I see that they bring me only two glasses. 'What's the meaning of this?' I ask; the servant says: 'Anna Mikhailovna says she begs your pardon because the cow, she says, doesn't give much milk now.' What's that to do with me? An agreement is more sacred than money. Suppose their cow gave no milk at all—does that mean I'm not to have any milk? 'No,' I say. 'If there is no milk, then tell Anna Mikhailovna to give me a glass of water. I'm used to three glasses and I must have them.'"

"Our Pavloushka's a hero," said Peredonov. "Tell them how you argued with the General, old chap."

Volodin eagerly repeated his story. But this time they laughed at his expense. He stuck out an offended underlip.

After supper they all got drunk, even the women. Volodin proposed that they should dirty the walls some more. They were delighted: almost before they had finished supper they acted on this suggestion and amused themselves prodigiously. They spat on the wall-paper, poured beer on it, and they threw at the walls and ceiling paper arrows whose ends were smeared with butter, and they flipped pieces of moist bread at the ceiling. Afterwards they invented a new game which they played for

money; they tore off strips of the wall-paper to see who could get the largest. But at this game the Prepolovensky won another rouble and a half.

Volodin lost. Because of his loss and his intoxication he became depressed and began to complain about his mother. He made a dolorous face, and gesticulating ridiculously with his hand, said:

"Why did she bear me? And what did she think at the time? What's my life now? She's not been a mother to me, she only bore me. Because whereas a real mother worries about her child, mine only bore me and sent me to a charitable home when I was a mere baby."

"Well, you've learnt something by it—it made a man of you," said Prepolovensky.

Volodin bent his head, wagged it to and fro and said:

"No, what's my life? A dog's life. Why did she bear me? What did she think then?"

Peredonov suddenly remembered yesterday's *erli*. "There," he thought, "he complains about his mother, because she bore him. He doesn't want to be Pavloushka. It's certain that he envies me. It may be that he's thinking of marrying Varvara and of getting into my skin." And he looked anxiously at Volodin.

He must try to marry him to someone.

At night in the bedroom Varvara said to Peredonov:

"You think that all these girls who are running after you are really good-looking? They're all trash, and I'm prettier than any of them."

She quickly undressed herself and, smiling insolently, showed Peredonov her rosy, graceful, flexible and beautiful body.

Though Varvara staggered from drunkenness and her face would have repelled any decent man with its flabby-lascivious expression, she really had the beautiful body of a nymph, with the head of a faded prostitute attached to it as if by some horrible black magic. And this superb body was for these two drunken and dirty-minded people merely the source of the vilest libidinousness.

And so it often happens in our age that beauty is debased and abused.

Peredonov laughed gruffly but boisterously as he looked at his naked companion.

The entire night he dreamed of women of all colours, naked and hideous.

Varvara believed that the friction with nettles, which she applied at Prepolovenskaya's advice, helped her. It seemed to her that she got plumper almost at once. She asked all her acquaintances:

"It's true, isn't it, that I'm a little fuller?"

And she thought that now Peredonov would surely marry her, seeing that she was plumper, and that he would receive the forged letter.

Peredonov's expectations were far from being so agreeable as hers. He had become convinced some time before that the Head-Master was hostile to him—and as a matter of fact the Head-Master considered Peredonov a lazy, incapable instructor. Peredonov imagined that the Head-Master told the boys not to respect him, which it is obvious was an absurd invention of his own. But it inspired Peredonov with the idea that he must be on his guard against the Head-Master.

From spite against the Head-Master he spoke slightly of him more than once in the classes of the older students. This pleased many of the students.

Now that Peredonov was hoping to become an inspector the Head-Master's attitude towards him seemed particularly unpleasant. Let it be admitted that if the Princess should so desire, her protection would override the Head-Master's unfriendliness, still it was not without its dangers.

And there were other people in the town—as Peredonov had lately noticed—who were hostile to him and wanted to hinder his appointment to the inspectorship. There was Volodin; it was not for nothing that he continually repeated the words, "The future inspector." There have been occasions when people have assumed another man's name with great profit to themselves. Of course, Volodin would find it difficult to impersonate Peredonov, but after all even such a fool as Volodin might have the idea that he could. It is certain that we ought to fear every evil man. And there were still the Routilovs, Vershina with her Marta, and his envious colleagues—all equally ready to do him harm. And how could they harm him? It was perfectly clear they could vilify him to the authorities and make him out to be an unreliable man.

So that Peredonov had two anxieties: one, to prove his reliableness and the other to secure himself from Volodin—by marrying him to a rich girl.

Peredonov once asked Volodin:

"If you like, I'll get you engaged to the Adamenko girl, or are you still pining for Marta? Isn't a month long enough for you to get consoled?"

"Why should I pine for Marta?" replied Volodin, "I've done her a great honour by proposing to her, and if she doesn't want me, what's that to me? I'll easily find someone else—there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"Well, but Marta's pulled your nose for you nicely," said Peredonov tauntingly.

"I've no notion what sort of a husband they're looking for," said Volodin with an offended air. "They haven't even any dowry to speak of. She's after you, Ardalyon Borisitch."

Peredonov advised him:

"If I were in your place I should smear her gates with tar."

Volodin grinned and calmed down at once. He said:

"But if they catch me it might be unpleasant."

"Hire somebody; why should you do it yourself?" said Peredonov.

"And she deserves it—honest to God!" said Volodin animatedly. "A girl who won't get married and yet lets young fellows in through the window! That means that human beings have no shame or conscience!"

CHAPTER 6

The next day Peredonov and Volodin went to see the Adamenko girl. Volodin was in his best clothes; he put on his new, tight-fitting frock-coat, a clean-laundered shirt and a brightly-coloured cravat. He smeared his hair with pomade and scented himself—he was in fine spirits.

Nadezhda Vassilyevna Adamenko lived with her brother in town in her own red-brick house; she had an estate not far from town which she let on lease. Two years before she had completed a course in the local college and now she occupied herself in lying on a couch to read books of every description and in coaching her brother, an eleven-year-old schoolboy, who always protected himself against his sister's severities by saying:

"It was much better in Mamma's time—she used to put an umbrella in the corner instead of me."

Nadezhda Vassilyevna's aunt lived with her. She was a characterless, decrepit woman with no voice in the household affairs. Nadezhda Vassilyevna chose her acquaintances with great care. Peredonov was very seldom in her house and only his lack of real acquaintance with her could have given birth to his idea of getting her to marry Volodin. She was therefore extremely astonished at their unexpected visit, but she received the uninvited guests quite graciously. She had to amuse them, and it seemed to her that the most likely and pleasant method of entertaining an instructor of the Russian language would be to talk of educational conditions, school reform, the training of children, literature, Symbolism and the Russian literary periodicals. She touched upon all these themes, but received no response beyond enigmatic remarks, which showed that these questions had no interest for her guests.

She soon saw that only one subject was possible—town gossip. But Nadezhda Vassilyevna nevertheless made one more attempt.

"Have you read the 'Man in the Case,' by Chekhov?" she asked. "It's a clever piece of work, isn't it?"

As she turned with this question to Volodin he smiled pleasantly and asked:

"Is that an essay or a novel?"

"It's a short story," exclaimed Nadezhda.

"Did you say it was by Mister Chekhov?" inquired Volodin.

"Yes, Chekhov," said Nadezhda and smiled.

"Where was it published?" asked Volodin curiously.

"In the 'Russkaya Misl,'" the young woman explained graciously.

"In what number?" continued Volodin.

"I can't quite remember. I think it was in one of the summer numbers," replied Nadezhda, still graciously but with some astonishment.

A schoolboy suddenly appeared from behind the door.

"It was published in the May number," he said, with his hand on the door-knob, glancing at his sister and her guests with cheerful blue eyes.

"You're too young to read novels!" growled Peredonov angrily. "You ought to work instead of reading indecent stories."

Nadezhda Vassilyevna looked sternly at her brother.

"It is a nice thing to stand behind doors and listen," she remarked, and lifting her hands crossed her little fingers at a right angle.

The boy made a wry face and disappeared. He went into his own room, stood in the corner and gazed at the clock; two little fingers crossed was a sign that he should stand in the corner for ten minutes. "No," he thought sadly, "it was much better when Mamma was alive. She only put an umbrella in the corner."

Meanwhile in the drawing-room Volodin was promising his hostess that he would certainly get the May number of the "Russkaya Misl," in order to read Mister Chekhov's story. Peredonov listened with an expression of unconcealed boredom on his face. At last he said:

"I haven't read it either. I don't read such nonsense. There's nothing but stupidities in stories and novels." Nadezhda Vassilyevna smiled amiably and said:

"You're very severe towards contemporary literature. But good books are written even nowadays."

"I read all the good books long ago," announced Peredonov. "I don't intend to begin to read what's being written now."

Volodin looked at Peredonov with respect. Nadezhda Vassilyevna sighed lightly and—as there was nothing else for her to do—she began a string of small-talk and gossip to the best of her ability. Although she disliked such conversation she managed to keep it up with the ease and buoyancy of a lively, well-trained girl. The guests became animated. She was intolerably bored, but they thought that she was particularly gracious and they put it down to the charm of Volodin's personality.

Once in the street Peredonov congratulated Volodin upon his success. Volodin laughed gleefully and skipped about. He had already forgotten all the other girls who had rejected him.

"Don't kick up your heels like that," said Peredonov. "You're hopping about like a young sheep! You'd better wait; you may have your nose pulled again."

But he said this only in jest, and he fully believed in the success of the match he had devised.

Grushina came to see Varvara almost every day. Varvara was at Grushina's even oftener, so that they were scarcely ever parted from each other. Varvara was agitated because Grushina delayed—she assured Varvara that it was very difficult to copy the handwriting so that the resemblance would be complete.

Peredonov still refrained from fixing a date for the wedding. Again he demanded his inspector's post first. Recollecting how many girls were ready to marry him, he more than once, as in the past winter, said to Varvara threateningly:

"I'm going out to get married. I shall be back in the morning with a wife and then out you go. This is your last night here!"

And having said this he would go—to play billiards. From there he would sometimes return home, but more often he would go carousing in some dirty hole with Routilov and Volodin. On such nights Varvara could not sleep. That is why she suffered from headaches. It was not so bad if he returned at one or two—then she could breathe freely. But if he did not turn up till the morning then the day found Varvara quite ill.

At last Grushina had finished the letter and showed it to Varvara. They examined it for a long time and compared it with the Princess's letter of last year. Grushina assured her that the letter was so like the other that the Princess herself would not recognise the forgery. Although there was actually little resemblance, Varvara believed her. She also realised that Peredonov would not remember the Princess's unfamiliar handwriting so minutely that he would see it was a forgery.

"At last!" she said joyously. "I have waited and waited, and I'd almost lost patience. But what shall I tell him about the envelope if he asks?"

"You can't very well forge an envelope; there's the post-mark," said Grushina laughing as she looked at Varvara with her cunning unequal eyes, one of them wider open than the other.

"What shall we do?"

"Varvara Dmitrievna darling, just tell him that you threw the envelope into the fire. What's the good of an envelope?"

Varvara's hopes revived. She said:

"Once we're married, he won't keep me any longer on the run. I'll do the sitting and he can do the running for me."

On Saturday after dinner Peredonov went to play billiards. His thoughts were heavy and melancholy. He thought:

"It's awful to live among hostile and envious people. But what can one do—they can't all be inspectors! That's the struggle for existence!"

At the corner of two streets he met the Officer of the gendarmerie—an unpleasant meeting.

Lieutenant-Colonel Nikolai Vadimovitch Roubovsky, a medium-sized, stout man with heavy eyebrows, cheerful grey eyes, and a limping gait which made his spurs jingle unevenly and loudly, was a very amiable person and was therefore popular in society. He knew all the people in town, all their affairs and relations, and loved to hear gossip, but was himself as discreet and silent as the grave, and caused no one any unnecessary unpleasantness.

They stopped, greeted each other and entered into conversation. Peredonov looked frowningly on each side and said cautiously:

"I hear that our Natasha is with you now. You mustn't believe anything she tells you about me, because she's lying."

"I don't listen to servants' gossip," said Roubovsky with dignity.

"She's really a bad one," said Peredonov, paying no attention to Roubovsky's remark; "her young man is a Pole; very likely she came to you on purpose to get hold of some official secret."

"Please don't worry about that," said the Lieutenant-Colonel dryly. "I haven't any plans of fortresses in my possession."

This introduction of fortresses perplexed Peredonov; it seemed to him that Roubovsky was hinting at something—that he thought of imprisoning Peredonov in a fortress.

"It's nothing to do with fortresses—it's a very different matter," he muttered. "But all sorts of stupid things are being said about me, for the most part from envy. Don't believe any of them. They're informing against me in order to get suspicion away from themselves, but I can do some informing myself."

Roubovsky was mystified.

"I assure you," he said, shrugging his shoulders and jingling his spurs, "that no one has informed against you. It is obvious that someone has been pulling your leg—people of course will talk nonsense sometimes."

Peredonov was mistrustful. He thought that the Lieutenant-Colonel was concealing something, and he suddenly felt a terrible apprehension.

Every time that Peredonov walked past Vershina's garden, Vershina would stop him and with her bewitching gestures and words would lure him into the garden. And he would enter, unwillingly yielding to her quiet witchery. Perhaps she had a better chance of succeeding in her purpose than the Routilovs—for was not Peredonov equally unrelated to them all, and therefore why should he not marry Marta? But it was evident that the morass into which Peredonov was sinking was so tenacious that no magic could ever have got him out of it into another.

And now after this meeting with Roubovsky, as Peredonov was walking past Vershina's, she, dressed in black as usual, enticed him in.

"Marta and Vladya are going home for the day," she said, looking tenderly at Peredonov with her cinnamon-coloured eyes through the smoke of her cigarette. "It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to spend the day with them in the village. A workman had just come in a cart for them."

"There isn't enough room," said Peredonov morosely.

"I think you could manage it," said Vershina, "and even if you have to squeeze in a little, it won't be a great hardship—you've only got six versts to go."

Meanwhile Marta ran out of the house to ask Vershina something. The excitement of getting off dissipated her usual languor and her face was livelier and more cheerful. They both tried to persuade Peredonov to go.

"You'll manage quite comfortably," Vershina assured him; "you and Marta can sit at the back, and Vladya and Ignaty in front. Look, there's the cart in the yard now."

Peredonov followed them into the yard where the cart was standing. Vladya was fussing about, putting various things in it. The cart was quite a large one, but Peredonov morosely surveyed it and announced:

"I'm not going. There isn't enough room. There are four of us and those things besides."

"Well, if you think it's going to be a tight squeeze," said Varshina, "Vladya can go on foot."

"Of course," said Vladya, with a suppressed grin. "I'll start at once and I'll get there before you."

Then Peredonov declared that the cart would jolt and that he did not like jolts. They returned to the summer-house. Everything was ready, but Ignaty was still in the kitchen eating slowly and solidly.

"How does Vladya get on with his lessons?" asked Marta.

She did not know what else to talk about with Peredonov, and Vershina had more than once reproached her for not knowing how to entertain him.

"Badly," said Peredonov; "he's lazy and doesn't pay attention."

Vershina loved to grumble. She began to scold Vladya.

The boy flushed and smiled, and shrivelled into his clothes as if he were cold, lifting one shoulder higher than the other, as his habit was.

"The year has only just begun," he said, "I've got plenty of time to catch up."

"You ought to start from the very beginning," said Marta in a very grown-up way, which slightly embarrassed her.

"Yes, he's always in mischief," said Peredonov. "Only yesterday, he was running about with some of the others as if they were street boys. He's impertinent too. Last Thursday he was quite cheeky to me."

Vladya suddenly flushed up with indignation, yet still smiled, and said:

"I wasn't impertinent. I only told the truth. The other copy-books had five mistakes not marked, and all mine were marked. And I only got two though mine was better than the boys who got three."

"And that wasn't the only time you were impertinent," persisted Peredonov.

"I wasn't impertinent, I only said that I would tell the inspector," said Vladya heatedly.

"Vladya, you forget yourself!" said Vershina angrily; "instead of apologising you're only repeating what you said."

Vladya suddenly remembered that he ought not to provoke Peredonov, as he might marry Marta. He grew even redder and in his confusion shifted his belt and said timidly:

"I'm sorry. I only meant to ask you to make the correction."

"Be quiet, please!" interrupted Vershina. "I can't stand such wrangling—I really can't," she repeated, and her thin body trembled almost imperceptibly. "You're being spoken to, so be silent," and Vershina poured out on Vladya many reproachful words, puffing at her cigarette and smiling her wry smile, as she usually did when she was talking, no matter what the subject was.

"We shall have to tell your father, so that he can punish you," she concluded.

"He needs birching," suggested Peredonov, and looked angrily at the offending Vladya.

"Certainly," agreed Vershina. "He needs birching."

"He needs birching," repeated Marta and blushed.

"I'm going with you to your father to-day," said Peredonov, "and I'll see that he gives you a good birching."

Vladya looked silently at his tormentors, shrank within himself and smiled through his tears. His father was a harsh man. Vladya tried to console himself with the thought that these were only threats. Surely, he thought, they would not really spoil his holiday. For a holiday was a specially happy occasion and not a schoolday affair.

But Peredonov was always pleased when he saw boys cry, especially when he so arranged it that they cried and apologised at the same time. Vladya's confusion, the suppressed tears in his eyes and his timid, guilty smile, all these gave Peredonov joy. He decided to accompany Marta and Vladya.

"Very well, I'll come with you," he said to Marta.

Marta was glad but a little frightened. Of course she wanted Peredonov to go with them, or it would perhaps be more truthful to say that Vershina wanted it for her, and had instilled the desire into her by suggestion. But now that Peredonov said that he would come, Marta somehow felt uneasy on Vladya's account—she felt sorry for him.

Vladya also became sad. Surely Peredonov was not going on his account? In the hope of appeasing Peredonov, he said:

"If you think, Ardalyon Borisitch, that it will be a tight squeeze, then I will go on foot."

Peredonov looked at him suspiciously and said:

"That's all very well, but if I let you go alone, you'll run away somewhere. No, I think we had better take you to your father and he'll give you what you deserve!"

Vladya flushed once more and sighed. He began to feel uneasy and depressed, and indignant at this cruel, morose man. To soften Peredonov's heart, he decided to make his seat more comfortable.

"I'll make it so that you won't feel the jolts," he said.

And he scurried hastily towards the cart. Vershina looked after him, still smoking, with her wry smile, and said quietly to Peredonov:

"They're all afraid of their father. He's very stern with them."

Marta flushed.

Vladya wanted to take with him to the village his new English fishing-rod, bought with his saved-up money. And he wanted to take something else. But this would have occupied room in the cart and so Vladya carried all his goods back into the house.

The weather was moderate, the sun was beginning to decline. The road, wet with the morning rain, was free of dust. The cart rolled evenly over the fine stones, carrying its four passengers from the town; the well-fed grey cob trotted along as if their weight were nothing, and the lazy, taciturn driver, Ignaty, drove the cob on a light rein.

Peredonov was seated beside Marta. They had made him a wide seat, so that Marta's was very uncomfortable. But he did not notice this. And even if he had noticed it, he would have thought it quite proper, since he was the guest.

Peredonov felt on very good terms with himself. He decided to talk very amiably to Marta, to joke with her and to entertain her. This is how he began:

"Well, are you going to rebel soon?"

"Why rebel?" asked Marta.

"You Poles are always getting ready to rebel—but it's useless."

"I'm not thinking about it at all," said Marta, "and there's no one among us who wants to rebel."

"Oh, you only say that—you really hate the Russians."

"We haven't any such idea," said Vladya, turning to Peredonov from the front seat.

"Yes, we know what sort of an idea you have about it," answered Peredonov. "But we're not going to give Poland back to you. We have conquered you. We have conferred many benefits on you and yet it's true that however well you feed a wolf he always looks towards the wood."

Marta said nothing.

After a short silence Peredonov said abruptly:

"The Poles have no brains."

Marta flushed.

"There are all kinds of people among both Russians and Poles," she said.

"No, what I say is true," persisted Peredonov, "the Poles are stupid. They only submit to force. Take the Jews—they're clever."

"The Jews are cheats—they're not clever at all," said Vladya.

"No, the Jews are a very clever people. The Jew always gets the best of a Russian, but a Russian never gets the best of a Jew."

"It isn't a great thing to get the best of other people," said Vladya. "Is mind only to be used for cheating?"

Peredonov looked angrily at Vladya.

"The mind is for learning, and you don't learn," he said.

Vladya sighed and turned away and began to watch the cob's even trotting. But Peredonov continued:

"The Jews are clever in everything. Clever in learning and in everything. If the Jews were allowed to become professors, all professors would be Jews. But the Polish women are all sluts."

He looked at Marta and noted with satisfaction that she blushed violently. He became amiable:

"Now, don't think that I'm talking about you. I know that you would be a good housekeeper."

"All Polish women are good housekeepers," replied Marta.

"Well, yes," said Peredonov, "they're good housekeepers. They're clean on top, but their petticoats are dirty. But then you had Mickiewicz.¹¹ He's better than our Pushkin. He hangs on my wall—Pushkin used to hang there, but I took him down and hung him in the privy. He was a lackey."

"But you're a Russian," said Vladya. "What's our Mickiewicz to you? Pushkin's a good poet and Mickiewicz's a good poet."

"Mickiewicz is better," asseverated Peredonov. "The Russians are fools. They've invented only the samovar—nothing else."

Peredonov looked at Marta, screwed up one eye and said:

"You've got a lot of freckles. That's not pretty."

"What can one do?" asked Marta, smiling.

"I've got freckles too," said Vladya, turning round on his narrow seat and brushing against the silent Ignaty.

¹¹ Great Polish poet (1798-1855) who "is held to have been the greatest Slavonic poet with the exception of Pushkin."

"You're a boy," said Peredonov, "and so it doesn't matter. A man needn't be handsome; but it doesn't become a girl," he went on, turning to Marta. "No one will want to marry you. You ought to bathe your face in cucumber-brine."

Marta thanked him for his advice.

Vladya looked smilingly at Peredonov.

"What are you grinning at?" said Peredonov. "Just wait till we're there—then you'll get what's waiting for you."

Vladya, shifting in his seat, looked attentively at Peredonov and tried to find out if he were joking or speaking seriously. But Peredonov could not bear to have anyone stare at him.

"What are you eyeing me for?" he asked harshly. "There are no patterns on me. Are you trying to cast a spell on me?"

Vladya was frightened and turned away his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he added timidly, "I didn't do it on purpose."

"And do you believe in the evil eye?" asked Marta.

"Of course the evil eye is a superstition," said Peredonov angrily. "But it's so awfully rude to stare at people."

There was an awkward silence for the next few minutes.

"You're very poor, aren't you?" said Peredonov suddenly.

"Well, we're not rich," said Marta, "but still we're not so poor. Each one of us has a little something put aside."

Peredonov looked at her incredulously and said:

"I'm sure you're poor. You go barefoot at home every day."

"We don't do it from poverty," exclaimed Vladya.

"What then? From wealth?" asked Peredonov, and burst into a laugh.

"Not at all from poverty," said Vladya flushing. "It's very good for the health. It hardens one, and it's very pleasant in summer."

"You're lying," said Peredonov coarsely, "rich people don't go barefoot. Your father has a lot of children and hasn't got tuppence to keep them on. You can't afford to buy so many boots."

CHAPTER 7

Varvara had no knowledge of Peredonov's trip. She passed an extremely distressing night.

When Peredonov returned to town in the morning he did not go home, but asked to be driven to church—it was time for Mass. It seemed dangerous to him now not to go to church often—they might inform against him if he did not.

At the church gate he met a pleasant-looking schoolboy, with a rosy, ingenuous face and innocent blue eyes. Peredonov said to him:

"Hullo there, Mashenka, hullo, girlie!"

Misha Koudryavtsev flushed painfully. Peredonov often teased him by calling him "Mashenka"—Misha did not understand why and could not make up his mind to complain. A number of his companions, stupid youngsters elbowing each other, laughed at Peredonov's words. They too liked to tease Misha.

The church, dedicated to the prophet Elias, an old structure built in the days of Tsar Mikhail, stood in the square, facing the school. For this reason, on church holidays, at Mass and for Vespers, the schoolboys had to gather here and to stand in rows on the left by the chapel of St. Catherine the Martyr, while behind them stood one of the assistant masters in order to keep discipline. Here also in a row, nearer the centre of the church, stood the form masters, as well as the inspector and the Head-Master, with their families. It was usual for nearly all the orthodox schoolboys to gather here, except the few who were permitted to attend their parish churches with their parents.

The choir of schoolboys sang well, and for this reason the church was attended by merchants of the First Guild, officials and the families of landed gentry. There were only a few of the common folk—especially since, in conformity with the Head-Master's wish, Mass was celebrated there later than in other churches.

Peredonov stood in his usual place, from which he could see all the members of the choir. Screwing up his eyes, he looked at them and thought that they were standing out of their places. If he had been inspector he would have pulled them up. There was, for example, a smooth-faced boy, named Kramarenko, a small, thin, fidgety youngster who was constantly turning this way and that way, whispering, smiling—and there was no one to keep him in order. It seemed to be no one's affair.

"What confusion!" thought Peredonov. "These choir-boys are all good-for-nothings. That dark youngster there has a fine, clear soprano—so he thinks he can whisper and grin in church."

And Peredonov frowned.

At his side stood a late-comer, the inspector of the National Schools, Sergey Potapovitch Bogdanov, an oldish man with a brown, stupid face, who always looked as if he wanted to explain to somebody something which he could never make head or tail of himself. No one was easier to frighten or to astonish than Bogdanov: no sooner did he hear anything new or disquieting than his forehead would become wrinkled from his inward, painful efforts and from his mouth would issue a string of incoherent and perplexed exclamations.

Peredonov bent towards him and said in a whisper:

"One of your schoolmistresses walks about in a red shirt!"

Bogdanov was alarmed. His white Adam's apple twitched with fear under his chin.

"What do you say?" he whispered hoarsely. "Who is she?"

"The loud-voiced, fat one—I don't know what her name is," whispered Peredonov.

"The loud-voiced one, the loud-voiced one," repeated Bogdanov in a confused way, "that must be Skobotchkina. Yes?"

"Yes, that must be the one," declared Peredonov.

"Well! Good heavens! Who'd have thought that!" exclaimed Bogdanov.

"Skobotchkina in a red shirt! Well! Did you see it with your own eyes?"

"Yes, I saw her, and they tell me she goes into school like that. And sometimes even worse; she puts on a sarafan¹² and walks about like a common girl."

"You don't say so! I must look into it! We can't have that! We can't have that! She'll have to be dismissed, dismissed, I say," babbled on Bogdanov. "She was always like that."

Mass was over. As they were leaving the church, Peredonov said to Kramarenko:

"Here, you whippety-snippet! Why were you grinning in church? Just wait, I shall tell your father!"

Kramarenko looked at Peredonov in astonishment and ran past him without speaking. He belonged to that number of pupils who thought Peredonov coarse, stupid and unjust, and who therefore disliked and despised him. The majority of the pupils thought similarly. Peredonov imagined that these were the boys who had been prejudiced against him by the Head-Master, if not personally, at least through his sons.

¹² Sarafan, national peasant-woman's costume.

Peredonov was approached on the other side of the fence by Volodin. He was chuckling happily, and his face was as cheerful as if it were his birthday; he wore a bowler hat and carried his cane in the fashionable way.

"I've something to tell you, Ardalyon Borisitch," he said gleefully. "I've managed to persuade Cherepnin, and very soon he's going to smear Marta's gate with tar!"

Peredonov said nothing for a moment. He seemed to be considering something, and then suddenly burst into his usual morose laughter. Volodin at once ceased grinning, assumed a sober look, straightened his bowler hat, looked at the sky, swung his stick and said:

"It's a fine day, but it looks as if it will rain this evening. Well, let it rain; I shall spend the evening at the future inspector's house."

"I can't waste any time at home now," said Peredonov, "I've got more important affairs to attend to in town."

Volodin looked as if he comprehended, though he really had no idea what business Peredonov had to attend to. Peredonov determined that he must, without fail, make several visits. Yesterday's chance meeting with the Lieutenant-Colonel had suggested to him an idea which now seemed to him very important: to make the rounds of all important personages of the town to assure them of his loyalty. If he should succeed, then, in an emergency, Peredonov would find defenders in the town who would testify to the correctness of his attitude.

"Where are you going, Ardalyon Borisitch?" asked Volodin, seeing that Peredonov was turning off from the path by which he usually went back from church. "Aren't you going home?"

"Yes, I'm going home," answered Peredonov, "but I don't like to go along that street now."

"Why?"

"There's a lot of *durman* growing there, and the smell's very strong. I'm very much affected by it—it stupefies me. My nerves are on edge just now. I seem to have nothing but worries."

Volodin's face once more assumed a comprehending and sympathetic expression.

On the way Peredonov pulled off some thistle-heads and put them in his pocket.

"What do you want those thistle-heads for?" asked Volodin with a grin.

"For the cat," answered Peredonov gruffly.

"Are you going to stick them in its fur?" asked Volodin.

"Yes."

Volodin sniggered.

"Don't begin without me," he cried.

Peredonov asked him to come in at once, but Volodin declared that he had an appointment: he suddenly felt that it wasn't the right thing not to have appointments; Peredonov's words about his affairs had inspired him with the idea that it would be well for him to visit the Adamenko girl on his own, and to tell her that he had some new, splendid drawings which needed framing—perhaps she would like to look at them. "In any case," thought Volodin, "Nadezhda Vassilyevna will ask me to have a cup of coffee."

And so that was what Volodin did. He suddenly invented another scheme: he proposed to Nadezhda Vassilyevna that her brother should take up carpentry. Nadezhda Vassilyevna imagined that Volodin was in need of money, and she immediately consented. They agreed to work for two hours three times a week, for which Volodin was to get thirty roubles a month. Volodin was in raptures—here was some cash and the possibility of frequent meetings with Nadezhda Vassilyevna.

Peredonov returned home gloomy as usual. Varvara, pale from her sleepless night, grumbled:

"You might have told me yesterday that you weren't coming home."

Peredonov provoked her by saying maliciously that he had been on a trip with Marta. Varvara was silent. She held the Princess's letter in her hand. It was a forged letter, but still——.

She said to him at luncheon, with a meaning smile:

"While you were gadding about with Marfushka, I received an answer from the Princess."

"I didn't know you wrote to her." Peredonov's face lighted up with a gleam of dull expectation.

"Well, that's good! Didn't you yourself tell me to write?"

"Well, what did she say?" asked Peredonov with some agitation.

"Here's the letter—read it for yourself."

Varvara fumbled for a long time in her pockets and finally found the letter and gave it to Peredonov. He stopped eating and grabbed the letter eagerly. He read it and was overjoyed. Here at last was a clear and definite promise. At the moment no doubts entered his mind. He quickly finished his luncheon and went out to show the letter to his acquaintances and friends.

With a grim animation he entered Vershina's garden. Vershina, as nearly always, was standing at the gate smoking. She was very pleased: formerly, she had to lure him in, now he came in himself. Vershina thought:

"That comes of his going on a trip with Marta; he spent some time with her and now he's come again. I wonder if he means to propose to her?"

Peredonov disillusioned her immediately by showing her the letter.

"You kept disbelieving it," he said, "and here the Princess has written. Read that and see for yourself."

Vershina looked incredulously at the letter, quickly blew tobacco smoke on it several times running, made a wry smile and asked quietly and quickly:

"But where's the envelope?"

Peredonov suddenly felt alarmed. He suspected that Varvara was trying to deceive him and had written the letter herself. He must get the envelope from her at once.

"I don't know," he said, "I must ask."

He said good-bye to Vershina and went quickly back to his own house. It was absolutely necessary for him to assure himself as soon as possible of the source of the letter—the sudden doubt tormented him. Vershina, standing at the gate, looked after him with her wry smile, rapidly puffing out cigarette smoke, as if she were trying to finish the cigarette like a tiresome lesson.

Peredonov came running home with a frightened and tormented face, and while yet in the passage he shouted in a voice hoarse with agitation:

"Varvara! Where's the envelope?"

"What envelope?" asked Varvara in a trembling voice.

She looked at Peredonov insolently and would have flushed had she not been already rouged.

"The envelope, from the Princess, of the letter you gave me to-day," explained Peredonov, with a look half-frightened, half-malignant.

Varvara gave a forced laugh.

"I burnt it. What good was it to me?" she said. "Why should I keep it? I'm not making a collection of envelopes. You can't get any money for envelopes. You can only get money for empty bottles at a pub."

Peredonov walked gloomily about the rooms and growled:

"There are all sorts of Princesses—we know that. Perhaps this Princess lives here."

Varvara pretended not to understand his suspicions, but yet trembled violently.

When, towards evening, Peredonov strolled past Vershina's cottage, she stopped him.

"Have you found the envelope?" she asked.

"Vara tells me she burnt it."

Vershina laughed, and the white, thin clouds of tobacco smoke wavered before her in the quiet, cool air.

"It's strange," she said, "that your cousin is so careless. Here's an important letter—and no envelope! You might have been able to tell from the post-mark when it was sent and where from."

Peredonov was extremely irritated. In vain Vershina invited him into the garden; in vain she promised to look in the cards for him—Peredonov left.

Nevertheless, he showed the letter to his friends and boasted. And his friends believed him.

But Peredonov did not know whether to believe or not. At all events, he decided to begin on Tuesday his round of visits to important personages in the town to strengthen his position. He decided not to begin on Monday, as it was an unlucky day.

CHAPTER 8

As soon as Peredonov left to play billiards Varvara went off to see Grushina. They argued for a long time, and at last decided to mend the matter with another letter. Varvara knew that Grushina had friends in Peterburg. With their assistance it would be easy to get the letter posted in Peterburg.

Just as on the first occasion, Grushina for a long time pretended to have scruples.

"Oh, Varvara Dmitrievna darling!" she said. "Even the first letter makes me tremble. I'm always afraid. Whenever I see a police inspector near the house I almost faint. I think they're coming for me to take me to jail."

For a whole hour Varvara tried to persuade her. She promised her all sorts of gifts, and even offered a little money in advance. In the end Grushina agreed. They decided to act in this way: First, Varvara would say that she had replied to the Princess's letter, thanking her; then, after several days, a letter would arrive, ostensibly from the Princess. In that letter it would be even more definitely stated that there were certain positions in view, and that as soon as they were married it would be possible, with a little effort, to procure one for Peredonov. This letter, like the first, would be written by Grushina—then they would seal it up, put a seven kopeck stamp on it, Grushina would enclose it in a letter to her friend in Peterburg, who would drop it into a letter-box.

Presently Varvara and Grushina set out to a shop at the extreme end of the town and there bought a packet of narrow envelopes with a coloured lining, and some coloured paper, the last of the kind in the shop. This precaution had been suggested by Grushina in order to help conceal the forgery. The narrow envelopes were chosen so that the forged letter could easily be enclosed in another envelope.

When they got back to Grushina's house they composed the Princess's letter. When, in the course of a couple of days, the letter was ready, they scented it with Chypre. The remaining envelopes and paper they burnt, so that no trace should be left.

Grushina wrote to her friend, telling her the precise day on which the letter was to be posted—they calculated for the letter to arrive on Sunday, when Peredonov was at home. This would be an additional proof of the letter's genuineness.

On Tuesday Peredonov tried to get home earlier from school. Circumstances helped him: his last lesson was in a class-room whose door opened into the corridor where the clock hung and where the school porter, an alert ex-sergeant, rang the bell at stated intervals. Peredonov sent the porter into the office to get the class-book, and himself put the clock a quarter of an hour forward. No one noticed him.

At home Peredonov refused his luncheon and asked for dinner to be prepared later—he had certain business to attend to.

"They tangle and tangle and I must untangle," said he angrily, thinking of the snares which his enemies were preparing for him.

He put on a frock-coat which he seldom wore and in which he felt constrained and uneasy: his body had grown stouter with years, and the frock-coat sat badly on him. He was annoyed because he had no orders or decorations to wear. Other people had them—even Falastov of the Town School had—and he, Peredonov, had none. It was all the Head-Master's malice: not once had he been nominated. He was sure of his rank: this the Head-Master could not take away—but what was the use of that, if there were no visible signs of it? However, his new uniform would show his rank: it was pleasant to think that the epaulettes of this uniform would be according to the rank and not according to the class he taught. This would look important—the epaulettes like a general's and one large star. Everyone in the street could see at once that a State Councillor was walking by. "I shall have to order my new uniform soon," thought Peredonov.

He went into the street and only then he began to wonder with whom he should begin.

It seemed to him that in his circumstances the most important people were the Commissioner of Police and the District Attorney. It was obvious that he ought to begin with them or possibly with the Marshal of the Nobility. But at the thought of starting with them he was seized with apprehension. Marshal Veriga was after all a general who had a governorship in view. The Commissioner of Police and the District Attorney were the terrible representatives of the police and the law.

"At the beginning," thought Peredonov, "I ought to begin with the lesser officials and then look about me and nose around—then it will be clear how they'll treat me and what they'll say about me." This is why Peredonov decided that it would be wiser to begin with the Mayor. Although he was a merchant and had only been educated in the District school, still he went about everywhere and everyone came to his house. His position gave him the respect of the town, and even in other towns and in the capital he had quite important acquaintances.

And Peredonov resolutely turned in the direction of the Mayor's house.

The weather was gloomy, the leaves fell from the boughs submissively and wearily. Peredonov felt somewhat apprehensive. In the Mayor's house a smell of freshly-waxed parquet floors mingled with a barely perceptible and yet pleasant odour of food. It was quiet and depressing there. The Mayor's children, a schoolboy and a growing girl—"She has a governess to look after her," her father used to say—were decorously in their rooms. There it was cosy, restful and cheerful; the windows

looked out on the garden; the furniture was comfortable; there were all sorts of games in the rooms and in the garden. The children's voices sounded cheerfully.

In the first-floor rooms, facing the street, where visitors were received, everything was affected and severe. The red wood furniture was like immensely magnified toy models; it was quite awkward for ordinary people to sit in—when you sat down you felt as if you had dropped on a stone, but the heavy host seemed to sit down quite comfortably. The Archimandrite of the suburban monastery, who often visited the Mayor, called these "soul-saving chairs," to which the Mayor would answer: "Yes, I don't like those womanish luxuries that you see in other houses. You sit down on springs and you shake—you shake yourself and the furniture shakes—what's the use of that? And in any case the doctors also don't approve of soft furniture."

The Mayor, Yakov Anikyevitch Skouchayev, met Peredonov on the threshold of his drawing-room. He was a tall, robust man with closely cropped dark hair; he comported himself with dignity and courtesy, though not altogether free from contemptuousness towards people of small means.

Peredonov sat down heavily in a broad chair and said in answer to his host's first polite questions:

"I've come on business."

"With pleasure. What can I do for you?" said the Mayor politely.

In his cunning little black eyes suddenly glimmered a spark of contempt. He thought that Peredonov had come to borrow money, and decided that he could not let him have more than a hundred and fifty roubles. There were quite a number of officials in town who owed Skouchayev more or less significant sums. Skouchayev never referred to the loan, but he never extended further credit to the delinquent debtors. He always gave willingly the first time according to the standing and condition of the borrower.

"You, as Mayor, Yakov Anikyevitch, are the first personage in the town," said Peredonov. "That's why I came to have a talk with you."

Skouchayev assumed an important air and inclined his head slightly as he sat in the chair.

"All sorts of scandal are being spread about me," said Peredonov morosely. "They invent things that never happened."

"You can't gag other people's mouths," said the Mayor. "And, in any case, in our little Palestines it's well known that gossips have nothing to do except to wag their tongues."

"They say I don't go to church, but that's not true," continued Peredonov. "I do go; it's true I didn't go on St. Elias' day, but that was because I had a stomach ache. Otherwise I always go."

"That's quite true," the host confirmed, "I happened to see you there myself, though I don't often go to your church, I usually go to the monastery. It's been a custom of our family for a long time."

"All sorts of scandal are being spread about me," said Peredonov. "They say that I tell the schoolboys nasty tales, but that's nonsense. Of course, I sometimes tell them something amusing at a lesson, to make it interesting. You yourself have a boy at school. Now, he hasn't told you anything of the sort about me, has he?"

"That's quite true," agreed Skouchayev. "Nothing of the sort has happened. However, youngsters are usually cunning, they never repeat what they know they oughtn't to repeat. Of course, my boy is still quite small. He's young enough to have repeated something silly, but I assure you he has said nothing of the sort."

"And in the elder classes they know everything for themselves," went on Peredonov. "But, of course, I never say anything improper there."

"Naturally," replied Skouchayev, "a school is not a market place."

"That's the kind of people they are here," complained Peredonov. "They invent tales of things that never happened. That's why I've come to you—you're the Mayor of the town."

Skouchayev felt very flattered that Peredonov had come to him. He did not understand what it was all about, but he was shrewd enough not to show his lack of comprehension.

"And there are other things being said about me," continued Peredonov. "For one thing that I live with Varvara—they say that she's not my cousin but my mistress. And she's only a cousin to me—honest to God! She's a very distant relative—only a third cousin; there's nothing against marrying her. Indeed I'm going to marry her."

"So-o. So-o. Of course!" said Skouchayev reflectively. "Besides, a bride's wreath ends the matter."

"It was impossible earlier," said Peredonov. "I had important reasons. It was utterly impossible, or I should have married long ago, believe me."

Skouchayev assumed an air of dignity, frowned, and, tapping on the dark tablecloth with his plump white fingers, said:

"I believe you. If that is so, it alters the case entirely. I believe you now. I must confess that it was a little dubious for you to live, if you will permit me to say so, with your companion without marrying her. It was very dubious, perhaps because—well,

you know children are an impressionable race; they're apt to pick things up. It's hard to teach them what's good, but the bad comes easily to them. That's why it was really dubious. And besides, whose business is it? That's how I look at it. It flatters me that you've come to complain to me, because although I'm only one of the common folk—I didn't go beyond the District school—still I have the respect and confidence of society. This is my third year as Mayor, so that my word counts for something among the burgesses."

Skouchayev talked and all the time entangled himself in his own thoughts, and it seemed as if he would never end his tongue-spinning. He stopped abruptly and thought irritably:

"This is a waste of time. That's the trouble with these learned men. You can't understand what they want. Everything's clear to him, to the learned man, in his books, but as soon as he gets his nose out of his books, he tangles up himself and tangles up other people."

He fixed his eye on Peredonov with a look of perplexity, his keen eyes grew dull, his stout body relapsed into the chair, and he seemed no longer the brisk man of action but simply a rather foolish old man.

Peredonov was silent for a while, as if he were bewitched by his host's last words. Then, screwing up his eyes with an indefinable clouded expression, he said:

"You're the Mayor of the town, so you can say that it's all nonsense."

"That is, in what respect?" inquired Skouchayev cautiously.

"Well," explained Peredonov, "if they should inform against me in the District—that I don't go to church or something or other—then if they should come and ask you might put in a word for me."

"This we can do," said the Mayor. "In any case, you can rely on us. If anything should happen, then we'll stand up for you—why shouldn't we put in a word for a good man? We might even send in a testimonial from the Town Council. That's all we can do. Or perhaps, if you like, we can give you a personal recommendation from some prominent citizen. Why not? We can do it, if it comes to the pinch."

"So I may depend on you?" said Peredonov gravely, as if replying to something not altogether pleasant to him. "There's the Head-Master always persecuting me."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Skouchayev, shaking his head sympathetically. "I can't imagine how that can be, except from slanders. Nikolai Vlashevitch, it seems to me, is a very reliable man, who wouldn't injure anyone for nothing. I can judge that from his son. He's a serious, rigid man, who allows no indulgences and makes no personal distinctions. In short, he's a reliable man. It couldn't be except from slanders. Why are you at loggerheads?"

"We don't agree in our views," explained Peredonov. "And there are people in the school who are jealous of me—they all want to be inspectors. It's because Princess Volchanskaya has promised to get me an inspector's job, and so they're mad with jealousy."

"So-o. So-o," said Skouchayev cautiously. "But in any case, why should we go on with our tongues dry? Let's have a snack and a drink."

Skouchayev pressed the button of the electric bell near the hanging lamp.

"That's a handy trick!" said he to Peredonov. "I think it wouldn't be bad for you to get into another official position. Now, Dashenka," he said to the pleasant looking maid-servant of heavy build who came in answer to the bell, "bring in some *zakouska* and some coffee, piping hot kind—d'you understand?"

"Yes," replied Dashenka, smiling, as she walked out with a remarkably light step considering her heaviness.

"Yes, in another department," Skouchayev turned to Peredonov again. "Say, in the ecclesiastical. If you take holy orders, you would make quite a serious, reliable priest. I could help you into it. I have influential friends among the Church dignitaries."

Skouchayev named several diocesan and suffragan bishops.

"No, I don't want to be a priest," answered Peredonov. "I'm afraid of the incense—it makes me feel sick and giddy."

"Well, if that's the case, why don't you join the police," advised Skouchayev. "You might, for example, become a Commissioner of Police. Do you mind telling me what your rank is?"

"I'm a State Councillor," said Peredonov importantly.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Skouchayev in surprise. "You certainly get high rank in your profession—and all that because you teach the youngsters? That shows knowledge is something! Though nowadays there are certain gentlemen who attack it, still we can't do without it. Though I only went to a District school, I am sending my boy to a University. When you send him to a *gymnasia* you have to force him to go, sometimes with a birch, but he'll go to a University of his own free will. Let me say that I never birch him, but if he gets lazy or does something naughty, I simply take him by the shoulders to the window—there are birch trees in the garden. I point to the trees—'Do you see that?' I say to him. 'I see, papa,' he says; 'I won't do it again!' And true enough it helps—the youngster mends his ways as if he'd actually been whipped. Ah, those children! those children!" concluded Skouchayev with a sigh.

Peredonov remained two hours at Skouchayev's. The business talk was followed by abundant hospitality.

Skouchayev regaled him—as he did everything else—very solidly, as if he were conducting an important affair. At the same time he tried to introduce some ingenious tricks into his hospitality. They brought punch in large glasses like coffee, and the host called it his "little coffee." The vodka glasses looked as if the foot had been broken off and the stem sharpened so that they would not stand upright on the table.

"Now I call these, 'Pour in and pour out,'" exclaimed the host.

Then the merchant Tishkov arrived, a small, grey-haired, brisk and cheerful man in very long boots. He drank a great deal of vodka and said all sorts of absurdities in rhyme¹³, briskly and gaily, and it was obvious that he was very satisfied with himself.

Peredonov decided at last that it was time to go home, and he rose to take his leave.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said the host, "stay a while."

"Stay a while and help us smile," said Tishkov.

"No, it's time to leave," replied Peredonov with a preoccupied air.

"It's time to leave or his cousin'll grieve," said Tishkov and winked at Skouchayev.

"Just now I'm a busy man," said Peredonov.

"He who's a busy man we praise him all we can," answered Tishkov promptly.

Skouchayev escorted Peredonov to the hall. They embraced and kissed each other at parting. Peredonov was pleased with his visit. "The Mayor's on my side," he thought confidently.

When he returned to Tishkov, Skouchayev said:

"They gossip about that youth."

"They may gossip about that youth, but they don't know the truth," Tishkov caught him up immediately, deftly pouring himself a glass of English bitter.

It was evident that he was not paying attention to what was said to him, but that he only caught up words for the sake of rhyme.

"He's not a bad fellow," said Skouchayev. "He's a hearty chap and he's not a fool at drinking," continued Skouchayev as he poured himself a drink, paying no attention to Tishkov's rhyming.

¹³ This rhyming fellow is not such a rare specimen as may seem to the English reader. The tendency to speak in rhymes is rather common among Russian peasants. The *rayeshnik* is an interesting native institution. He usually improvises rhymes at gatherings and entertainments in open places, especially at carnivals and fairs. There is also the *balagani d'yed* (the tent grandfather), who appears in a tent in a long white beard of flax, and makes jests in rhymes. It is an institution that is gradually disappearing.

"If he's not a fool at drinking, then he's not an ass at thinking," shouted Tishkov gaily, swallowing his drink at one gulp.

"That he's fussing around with a Mam'zell—what does that matter!" said Skouchayev.

"Well, he's got a Mam'zell, but she may be a damn sell," replied Tishkov.

"He who has not sinned against God is not responsible to the Tsar."

"Against God we've all sinned; by love we're all pinned."

"But he wants to hide his sin under a bridal-wreath."

"They'll hide sin under a bridal wreath and tear each other with furious teeth."

Tishkov always talked in this way when the conversation did not concern his own affairs. He might have bored everybody to tears, but they had all got used to him and did not notice his brisk rhyming; but occasionally they let him loose on a new-comer. But it was all the same to Tishkov whether they listened to him or not; he could not help catching up other people's words to make rhymes, and he acted with the infallibility of a shrewdly devised boring-machine. If you looked at his quick, precise movements, you might conclude that he was not a living person, that he was already dead or had never lived, and that he saw nothing in the living world and heard nothing but dead-sounding words.

CHAPTER 9

The next day Peredonov went to see the District Attorney Avinovitsky.

Again it was a gloomy day. The wind came in violent blasts, and whirled clouds of dust before it. The evening was coming on, and everything was permeated with the dead melancholy light of bleak skies. A depressing silence filled the streets, and it seemed as if all these pitiful houses had sprung up to no purpose, as if these hopelessly decayed structures timidly hinted at the poor tedious life that lurked within their walls. A few people walked in the streets—and they walked slowly, as if they barely conquered the drowsiness that inclined them to repose. Only children, eternal, unwearying vessels of divine joy, were lively, and ran about and played—but even they showed signs of inertia, and some sort of ugly, hidden monster, nestling behind their shoulders, looked out now and then with eyes full of menace upon their suddenly dulled faces.

In the midst of the depression of these streets and houses, under estranged skies, upon the unclean and impotent earth, walked Peredonov, tormented by confused fears—there was no comfort for him in the heights and no consolation upon the earth, because now, as before, he looked upon the world with dead eyes, like some demon who, in his dismal loneliness, despaired with fear and with yearning.

His feelings were dull, and his consciousness was a corrupting and deadening apparatus. All that reached his consciousness became transformed into abomination and filth. All objects revealed their imperfections to him and their imperfections gave him pleasure. When he walked past an erect and clean column, he had a desire to make it crooked and to bespatter it with filth. He laughed with joy when something was being besmirched in his presence. He detested very clean schoolboys, and persecuted them. He called them "the skin scrubbers." He comprehended the slovenly ones more easily. There were neither beloved objects for him, nor beloved people—and this made it possible for nature to act upon his feelings only one-sidedly, as an irritant. The same was true of his meetings with people. Especially with strangers and new acquaintances, to whom it was not possible to be impolite. Happiness for him was to do nothing, and, shutting himself in from the world, to gratify his belly.

"And now I must go against my will," he thought, "and explain matters." What a burden! What a bore! If he had an opportunity at least of besmirching the place he was about to visit—but even this consolation was denied to him.

The District Attorney's house only intensified Peredonov's feeling of grim apprehension. And really, this house had an angry, evil look. The high roof descended gloomily upon the windows which came in contact with the ground. And

its wooden border, and the roof itself had at one time been painted gaily and brightly, but time and the rains had turned the colouring gloomy and grey. The huge ponderous gates, towering above the house, and fitted as it were to repel hostile attacks, were always bolted. Behind them rattled a chain and a huge dog howled in a hoarse bass at every passer-by.

All around were uncultivated spots, vegetable gardens and hovels which stood awry. In front of the District Attorney's house, was a long hexagonal space, the middle of which, somewhat deeper than the rest, was all unpaved, and overgrown with grass. At the house itself stood a lamp-post, the only one to be seen.

Peredonov slowly and unwillingly ascended the four high steps leading to the porch which was covered with a double-sloped roof, and pulled the begrimed handle of the bell. The bell resounded quite close to him, with a sharp and continuous tinkle. Soon stealthy footsteps were heard. Someone seemed to approach the door on tip-toes, and then remained standing there intensely still. Very likely someone was looking at him through some invisible crevice. Then there was the creak of iron hinges, and the door opened—a gloomy, black-haired, freckled girl stood on the threshold and looked at him with eyes full of suspicious scrutiny.

"Whom do you want?" she asked.

Peredonov said that he had come to see Aleksandr Alekseyevitch on business. The girl let him in. No sooner had he crossed the threshold than he made haste to pronounce a charm. And it was well that he did so: he had not yet had time to take off his coat when he heard Avinovitsky's sharp, angry voice coming from the drawing-room. There was always something terrifying in the District Attorney's voice—he could not speak otherwise. So even now he was already shouting in the drawing-room in his angry and abusive voice a greeting of welcome and joy that Peredonov had at last thought of coming to him.

Aleksandr Alekseyevitch Avinovitsky was a man of gloomy appearance; and seemed by nature fitted to reprimand and overbear others. A man of impeccable health—he bathed from ice to ice—he appeared nevertheless lean because of his shaggy, overgrown black beard, with a tinge of blue in it. He brought uneasiness if not fear upon everyone, because he incessantly shouted at someone, and threatened someone with hard labour in Siberia.

"I've come on business," said Peredonov confusedly.

"Have you come with a confession? Have you killed a man? Have you committed arson? Have you robbed the post?" asked Avinovitsky angrily as he admitted Peredonov into the drawing-room. "Or have you been the victim of a crime yourself, which is more possible in our town. Ours is a filthy town and its police is even worse. I'm astonished that you don't find dead bodies every morning lying about the place. Well, sit down. What is your business? Are you the criminal or the victim?"

"No," said Peredonov, "I haven't done anything of the kind. Now there's the Head-Master who'd undoubtedly like to settle my hash for me, but I haven't any such thing in mind."

"So you haven't come with a confession?" asked Avinovitsky.

"No, I can't say that I have," mumbled Peredonov timidly.

"Well, if that's the case," said the District Attorney with savage emphasis, "then let me offer you something."

He picked up a small handbell from the table and rang it. No one came. Avinovitsky took the handbell in both hands, raised a furious racket, then threw the bell on the floor, stamped his feet and shouted in a savage voice:

"Malanya! Malanya! Devils! Beasts! Demons!"

Unhurried footsteps were heard and a schoolboy came in, Avinovitsky's son, a stubby, black-haired boy of about thirteen years of age with an air of confidence and self-assurance. He greeted Peredonov, picked up the bell, put it on the table and said quietly:

"Malanya is in the vegetable garden."

Avinovitsky recovered his calm for a moment, and looking at his son with a tenderness that did not altogether become his overgrown and angry face, he said:

"Now run along, sonny, and tell her to bring us something to drink and some *zakouska*."

The boy leisurely walked out of the room. His father looked after him with a pleased and proud smile. But while the boy was still on the threshold Avinovitsky suddenly frowned savagely and shouted in his terrible voice which made Peredonov tremble:

"Look alive!"

The schoolboy began to run and they could hear how impetuously he slammed the doors. Avinovitsky, smiling with his heavy red lips, again renewed his angry-sounding conversation:

"My heir—not bad, eh? What's he going to turn out like? What do you say? He may become a fool, but a knave, a coward or a rag—never!"

"Well—a——" mumbled Peredonov.

"People are trivial nowadays—they're a parody of the human race!" roared Avinovitsky. "They consider health a trifle. Some German invented under-waistcoats. Now I would have sent that German to hard labour. Imagine my Vladimir suddenly in an under-waistcoat! Why all summer he walked about in the village without once

putting his boots on, and then think of him in an under-waistcoat! Why, he even gets out of his bath and runs naked in a frost and rolls in the snow—think of him in an under-waistcoat. A hundred lashes for the accursed German!"

Avinovitsky passed from the German who invented under-waistcoats to other criminals.

"Capital punishment, my dear sir, is not barbarism!" he shouted. "Science admits that there are born criminals. There's nothing to be said for them, my friend. They ought to be destroyed and not supported by the State. A man's a scoundrel—and they give him a warm corner in a convict prison. He's a murderer, an incendiary, a seducer, but the tax-payer must support him out of his pocket. No-o! It's much juster and cheaper to hang them."

The round table in the dining-room was covered with a white tablecloth with a red border, and upon it were distributed plates with fat sausages and other salted, smoked, and pickled eatables, and decanters and bottles of various sizes and forms, containing all sorts of vodkas, brandies and liqueurs. Everything was to Peredonov's taste, and even the slight carelessness of their arrangement pleased him.

The host continued to shout. Apropos of the food, he began to abuse the shopkeepers, and then for some reason began to talk about ancestry.

"Ancestry is a big thing," he shouted savagely, "for the muzhiks to enter the aristocracy is stupid, absurd, impractical and immoral. The soil is getting poorer and the cities are filled with unemployed. Then there are bad harvests, idleness and suicides—how does that please you? You may teach the muzhik as much as you like but don't give him any rank—it makes a peasantry lose its best members and it always remains rabble and cattle. And the gentry also suffer detriment from the influx of uncultured elements. In his own village he was better than others, but when he gets into a higher rank he brings into it something coarse, unknightly and plebeian. In the first case the most important things are gain and his stomach. No-o, my dear fellow, the castes were a wise institution."

"Here, for instance, our Head-Master lets all sorts of riff-raff into the school," said Peredonov angrily. "There are even peasant children there and many commoners' children."

"Fine doings, I must say!" shouted the host.

"There's a circular saying that we shouldn't admit all kinds of riff-raff, but he does as he likes," complained Peredonov. "He refuses hardly anyone. Life is rather poorish in our town, he says, and there are too few pupils as it is. What does he mean by few? It would be better if there were less. It's all we can do to correct the exercise-books alone. There's no time to read the school-books. They purposely write dubious words in their compositions—you have to look in Grote to see how they're spelled."

"Have some brandy," suggested Avinovitsky. "Well, what is your business with me?"

"I have enemies," growled Peredonov, as he looked dejectedly into his glass of yellow vodka before drinking it.

"There was once a pig who lived without enemies," said Avinovitsky, "and he also was slaughtered. Have a bit—it was a very good pig."

Peredonov took a slice of ham and said: "They're spreading all sorts of scandal about me."

"Well, as for gossip I can assure you that no town is worse," shouted the host. "What a town! No matter what you do, all the pigs begin to grunt at you at once."

"Princess Volchanskaya has promised to get me an inspector's job, and suddenly they all begin to gossip. This might hurt my prospects. It all comes from envy. Now there's the Head-Master, he's corrupted the entire school—the schoolboys, who live in apartments, smoke, drink and run after girls and even the town-boys are no better. He's done all the corrupting himself and now he persecutes me. It's likely that someone's carried tales to him about me. And then it goes still farther. It might reach the Princess."

Peredonov dwelt long and incoherently on his apprehensions. Avinovitsky listened with an angry countenance and punctuated his discourse with exclamations:

"Villains! Scamps! Children of Herod!"

"What sort of Nihilist am I?" said Peredonov. "It's ridiculous. I have an official cap with a badge, but I don't always wear it—and I sometimes wear a bowler. As for the fact that Mickiewicz hangs on my wall, I put him there because of his poetry and not because he was a rebel. I haven't even read his 'Kolokol.'"¹⁴

"Well, you've caught that from another opera," said Avinovitsky unceremoniously. "Herzen published it and not Mickiewicz."

"That was another 'Kolokol,'" said Peredonov. "Mickiewicz also published a 'Kolokol.'"

"I didn't know it—you'd better publish the fact. It would be a great discovery. You'd become celebrated."

"It's forbidden to publish it," said Peredonov angrily; "I'm not allowed to read forbidden books. And I never read them. I'm a patriot."

After lengthy lamentations in which Peredonov poured himself out, Avinovitsky concluded that someone was trying to blackmail Peredonov, and with this purpose in

¹⁴ Alexander Herzen's periodical, the "Kolokol" (The Bell), was suppressed in 1863 for its sympathy with the Poles.

view was spreading rumours about him in order to frighten him and to prepare a basis for a sudden demand for money. That these rumours did not reach him, Avinovitsky explained by the fact that the blackmailer was acting skilfully upon Peredonov's immediate circle—because it was only necessary to frighten Peredonov. Avinovitsky asked:

"Whom do you suspect?"

Peredonov fell into thought. Quite by chance Grushina came into his mind, he recalled confusedly the recent conversation with her, during which he interrupted her by a threat of informing against her. The fact that it was he who had threatened to inform against Grushina became in his mind a vague idea of informing in general. Whether he was to inform against someone or whether they were to inform against him was not clear, and Peredonov had no desire to exert himself to recall the matter precisely—one thing was clear, that Grushina was an enemy. And what was worse she had seen where he hid Pisarev. He would have to hide the books somewhere else.

Peredonov said at last:

"Well, there's Grushina."

"Yes, I know, she's a first class rogue," said Avinovitsky sharply.

"She's always coming to our house," complained Peredonov. "And always nosing around. She's very grasping—she takes all she can get. It's possible that she wants money from me in order to keep her from reporting that I once had Pisarev. Or perhaps she wants to marry me. But I don't want to pay her. And I have someone else I want to marry—let her inform against me—I'm not guilty. Only it's unpleasant to me to have this gossip as it might prevent my appointment."

"She's a well-known charlatan," said the District Attorney. "She wanted to take up fortune-telling by cards here, and to get money out of fools. But I asked the police to stop it. At that time they were sensible and did what I told them."

"Even now she tells fortunes," said Peredonov. "She spread out the cards for me and she always saw a long journey and an official letter for me."

"She knows what to say to everybody. Just wait, she'll set a trap for you and then she'll try and extort money from you. Then you come to me and I'll give her a hundred of the hottest lashes," said Avinovitsky, using his favourite expression.

This expression was not to be taken literally, it merely meant an ordinary rebuke.

Thus Avinovitsky promised his protection to Peredonov, but Peredonov left him agitated by vague fears inspired by Avinovitsky's loud, stern speeches.

In this manner Peredonov made a single visit every day before dinner—he could not manage more than one because everywhere he had to make circumstantial explanations. In the evening, as was his custom, he went to play billiards.

As before, Vershina enticed him in by her witching invitations, as before Routilov praised his sisters to him. At home Varvara used her persuasive powers to make him marry her sooner—but he came to no resolution. He indeed thought sometimes that to marry Varvara would be the best thing he could do—but suppose the Princess should deceive him? He would become the laughing-stock of the town, and this possibility made him pause.

The pursuit of him by would-be brides, the envy of his comrades, more often the product of his imagination than an actual fact, all sorts of suspected snares—all this made his life wearisome and unhappy, like the weather which for several successive days had been bleak, and often resolved itself into slow and scant, but cold and prolonged rains. Peredonov felt that life was becoming a detestable thing—but he thought that he would soon become an inspector, and then everything would take a turn for the better.

CHAPTER 10

On Thursday, Peredonov went to see the Marshal of the Nobility.

The Marshal's house reminded one of a palatial cottage in Pavlovsk or in Tsarskoye Selo, with full conveniences even for winter residence. Though there was no blatant display of luxury, the newness of many articles seemed unnecessarily pretentious.

Aleksandr Mikhailovitch Veriga received Peredonov in his study. He pretended to hurry forward to greet his guest, and gave the impression that it was only his extreme busyness that kept him from meeting Peredonov earlier.

Veriga held himself extraordinarily erect even for a retired cavalry officer. It was whispered that he wore corsets. His clean-shaven face was a uniform red, as if it were painted. His head was shorn by the closest-cutting clippers—a convenient method of minimising his bald patch. His eyes were grey, affable, but cold. In his manner he was extremely amiable to everyone, but his views were decided and severe. A fine military discipline was apparent in all his movements, and there was a hint in his habits of the future Governor.

Peredonov began to explain his business to him across a carved oak table:

"All sorts of rumours are being spread about me and, as a gentleman,¹⁵ I turn to you. All sorts of nonsense is being said about me, your Excellency, none of which is true."

"I haven't heard anything," replied Veriga, smiling amiably and expectantly, and fixing his attentive grey eyes on Peredonov.

Peredonov looked fixedly in one corner of the room and said:

"I never was a Socialist. But if it sometimes happened that I said something I oughtn't to say, you must remember that one is apt to be a little careless in one's young days. But I've given up thinking of such things altogether."

"So you were quite a Liberal?" asked Veriga with an amiable smile. "You wanted a Constitution, isn't that so? But we all wanted a Constitution when we were young. Have one of these."

Veriga pushed a box of cigars towards Peredonov who was afraid to take one and refused. Veriga lighted his own.

¹⁵ *Dvoryanin* actually means a nobleman, but certain professions—that of a schoolmaster, for instance—entitle a man to the rank of "dvoryanin." We have used the English word "gentleman," to avoid confusing the reader.

"Of course, your Excellency," admitted Peredonov, "in the University I, and only I, wanted a different kind of Constitution from the others."

"And what sort precisely?" asked Veriga with a shade of approaching displeasure in his voice.

"What I wanted was a Constitution without a Parliament," explained Peredonov, "because in a Parliament they only wrangle."

Veriga's eyes lit up with quiet amusement.

"A Constitution without a Parliament!" he said reflectively. "Do you think it's practical?"

"But even that was a long time ago," said Peredonov. "Now I want nothing of the sort."

And he looked hopefully at Veriga.

Veriga blew a thin wisp of smoke from his lips, was silent a moment, and then said slowly:

"Well, you're a schoolmaster. And my duties in the district have something to do with the schools. Now, in your opinion, to what kind of school would you give preference: to the Parish Church Schools or to the so-called secularised District Schools?"

Veriga knocked the ash from his cigar and fixed an amiable but very attentive gaze on Peredonov. Peredonov frowned, looked into the corners and said:

"The District Schools ought to be reorganised."

"Reorganised," repeated Veriga in an indefinite tone. "So-o."

And he fixed his eyes on the smouldering cigar, as if he were awaiting a long explanation.

"The Instructors there are Nihilists," said Peredonov. "The Instructresses don't believe in God. They stand in church and blow their noses."

Veriga glanced quickly at Peredonov and said with a smile:

"But that's necessary sometimes, you know."

"Yes, but the one I mean blows her nose like a horn, so that the boys in the choir laugh," growled Peredonov. "She does it on purpose. That's the sort Skobotchkina is."

"Yes, that is unpleasant," said Veriga, "but in Skobotchkina's case it's due to a bad bringing up. She's a girl altogether without manners, but an enthusiastic schoolmistress. In any case it's not nice: she must be told about it."

"And she walks about in a red shirt. And sometimes she even walks barefoot in a sarafan. She practises at the high-jumps with the little boys. It's too free in the schools," went on Peredonov. "There's no discipline of any kind. They actually don't want to chastise the pupils. The muzhiks' children shouldn't be treated in the same way as the children of gentlemen—they have to be birched."

Veriga looked calmly at Peredonov, then, as if feeling uneasy at Peredonov's untactful remarks, he lowered his eyes, and said in a cold, almost gubernatorial tone:

"I must say that I have noticed many good qualities in pupils from District Schools. Undoubtedly, in the great majority of cases, they do their work very conscientiously. Of course, as everywhere, the children are sometimes guilty of offences. In consequence of a bad upbringing and of a poor environment, these offences can take a coarse form, all the more since among the Russian village population the general feelings of duty, of honour and respect of private ownership are little developed. The school should concern itself with these offences attentively and sternly. When all methods of persuasion are exhausted and if the offence is a severe one, then of course it should follow that in order not to ruin the boy extreme measures must be taken. Besides, this should apply to all children, even to those of gentlemen. In general, however, I agree with you that in schools of this kind training is not satisfactorily organised. Madame Shteven,¹⁶ in her extremely interesting book—have you read it?"

"No, your Excellency," said Peredonov in confusion, "I never have the time. There's so much work in school. But I will read it."

"Well, that's not altogether necessary," said Veriga with a smile, as if he were forbidding Peredonov's reading it. "Yes, Madame Shteven recounts with distress that two of her pupils, young men of seventeen, were sentenced to be birched by the District Court. You see, they were proud young fellows—let me add that we all suffered while they suffered the execution of the sentence—this penalty was afterwards abolished. And, let me say that if I were in Madame Shteven's place I would like to let all Russia know that this has happened: because, just imagine, they were sentenced for stealing apples. Observe, for stealing! And what's more she writes that they were her very best pupils. Yet they stole the apples! Fine bringing up! It must frankly be admitted that we don't respect the rights of ownership."

Veriga rose from his place in agitation, made two steps forward, but controlled himself and immediately sat down again.

"Now when I am an inspector of National Schools I shall do things differently," said Peredonov.

"Have you that position in prospect?" asked Veriga.

¹⁶ Madame Shteven gave all her energy to the education of peasants, but her efforts were ultimately curtailed by the authorities.

"Yes, Princess Volchanskaya has promised me."

Veriga assumed an expression of pleasure.

"I shall be very glad to congratulate you. I have no doubt that in your hands things will be improved."

"But, your Excellency, in the town they're spreading all sorts of nonsense about me—you can't tell, someone in the district may inform against me and hinder my appointment, and I haven't done anything."

"Whom do you suspect in the spreading of these false rumours?" asked Veriga.

Peredonov mumbled in confusion:

"Who should I suspect? I don't know, but they do gossip about me. And I have come to you because they might injure my position."

Veriga reflected that he would not know who was spreading the gossip, because he was not yet Governor.

He again assumed his role of Marshal, and made a speech which Peredonov listened to with fear and depression:

"I appreciate the confidence which you have shown me in calling upon my"—(Veriga wanted to say "patronage" but refrained)—"intervention between you and the society in which, according to your information, these detrimental rumours about you are being disseminated. These rumours have not yet reached me, and you may depend upon it that the calumnies, which are being spread in connection with you, dare not venture to rise from the low places of the town public, and, in other words, they will not go beyond the secret darkness in which they are confined. But it is very pleasant to me that you, who hold your official post by appointment, at the same time value so highly the importance of public opinion and the dignity of the position you occupy as a trainer of youth, one of those to whose enlightening solitude we, the parents, entrust our most priceless inheritance, namely, our children, the heirs of our name and of our labours. As an official you have your chief in the person of your honoured Head-Master, but as a member of society and as a gentleman you have always the privilege of counting on ... the co-operation of the Marshal of Nobility in questions concerning your honour and your dignity as a man and a gentleman."

As he continued to speak, Veriga rose and, pressing heavily on the edge of the table with the fingers of his right hand, looked at Peredonov with that impersonally affable and attentive expression with which an orator looks at a crowd when pronouncing benevolent official speeches. Peredonov rose also, and crossing his hands on his stomach, looked morosely at the rug under the Marshals feet. Veriga went on:

"I am glad that you turned to me, because in our time it is especially useful to members of the official classes always and everywhere to remember above all things

that they are gentlemen and to value their membership of this class—not only in the matter of privileges but also in responsibilities and in their dignity as gentlemen. Gentlemen, in Russia, as you know, are pre-eminently of the Civil Service. Strictly speaking, all governmental positions, except the very lowest, it goes without saying, should be found only in gentlemen's hands. The presence of commoners in the Government service constitutes of course one of the causes of undesirable occurrences such as that which has disturbed your tranquillity. Intrigue and calumny, these are the weapons of people of lower breed, not brought up in fine gentlemanly traditions. But I hope that public opinion will make itself heard clearly and loudly on your behalf, and in this connection you can fully count on my co-operation."

"I thank your Excellency most humbly," said Peredonov, "and I am glad that I can count on you."

Veriga smiled amiably and did not sit down, giving Peredonov to understand that the interview was closed. As he finished his speech he suddenly realised that what he had said was out of place and that Peredonov was nothing but a timorous place-seeker, knocking at doors in his search for patronage.

As the footman in the hall helped him on with his coat he heard the sounds of a piano in a distant room. Peredonov thought that in this house lived people of great self-esteem whose manner of life was really seigneurial. "He has a Governorship in view," thought Peredonov with a feeling of respectful and envious astonishment.

On the stairs he met two of the Marshal's boys returning from a walk with their tutor. Peredonov looked at them with morose curiosity.

"How clean they are!" he thought. "There's not a speck of dirt even in their ears. How alive they are, and they're trained to hold themselves straight as a taut fiddle-string. And they're never even whipped, if you please," thought Peredonov.

And he looked angrily after them as they ran up the stairs, chattering gaily. It astonished Peredonov that the tutor treated them as equals—he did not frown at them nor did he scold them.

When Peredonov returned home he found Varvara in the drawing-room with a book in her hands, which was a rare occurrence. Varvara was reading a cookery book, the only one she had, and which she sometimes looked into. The book was old, ragged and had black binding. The binding caught Peredonov's eye, and it depressed him.

"What are you reading, Varvara?" he asked angrily.

"What? Can't you see? A cookery book," replied Varvara. "I haven't time to read nonsense."

"Why a cookery book?" asked Peredonov in fright.

"What do you mean, why? I want to find some new dishes for you—you're always grumbling about the food," said Varvara with a sort of sarcastic self-satisfaction.

"I won't eat from a black book," announced Peredonov decisively, and quickly tore the book from Varvara's hands and took it into the bedroom.

"A black book! The idea of preparing dinners from it!" The thought filled him with fear. It had come to that: he was to be ruined openly with black magic! "I must destroy this awful book," he thought, and paid no attention to Varvara's grumbling.

On Friday Peredonov went to see the President of the District Landlords' Board.

Everything in this house pointed to a love of simplicity and good living, and to the fact that the occupants had public interest at heart. Many objects of good furniture, reminding one of village life, were about, among other things a chair with a back made of a harness arch and hand supports resembling axe handles; an inkwell shaped like a horse-shoe; and an ash-pan that resembled a peasant's shoe. Several corn measures containing samples of corn were lying about in the parlour—on the window-sills, on the tables, on the floor, while here and there were pieces of "hungry" bread¹⁷—dirty lumps that resembled peat. In the drawing-room were designs and models of agricultural machines. Several cases of books on rural economy and school matters encumbered the study. The table was covered with papers, printed forms, paste-board boxes containing cards of various sizes. There was much dust, and not a single picture.

The master of the house, Ivan Stepanovitch Kirillov, was very anxious, on the one hand, to be amiable—in the European fashion—on the other not to detract from his own dignity as a district landowner. He was a strange contradiction, as if welded from two halves. It was evident from all his surroundings that he did a great deal of work with intelligence. But to look at him you might imagine that his work in the district was only a temporary distraction and that his real cares were somewhere before him. This was evident in his eyes, which now and then stared into the distance—eyes alert yet inanimate in their tinny gleam. It was as if someone had taken out his live soul and put it into a long box, and had replaced it with a skilful, bustling machine.

He was of low stature, thin, youngish—so youngish and ruddy that now and then he looked like a boy who had glued on a false beard and had assumed grown-up manners with complete success. His movements were quick but precise; when he greeted anyone he bowed elaborately, and he seemed to glide on the soles of his fancy boots. One's impulse was to call his clothes a "small costume": he wore a grey jacket, a shirt of unstarched batiste with turned-down collar, a blue cord tie, narrow trousers and grey socks. And his always courteous conversation was also

¹⁷ Very inferior bread used during the famine.

ambiguous: he would speak quite gravely and then suddenly an ingenuous smile, like a child's, would appear, and then next moment he would be grave again.

His wife, a quiet, sedate woman, who seemed older than her husband, came into the study a number of times while Peredonov was there, and each time she asked her husband for some detailed information about the affairs of the district.

Their household in town was always confused—there were always visitors on business and constant teas. Hardly had Peredonov seated himself when they brought him a glass of lukewarm tea and some rolls on a plate.

Before Peredonov arrived there was already a visitor there. Peredonov knew him—but then who is not known to everyone in our town? Everyone knows everyone else, but some have quarrelled and broken off the acquaintance.

This was the District physician, Georgiy Semenovitch Trepetov, a little man—even smaller than Kirillov—with a pimply, insignificant, sharp-featured face. He wore blue spectacles, and he always looked under or to the side of them, as if it were an effort to look at his companion. He was unusually upright, and never gave a single kopeck for anyone else's benefit. He detested deeply everyone who was a government official: he would go so far as to shake hands at meeting but stubbornly refrained from conversation. For this he was reputed a shining light—like Kirillov—although he knew very little and was a poor physician. He was all the time getting ready to lead the simple life, and with this intention he looked on at the muzhiks when they blew their noses and scratched the back of their heads and wiped their mouths with the back of their hands; when he was alone he sometimes imitated them, but he always put off his simplification till next summer.

Peredonov here also repeated his usual complaints against the town gossip, such as he had made during the last few days, and against the envious people who wanted to hinder his obtaining an inspector's position. At the beginning Kirillov felt rather flattered by this attention. He exclaimed:

"Now you can see what goes on in provincial towns. I always said that the one deliverance for thinking people is to join hands—and I'm glad that you've come to the same conclusion."

Trepetov snorted angrily, as if affronted. Kirillov looked at him timorously. Trepetov said with contempt:

"Thinking people!" and then he snorted again.

After a short silence he began again in his thin, indignant voice:

"I don't know how thinking people can serve a musty classicism."

Kirillov said irresolutely:

"But, Georgiy Semenovitch, you never realise that a man does not always choose his own profession."

Trepetov snorted contemptuously, which finally settled the amiable Kirillov, and became immersed in a deep silence.

Kirillov turned to Peredonov when he heard that he was talking of an inspector's position. Kirillov looked worried. He imagined that Peredonov wanted to be an inspector in our district.

In the District Council there had matured a project to establish the position of their Inspector of schools, who was to be chosen by the Council, the appointment to be approved by the Educational Commission.

Then, the Inspector Bogdanov, who had charge of the schools of three districts, would be transferred to one of the neighbouring towns, and the schools of our district would be turned over to the new Inspector. For this position the members of the Council had in view an instructor in a pedagogical seminary in the neighbouring town, Safata.

"I have patrons," said Peredonov, "but I'm afraid that the Head-Master here will harm my chances—yes, and other people too. All sorts of nonsense is being spread about me. So that in case of any inquiries concerning me, I want to say now that all this talk is rubbish. Don't you believe any of it."

Kirillov replied alertly:

"I have no time, Ardalyon Borisitch, to give attention to all the town rumours and gossip; I'm up to my neck in work. If my wife didn't help me, I don't know what I should do. But I am fully convinced that all that is being said about you—though I assure you I haven't heard anything—is mere gossip. But the position you have in view doesn't depend on me alone."

"They might ask you about it," said Peredonov.

Kirillov looked at him in astonishment, and said:

"Of course they will. But the real point at issue is that we have in view ..."

At this moment Kirillov's wife appeared at the door and said:

"Stepan Ivanitch, just a moment."

The husband went to her. She whispered to him in a worried way:

"I think you'd better not tell this creature that we have Krasilnikov in view. I mistrust this creature—he will try to spoil Krasilnikov's chances."

"You think so?" whispered Kirillov. "Yes, yes, you may be right. It's an unpleasant business."

He clutched his head.

His wife looked at him with professional sympathy and said:

"It is better to tell him nothing at all about it—as if there were no vacancy."

"Yes, yes, you're right," whispered Kirillov. "But I must run along—it's discourteous."

He ran back into his study and began to converse amiably with Peredonov.

"So you will—if ..." began Peredonov.

"Please rest assured. Please rest assured. I'll have it in view," said Kirillov quickly.

"We haven't yet fully decided this question."

Peredonov did not understand to what question Kirillov referred, and he felt oppressed and apprehensive. Kirillov went on:

"We are establishing a school-map. We've had experts from Peterburg. They've worked at it the whole summer. It cost us nine hundred roubles. We're preparing now for the District meeting. It's a remarkably efficient plan—all distances have been considered and all school points have been mapped out."

And Kirillov explained the school-map minutely and at length, that is, the apportioning the District into several small divisions, with a school in each, so that every village would have its school close at hand. Peredonov understood nothing of this and became entangled with his dull thoughts in the wordy strands of the net which Kirillov handled so deftly and quickly.

At last he took his leave, hopelessly oppressed. In this house, he thought, they did not want to understand him or even to listen to what he had to say. The host babbled something unintelligible. Trepetov snorted angrily for some reason or other. The hostess came in ungraciously and walked out again—strange people lived in this house, thought Peredonov. A lost day!

CHAPTER 11

On Saturday Peredonov prepared to visit the Commissioner of Police. "Though he is not so big a bird as the Marshal of the Nobility," thought Peredonov, "he might do me greater harm than anyone else. On the other hand he might help me a great deal with the authorities. The police are, after all, very important."

Peredonov took from its box his official cap with its badge. He decided that henceforth he would wear no other hat. It was all very well for the Head-Master to wear any hat he liked—he stood well with the authorities, but Peredonov was still seeking his inspector's position; it was not enough for him to depend upon patrons, he must do something himself to show his mettle. Already, several days earlier, before he had begun to go about among the authorities, he had thought of this, but somehow his hat only came to his hand. Now Peredonov arranged things differently: he threw his hat on top of the stove—to make certain that he would not pick it up by accident.

Varvara was not at home; Klavdia was washing the floors. Peredonov went into the kitchen to wash his hands. He saw on the table there a roll of blue paper from which a few raisins had fallen. This was a pound of raisins bought for the tea-cake to be baked at home. Peredonov began to eat the raisins as they were, unwashed and unstoned. He quickly and avidly ate the whole pound as he stood at the table, keeping one eye on the door so that Klavdia should not surprise him. Then he carefully folded up the thick, blue paper and carried it into the front room under his coat and there put it in the pocket of his overcoat so that he could throw it away in the street and thus get rid of all traces of it.

He walked out. Soon Klavdia went to get the raisins, and then began to hunt for them unsuccessfully in a frightened way. Varvara returned and discovered the loss of the raisins and began to abuse Klavdia: she was certain that Klavdia had eaten them.

It was quiet in the streets with a slight breeze. There was only an occasional cloud. The pools were drying up. There was a pale glow in the sky. But Peredonov's soul was heavily oppressed.

On the way he went into the tailor's in order to hurry along the new uniform he had ordered three days ago.

As he walked past the church he took his hat off and crossed himself three times elaborately and sweepingly, so that everyone should see how the future inspector walked past the church. He was not accustomed to do it before, but now he had to

be on the look-out. It was possible that some spy was walking stealthily behind or was hiding around a corner or behind a tree and was watching him.

The Commissioner of Police lived in a remote street of the town. In the gates, which were flung wide open, Peredonov met a police constable—a meeting which now always made Peredonov feel dejected. There were several muzhiks visible in the courtyard, but not the kind one meets everywhere—these were an unusually orderly and quiet sort. The courtyard was dirty. Carts stood about covered with matting.

In the dark corridor Peredonov met another police constable, a small, meagre man of capable yet depressed appearance. He stood motionless and held under his arm a book in black leather binding. A ragged, barefoot girl ran out from a side door and helped Peredonov off with his coat; as she led him into the drawing-room, she said:

"Please come in, Semyon Grigoryevitch will be here soon."

The drawing-room ceiling was low and this oppressed Peredonov. The furniture was huddled against the wall. Rope-mats lay on the floor. To the right and to the left noises and whisperings could be heard behind the walls. Pale women and scrofulous boys looked out from the doors, all with avid glistening eyes. Among the whisperings certain questions and answers spoken in a louder tone could be heard:

"I brought ..."

"Where shall I take this?"

"Where do you want this put?"

"I've brought it from Ermoshkin, Sidor Petrovitch."

The Commissioner soon appeared. He was buttoning up his uniform and smiling amiably.

"Pardon me for keeping you waiting," he said, as he pressed Peredonov's hand in both his huge grasping hands. "I've had many business callers. Our work is such that it won't bear delay."

Semyon Grigoryevitch Minchukov a tall, robust, black-haired man, with a thinness of hair on the top of his scalp, stooped slightly. His hands hung down and his fingers were like rakes. He often smiled in such a way as to suggest that he had just eaten something that was forbidden but very pleasant and was now licking his lips. His lips were bright red, thick; his nose fleshy; his face was eager, zealous but stupid.

Peredonov was perturbed by everything he saw and heard in this place. He mumbled incoherent words and as he sat on his chair he tried to hold his cap in such a way that the Commissioner should see the badge. Minchukov sat opposite him on the other side of the table, very erect, and kept his amiable smile, while his rake-like fingers quietly moved on his knees, opening and shutting.

"They're saying I don't know what about me," said Peredonov. "Things that never happened. I can do some informing myself, but I don't want to. I'm nothing of what they say, but I know what *they* are. Behind your back they spread all sorts of scandal and then laugh in your face. You must admit that, in my position, this is very annoying. I have patronage, but these people go about throwing mud at me. All their following me about is useless. They only waste time and annoy me. Wherever you go, the whole town knows about it. So I hope that if anything happens you'll support me."

"Of course, of course! with the greatest pleasure! But how?" asked Minchukov, gesticulating with his large hands. "Still the police ought to know whether you suspect anyone."

"Of course, it's really nothing to me," said Peredonov angrily. "Let them chatter if they like. But they might injure my position. They're cunning. You don't notice that they all chatter, like Routilov, for instance. How do you know that he's not plotting to blow up the Treasury? It's one way of shifting the blame."

Minchukov at first thought that Peredonov was drunk and talking nonsense. Then as he listened further he imagined that Peredonov was complaining of someone who was spreading calumnies about him and that he had come to ask Minchukov to take certain measures.

"They're young people," continued Peredonov, thinking of Volodin, "and have a very good opinion of themselves. They're plotting against other people and are dishonest themselves. Young people, as everyone knows, are liable to temptation. Some of them are even in the police service, and they too are busybodies."

For a long time he talked about young people but for some reason or other did not want to name Volodin. At any rate, he wanted Minchukov to understand that certain young police officials were not free from his suspicions. Minchukov concluded that Peredonov was hinting at two young officials in the police bureau—two very young men who were rather frivolous and were always running after girls. Peredonov's confusion and manifest nervousness infected Minchukov.

"I'll look into the matter," he said with some anxiety. For a moment he was lost in thought and then again began to smile. "I have two quite young officials—their mothers' milk isn't dry on their lips. Believe me, one of them is still put in the corner by his mother, honest to God!"

Peredonov broke into a cackling laugh.

In the meantime Varvara had gone to Grushina's house where she learned an astonishing piece of news.

"Varvara Dmitrievna darling," said Grushina rapidly, before Varvara had time to cross the threshold, "I have a piece of news for you that will make you stare."

"What is it?" asked Varvara.

"Just think what low people there are in this world! What tricks they'll play to reach their purpose!"

"What is the matter?"

"Just wait and I'll tell you."

But first of all the cunning Grushina gave Varvara coffee; then chased her children out into the street, which made the elder of her girls unwilling to go.

"Ah, you little brat!" Grushina shouted at her.

"You're a brat yourself!" answered the little girl and stamped her foot at her mother.

Grushina caught the child by the hair, pushed her out the door and slammed it....

"The little beast!" she complained to Varvara. "These children are a great worry. I'm alone with them and I never get any peace. If only they had their father!"

"Why don't you marry again, then they'd have a father," said Varvara.

"You never can tell how a man'll turn out, Varvara Dmitrievna darling. He might treat them badly."

In the meantime the little girl ran back from the street and threw into the window a handful of sand which fell on to her mother's head and dress. Grushina put her head out of the window and shouted:

"Wait till I catch you, you little devil, and see what you'll get!"

"You're a devil yourself, you silly fool!" shouted the little girl from the street, jumping on one foot and clenching her dirty little fist at her mother.

"You just wait!" shouted Grushina.

And she shut the window. Then she sat down calmly as if nothing had happened and began to talk:

"I have a piece of news for you, but I don't know if I ought to tell you. But don't worry, Varvara Dmitrievna darling, they won't succeed."

"Well, what is it?" asked Varvara in affright, and the saucer of coffee trembled in her hand.

"You know that a young student by the name of Pilnikov has just entered the school and been put straight into the fifth form as if he'd come from Rouban, for his aunt has bought an estate in our district."

"Yes, I know," said Varvara, "I saw him when he came with his aunt. Such a pretty boy, almost like a girl, and always blushing."

"But, dearest, why shouldn't he look like a girl? He is a girl dressed up!"

"What do you mean!" exclaimed Varvara.

"They've thought of it on purpose to catch Ardalyon Borisitch," said Grushina quickly with many gesticulations, very happy that she had such important news to tell. "You see this girl has a first cousin, a boy, an orphan, who went to school at Rouban. And this girl's mother took him away from Rouban and used his papers to send the girl here. And you will notice that they have put him in a house where there are no other boys. He's there alone, so that the whole matter, they thought, would be kept secret."

"And how did you find out?" asked Varvara incredulously.

"Varvara darling, news gets about quickly. It was suspicious at once: all the other boys are like boys, but this one is so quiet and walks about as if he had just been dipped in the water. To look at he's a fine-looking fellow, red-cheeked and chesty, but his companions notice that he's very modest—they tell him a word and he blushes at once. They tease him for being a girl. They do it for a lark and don't realise that it's the truth. And just think how shrewd they've been—why, even the landlady doesn't know anything."

"How did you find out?" repeated Varvara.

"But, Varvara darling, what is there that I don't know! I know everyone in the district. Why everyone knows that they have a boy at home the same age as this one. Why didn't they send them to school together? They say that he was ill last summer and that he was to spend a year recuperating and then go back to school. But that's all nonsense. The real schoolboy is at home. And then everyone knows that they had a girl and they say that she was married and went off to the Caucasus. But that's another lie—she didn't go away. She's living here disguised as a boy."

"But what's the object of it?" asked Varvara.

"What do you mean, 'What's the object?'" said Grushina animatedly. "To get hold of one of the instructors—there are plenty of them bachelors. Or perhaps someone else. Disguised as a boy, she could go to men's apartments, and there isn't much she couldn't do."

"You say she's a pretty girl?" said Varvara in apprehensive tones.

"Rather! She's a fabulous beauty!" said Grushina. "She may be a little constrained now, but just wait, she'll get used to things and show her true colours. She'll turn plenty of heads in the town. And just think how shrewd they've been: as soon as I found out about this I tried to meet his landlady, or perhaps I should say her landlady."

"It's a topsy-turvy affair. Pah! God help us!" said Varvara.

"I went to Vespers at the parish church on St. Pantelemon's day. She's very pious. 'Olga Vassilyevna,' I say to her, 'why do you keep only one student in your house now?' 'It seems to me,' I say to her, 'that one is not enough for you.' And she says, 'Why should I have any more? They're a great trouble.' And so I say, 'Why, in past years you used to have two or three.' And then she says—just imagine, Varvara darling—'They stipulated that Sashenka alone should live in my house. They are well-to-do people,' she says to me, 'and they pay me a little more, as if they were afraid that the other boys would do him harm.' Now what do you think of that?"

"Aren't they sly blighters," said Varvara indignantly. "Well, did you tell her that he was a wench?"

"I said to her: 'Olga Vassilyevna, are you sure they haven't foisted a girl upon you instead of a boy?'"

"Well, and what did she say?"

"She thought at first that I was joking, and she laughs. Then I say to her more seriously, 'My dear Olga Vassilyevna,' I say, 'd'you know they say that this is a girl?' But she wouldn't believe me. 'Nonsense,' she says, 'who put that into your head? I'm not blind.'"

This tale left Varvara dumbfounded. She believed the whole story just as she heard it, and she believed that an assault from yet another side was being prepared for her intended husband. She must somehow have the mask torn off this disguised girl as quickly as possible. For a long time they deliberated as to how this was to be done, but so far they could not think of any way.

When Varvara got home her annoyance was further increased by the disappearance of the raisins.

When Peredonov returned Varvara quickly and agitatedly told him that Klavdia had hidden away somewhere the pound of raisins and would not admit it.

"And what is more," said Varvara, "she suggests that they've been eaten by the master. She says that you were in the kitchen for some reason or other when she was washing the floors and that you stopped there for a long time."

"I didn't stop there at all long," said Peredonov glumly, "I only washed my hands there and I didn't see any raisins."

"Klavdiushka! Klavdiushka!" shouted Varvara, "Master says he didn't even see the raisins—that means you must have hidden them somewhere."

Klavdia showed her reddened, tear-stained face from the kitchen.

"I didn't take your raisins!" she shouted in a tear-choked voice. "I'll pay for them, but I didn't take them."

"You'll pay for them all right," shouted Varvara angrily. "I'm not obliged to feed you on raisins."

Peredonov burst out laughing and shouted:

"Diushka's got away with a whole pound of raisins!"

"Heartless wretches!" shouted Klavdia, and slammed the door.

After dinner Varvara could not help telling Peredonov what she had heard about Pilnikov. She did not stop to reflect whether this would help her or do her harm, or how Peredonov would act—she spoke simply from malice.

Peredonov tried to recall Pilnikov to his mind, but somehow he could not clearly visualise him. Until now, he had given little attention to this new pupil, and detested him for his prettiness and cleanness, and because he conducted himself so quietly, worked well, and was the youngest of the students in the fifth form. But now Varvara's story aroused in him a mischievous curiosity. Immodest thoughts slowly stirred in his obscure mind.

"I must go to Vespers," he thought, "and take a look at this disguised girl."

Suddenly Klavdia came in rejoicing and threw on the table a piece of crumpled blue paper and exclaimed:

"There! You blamed me for taking the raisins, but what's this? As if I needed your raisins."

Peredonov guessed what was the matter; he had forgotten to throw the paper bag away in the street and now Klavdia had found it in his overcoat pocket.

"Oh! The devil!" he exclaimed.

"What is it? Where did you get it?" cried Varvara.

"I found it in Ardalyon Borisitch's pocket," said Klavdia triumphantly. "He ate them himself and I'm blamed for it. Everyone knows that Ardalyon Borisitch likes sweet things. But why should it be put on others when ..."

"Don't go so fast," said Peredonov, "you're telling lies. You put it there yourself. I didn't touch them."

"Why should I do that, God forgive you!" said Klavdia, nonplussed.

"How did you dare to touch other people's pockets!" shouted Varvara. "Are you looking for money?"

"I don't touch other people's pockets," answered Klavdia angrily, "I took the coat down to brush it. It was covered with mud."

"But why did you put your hand in the pocket?"

"It fell out of the pocket by itself," said Klavdia, defending herself.

"You're lying, Diushka," said Peredonov.

"I'm not a 'diushka'—what sneerers you are!" shouted Klavdia. "The devil take you. I'll pay for those raisins and you can choke on them—you've gorged on them yourself and now I must pay for them. Yes, I'll pay for them—you've no conscience, you've no shame, and yet you call yourself gentry!"

Klavdia went into the kitchen crying and abusing them.

Peredonov suddenly began to laugh and said:

"She's very touchy, isn't she?"

"Yes, let her pay for them," said Varvara. "If you let them, they'll eat anything, these ravenous devils."

And for a long time afterwards they tormented Klavdia with having eaten a pound of raisins. They deducted the price of the raisins from her wages and told the story to everyone who came to the house.

The cat, as if attracted by this uproar, had left the kitchen, sidling along the walls, sat down near Peredonov and looked at him with its avid, evil eyes. Peredonov bent down to catch the animal, which snarled savagely, scratched Peredonov's hand and ran and hid behind the sideboard. It peeped out from there and its narrow green eyes gleamed.

"It might be a were-wolf!" thought Peredonov in fear.

In the meantime Varvara, still thinking about Pilnikov, said:

"Why do you spend all your evenings playing billiards? You might occasionally drop in at the students' lodgings. They know that the instructors rarely come to see them and that the inspector only comes once a year, so that all sorts of indecencies, card-playing and drunkenness go on. You might, for instance, call on this disguised girl. You'd better go late, about bed-time—that would be a good time to find her out and embarrass her."

Peredonov reflected a while and then burst out laughing.

"Varvara's certainly a sly rogue!" he thought, "she can teach me a thing or two."

CHAPTER 12

Peredonov went to Vespers in the school chapel. There he placed himself behind the students and looked attentively to see how they behaved. It seemed to him that some of them were mischievous, talked, whispered and laughed. He noticed who they were and tried to memorise their names. There were a number of them and he reproached himself for not having brought a piece of paper and a pencil with him to write their names down. He felt depressed because the students behaved so badly and no one paid any attention to it, although the Head-Master and the inspector with their wives and children were present. As a matter of fact, the students were orderly and quiet—some of them crossed themselves absently, with their thoughts far away from the church, others prayed diligently. Only very rarely did one of them whisper to his neighbour—two or three words perhaps, without turning their heads, and the other always replied as briefly and quietly, sometimes with no more than a quick movement, a look, a shrug or a smile. But these insignificant movements, unnoticed by the form master, aroused an illusion of great disorder in Peredonov's dull, perturbed mind. Even in his tranquil moments Peredonov, like all coarse people, could not appraise small incidents: either he did not notice them at all or he exaggerated their importance. Now that he was agitated by expectations, his perceptions served him even worse, and little by little the whole reality became obscured before him by a thin smoke of detestable and evil illusions.

And after all, what were the students to Peredonov even earlier? Were they not merely an apparatus for the spreading of ink and paper by means of the pen, and for the retelling in ready-made language what had been said before in live human speech! In his whole educational career Peredonov never for a moment reflected that the students were the same human beings as grown-ups. Only bearded students with awakened inclinations towards women suddenly became in his eyes equal to himself.

After he had stood behind the boys for some time and gathered enough of depressing reflections, Peredonov moved forward toward the middle rows. There, on the very edge, to the right, stood Sasha Pilnikov; he was praying earnestly and often went down on his knees. Peredonov watched him, and it gave him pleasure to see Sasha on his knees like one chastised, and looking before him at the resplendent altar with a concerned and appealing expression on his face; with entreaty and sadness in his black eyes shaded by long intensely black eyelashes. Smooth-faced and graceful, his chest standing out broad and high as he rested there, calm and erect on his knees, as if under some sternly observing eye, he appeared at that moment to Peredonov altogether like a girl.

Peredonov now decided to go directly after Vespers to Pilnikov's rooms.

They began to leave the church. It was noticed that Peredonov no longer wore a hat but a cap with a badge. Routilov asked laughingly:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, how is that you're strolling about with your badge nowadays? That comes of having an inspectorship in view."

"Will the soldiers have to salute you now?" asked Valeria with pretended ingenuousness.

"What nonsense!" said Peredonov angrily.

"You don't understand, Valerotchka," said Darya. "Why do you say soldiers! But Ardalyon Borisitch will get a great deal more respect from his pupils now than before."

Liudmilla laughed. Peredonov made haste to take leave of them in order to get away from their sarcasms.

It was too early to go to Pilnikov and he had no desire to go home. Peredonov walked about the dark streets wondering how he could waste an hour. There were many houses, and lights shone from many windows, sometimes voices could be heard from the open windows. The church-goers walked in the streets, and gates and doors could be heard opening and shutting. All around lived people, strange and hostile to Peredonov, and it was possible that at this very moment some of them were devising evil against him. Perhaps someone was wondering why he walked alone at this late hour and where he was going. It seemed to Peredonov that someone was following him stealthily. He began to feel depressed. He walked on hurriedly and aimlessly.

He thought that every house here had its dead. And that all who lived in the old houses fifty years ago were now dead. Some of the dead he still remembered.

When a man dies his house should be burnt afterwards, thought Peredonov dejectedly, because it makes one feel horribly.

Olga Vassilyevna Kokovkina, with whom Sasha Pilnikov lived, was a paymaster's widow. Her husband had left her a pension and a small house, which was sufficiently large to accommodate two or three lodgers, but she gave preference to students. It so happened that the quietest boys were always placed at her house, those who studied diligently and completed their courses. At other students' lodgings there were a considerable number of boys who went from one school to another and always left their studies unfinished.

Olga Vassilyevna, a lean, tall and erect old woman with a good-natured face, to which, however, she tried to give a stern expression; and Sasha Pilnikov, a well-fed youngster, carefully trained by his aunt, sat at the supper table. That evening it was

Sasha's turn to supply the jam, which he had bought in the village, and therefore he felt as if he were the host and ceremoniously attended to Olga Vassilyevna, and his black eyes shone brightly. A ring at the door was heard—and a moment afterwards Peredonov appeared in the dining-room. Kokovkina was astonished at such a late visit.

"I've come to take a look at our pupil," he said, "and to see how he lives."

Kokovkina asked Peredonov to take some refreshment, but he refused. He wanted them to finish their supper, so that he could be alone with his pupil. They finished their supper and went into Sasha's room, but Kokovkina did not leave them and talked incessantly. Peredonov looked morosely at Sasha, who was timidly silent.

"Nothing will come of this visit," thought Peredonov with annoyance.

The maid-servant for some reason or other called out for Kokovkina. Sasha looked dejectedly after her. His eyes grew dull, they were covered by his eyelashes—and it seemed that these eyelashes, which were very long, threw a shadow on his smooth and suddenly pallid face. He felt uneasy in the presence of this morose man. Peredonov sat down beside him, put his arm awkwardly around him and without altering the immobile expression on his face asked:

"Well, Sashenka, has the little girl said her prayers yet?"

Sasha, shamefaced and frightened, looked at Peredonov and was silent.

"Well? Eh?" asked Peredonov.

"Yes," said Sasha at last.

"What red cheeks you've got," said Peredonov. "Well—a—you are a little girl? Yes? A girl, you rogue!"

"No, I'm not a girl," said Sasha, and suddenly angry at his own timidity, he asked in a shrill voice, "How am I like a girl? That's the fault of your students who try to tease me, because I don't say nasty words; I'm not used to saying them. Why should I say them?"

"Will Mamma punish you?" asked Peredonov.

"I have no mother," said Sasha. "My mother died long ago. I have only an aunt."

"Well then, will Aunt punish you?"

"Of course she'll punish me if I use nasty words. It isn't nice, is it?"

"And how will your aunt know?"

"I don't like it myself," said Sasha quietly. "And there are several ways Aunt may find out. I might give myself away."

"And which of your companions say nasty words?" asked Peredonov.

Sasha again blushed and was silent.

"Well, go on," insisted Peredonov. "You've got to tell me. You mustn't conceal things."

"No one says them," said Sasha in confusion.

"But you yourself just complained."

"I did not complain."

"Why do you deny it?" said Peredonov angrily.

Sasha felt himself caught in a detestable trap. He said:

"I only explained to you why some of my companions tease me with being a girl. But I didn't want to tell tales about them."

"So that's it. And why so?" asked Peredonov indignantly.

"It isn't nice," said Sasha with an annoyed smile.

"Well, I shall speak to the Head-Master and he'll make you tell," said Peredonov spitefully.

Sasha looked at Peredonov with anger in his eyes.

"No, please don't tell him, Ardalyon Borisitch," he entreated.

And from the agitated tones of his voice it could be perceived that he tried to entreat but that he wanted to shout fierce, insulting words.

"No, I'll tell. Then you'll see whether you can hide nasty things. You should have complained of them at once. But just wait, you'll get it."

Sasha rose and in confusion he shifted his belt. Kokovkina entered.

"Your quiet one is a good boy, I must say," said Peredonov malignantly.

Kokovkina was frightened. She quickly walked up to Sasha and sat down at his side—in her agitation she always stumbled—and asked timorously:

"What's the matter, Ardalyon Borisitch? What has he done?"

"You'd better ask him," replied Peredonov with morose spite.

"What is it, Sashenka? What have you done?" asked Kokovkina, touching Sasha's elbow.

"I don't know," said Sasha and began to cry.

"Well, what's the matter? What is it? Why are you crying?" asked Kokovkina.

She laid her hands on the boy's shoulders and pulled him towards her; she did not notice that this disturbed him further. He stood there, stooping, and kept his handkerchief to his eyes. Peredonov explained:

"He's being taught nasty words in the *gymnasia* and he won't say who it is. He oughtn't to conceal things. He not only learns nasty words himself but he shields the other boys."

"Oh, Sashenka, Sashenka. How could you do it? Aren't you ashamed?" said Kokovkina in a flustered way, as she released Sasha.

"I did nothing," replied Sasha, crying. "I did nothing that was wrong. Indeed, they tease me because I don't use bad words."

"Who says bad words?" asked Peredonov again.

"No one says them," exclaimed Sasha in despair.

"There, you see how he lies?" said Peredonov. "He ought to be well punished. He must tell the truth as to who says these nasty words, because our *gymnasia* might get a bad name and we could do nothing against it."

"You had better let him go, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Kokovkina. "How can he inform against his companions? They'd make his life unbearable if he did."

"He's obliged to tell," said Peredonov angrily. "Because it would be very useful. We will take measures to stop it."

"But they'll beat him," said Kokovkina irresolutely.

"They won't dare. If he's afraid, then let him tell in secret."

"Well, Sashenka, tell in secret. No one will know that it's you."

Sasha cried silently. Kokovkina drew him to her, embraced him, and for a long time whispered in his ear, but he shook his head negatively.

"He doesn't want to," said Kokovkina.

"Try a birch on him, then he'll talk," said Peredonov savagely. "Bring me a birch, I'll make him talk."

"Olga Vassilyevna! But why?" exclaimed Sasha. Kokovkina rose and embraced him.

"That's enough crying," she said gently but sternly, "no one shall touch you."

"As you like," said Peredonov. "But I must tell the Head-Master. I thought it might have been better to keep at home. Perhaps your Sashenka really knows more than

he'll tell. We don't know yet why he's teased with being a girl—perhaps it's for something else entirely. Perhaps it's not he who's being taught, but he who's corrupting others."

Peredonov left the room angrily. Kokovkina followed him. She said reproachfully:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, how can you worry a boy for I don't know what? It's as well that he doesn't understand what you say."

"Well, good-bye," said Peredonov angrily. "But I shall tell the Head-Master. This must be investigated."

He left. Kokovkina went to console Sasha. Sasha sat gloomily at his window and looked at the starry sky. His black eyes were now tranquil and strangely sad. Kokovkina silently stroked his head.

"It's my fault," he said. "I told him why they were teasing me and he wouldn't let it drop. He's a very coarse man. Not one of the students likes him."

The next day Peredonov and Varvara moved into their new house. Ershova stood at the gate and exchanged violently abusive words with Varvara. Peredonov hid himself behind the furniture vans.

As soon as they got in they had their new house blessed. It was necessary, according to Peredonov's calculations, to show that he was one of the faithful. During this ceremony the fumes of incense made his head dizzy and induced in him a religious mood.

One strange circumstance puzzled him. There came running from somewhere a strange indescribable creature—a small, grey and nimble *nedotikomka*.¹⁸ It nodded, and it trembled, and circled round Peredonov. When he stretched out his hand to catch it, it glided swiftly out of sight, hid itself behind the door or the sideboard, but reappeared a moment later, and trembled and mocked again—the grey, featureless, nimble creature.

At last when the blessing was over Peredonov, suspecting something, repeated a charm in a whisper. The *nedotikomka* hissed very, very quietly, shrivelled into a little ball and rolled away behind the door. Peredonov gave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, it's good that it has rolled away altogether, but it's possible that it lives in this house somewhere under the floor and will come out again to mock at me."

¹⁸ *nedotikomka*, an invention of the author. The word means "the touch-me-not-creature." It is presumably an elemental, a symbol of the evil of the world. Sologub begins one of his poems—"The grey *Nedotikomka* Wiggles and turns, round and round me...."

Peredonov felt cold and depressed.

"What's the use of all these unclean demons in the world?" he thought.

When the ceremony was over and the visitors gone Peredonov thought a longtime as to where the nedotikomka could have hidden itself. Varvara left with Grushina, and Peredonov began to search and rummage among her things.

"I wonder if Varvara carried it away in her pocket," thought Peredonov. "It doesn't need much room. It could hide in a pocket and stay there until its time comes to show itself."

One of Varvara's dresses attracted Peredonov's attention. It was made up of flounces, bows and ribbons, as if made purposely to hide something. Peredonov examined it for a long time, then by force and with the help of a knife he partly tore, partly cut away, the pocket and threw it on the stove, and then began to tear and cut the whole dress into small pieces. Strange, confused thoughts wandered through his brain and his soul felt hopelessly gloomy.

Soon Varvara returned—Peredonov was still cutting the remains of the dress into shreds. She thought he was drunk and began to abuse him. Peredonov listened for a long time and said at last:

"What are you barking at, fool! Perhaps you're carrying a devil in your pocket. I must think about it and see what's going on here."

Varvara was taken aback. Gratified by the impression he had produced, he made haste to find his cap and went out to play billiards. Varvara ran out into the passage and while Peredonov was putting on his overcoat she shouted:

"It's you, perhaps, who're carrying the devil in your pocket, but I haven't got any kind of devil. Where should I get your devil? Shall I order one for you from Holland?"

The young official, Cherepnin, the man about whom Vershina had told the story of his looking into the window, had paid attentions to her when she first became a widow. Vershina did not object to marrying a second time but Cherepnin seemed to her utterly worthless. Therefore he felt maliciously towards her.

With great delight he fell in with Volodin's suggestion of smearing Vershina's gate with tar.

He agreed, but later he felt some qualms. Suppose they should catch him? It would be awkward; after all he was an official. He decided to shift the matter on to other shoulders. He bribed two young scapegraces with a quarter of a rouble and promised them another fifteen kopecks each if they would get it done—if they would do it one dark night.

If anyone in Vershina's house had opened the window after midnight he might have heard the rustle of light feet on the wood pavement, a quiet whispering and certain soft sounds giving the impression that the fence was being swept; then a slight clinking, a fast pattering of feet, going faster and faster, distant laughing and the angry barking of dogs.

But no one opened the window. And in the morning ... the gate and the fence between the garden and the yard were covered with yellow-cinnamon coloured tar. Indecent words were written in tar on the gates. Passers-by stopped and laughed. The word soon went round and many inquisitive people came.

Vershina walked about quickly in the garden and smoked; her smile was even more wry than usual and she mumbled angrily. Marta did not leave her room and wept bitterly. The maid-servant Marya tried to wash off the tar and some words of abuse passed between her and the onlookers, who were laughing uproariously. That same day Cherepnin told Volodin what he had done. Volodin wasted no time in telling Peredonov. Both of them knew the boys, who were well-known for their daring pranks.

Peredonov on his way to billiards stopped at Vershina's. The weather was gloomy, so Vershina and Marta sat in the drawing-room.

"Your gates have been smeared with tar," said Peredonov.

Marta blushed. Vershina quickly related how they had got up in the morning and saw people laughing at the gate and how Marya had washed the fence.

"I know who did it," said Peredonov.

Vershina looked questioningly at Peredonov.

"How did you find out?" she asked.

"I found out all right."

"Tell us then who did it," said Marta crossly.

She had become altogether unattractive because she now had tear-stained eyes with red swollen eyelids. Peredonov replied:

"Of course I'll tell you—I've come for that reason. Such impertinent fellows ought to be punished. But you must promise not to say who told you."

"But why, Ardalyon Borisitch?" asked Vershina in astonishment.

Peredonov kept significantly silent. Then he said in explanation:

"They're such dare-devils that they might break my head if they found I'd given them away."

Vershina promised.

"And don't you tell either," said Peredonov to Marta.

"Very well, I won't tell," Marta agreed quickly because she wanted to know as quickly as possible who had done it.

She thought they ought to be made to suffer a cruel and ignominious punishment.

"No, you'd better swear," said Peredonov cautiously.

"Well, honest to God, I won't tell anyone," said Marta, trying to convince him. "But tell us quickly."

Vladya was listening behind the door. He was glad that he had not thought of going into the drawing-room: he would not be compelled to promise and he could tell it to anyone he liked. And he smiled with delight to think that he would be avenged on Peredonov.

"Last night, about one o'clock, I was going home along your street," began Peredonov, "and I heard someone moving by your gate. I thought at first it was thieves. 'What shall I do?' I thought, when suddenly I heard them running straight towards me. I pressed close against the wall and they didn't see me, but I recognised them. One had a brush and the other had a pail. They're well-known rascals, the sons of Avdeyev, the blacksmith. They ran, and I heard one say to the other: 'We haven't wasted the night,' he said, 'we've earned fifty-five kopecks.' I wanted to catch one of them but I was afraid they would smear my face, and besides I had a new overcoat on."

No sooner had Peredonov gone than Vershina went to the Commissioner of Police with a complaint. The Commissioner, Minchukov, sent a constable for Avdeyev and his sons.

The boys came boldly, thinking they were suspected on account of previous pranks. Avdeyev, a tall dejected old man, was, on the other hand, fully convinced that his sons were guilty of some fresh mischief. The Commissioner told Avdeyev of what his sons were accused, and Avdeyev replied:

"I can't control them. Do what you like with them. I've already hurt my hands beating them."

"It's not our doing," announced the elder boy Nil, who had curly red hair.

"No matter who does a thing we're blamed for it," said Ilya the younger, whose hair was also curly but white. "We've once done something and now we have to answer for everything."

Minchukov smiled amiably, shook his head and said:

"You'd better make a clean breast of it."

"There's nothing to confess," said Nil.

"Nothing? Who gave you fifty-five kopecks for your work, eh?"

And seeing from the boys' momentary confusion that they were guilty, Minchukov said to Vershina:

"It's obvious that they did it."

The boys renewed their denials. They were taken into a small room and whipped. Not being able to endure the pain, they confessed. But even then they were unwilling to say who had given them the money.

"We did it on our own," they said.

They were whipped again until they confessed that Cherepnin had given them the money. The boys were then turned over to their father.

"Well, we've punished them—that is their father punished them," said the Commissioner to Vershina, "and now you know who's responsible."

"I won't let that Cherepnin off easily," said Vershina. "I'll prosecute him."

"I shouldn't advise you to, Natalya Afanasyevna," said Minchukov abruptly. "You'd better let the thing drop."

"What! Let such wretches go! No, never!" exclaimed Vershina.

"After all, you have had no real proof," said the Commissioner quietly.

"What do you mean by no proof, when the boys themselves have confessed it?"

"That doesn't count, they might deny it before the judge and there'd be no one to flog them there."

"How can they deny it? There are the constables who were witnesses," said Vershina confidently.

"Where are your witnesses? When you beat a man he'll confess anything, even something that never happened. They're rascals, of course, and they got what they deserved. But you'll get nothing out of them in court."

Minchukov smiled and looked calmly at Vershina. Vershina left the Commissioner very dissatisfied, but after reflection admitted to herself that it was difficult to accuse Cherepnin, and that only publicity and scandal would come of it.

CHAPTER 13

Towards evening Peredonov appeared before the Head-Master—to talk on business.

The Head-Master, Nikolai Vlashevitch Khripatch had a certain number of rules which were sufficiently practical and not difficult to keep. He calmly fulfilled all the school laws and regulations and also kept to the rules of a generally-accepted mild Liberalism. This was why the school authorities, the parents and the students were equally satisfied with the Head-Master. He had no moments of doubt, no indecisions and no hesitations—what was the use of them?—one could always rely on the decisions of the Pedagogical Council or on the instructions of the Educational authorities. He was no less calm and correct in his personal relations. His very appearance gave the impression of good-nature and steadiness. He was short, robust, active, with keen eyes, and with a confident voice. He seemed a man who ordered his life well and who was always ready to improve. There were many books on the shelves in his study. He made notes from them. When he had accumulated a sufficient number of notes, he would put them in order and paraphrase them—that was how a text-book was compiled, published and circulated, of course not so successfully as the text-books of Ushinsky and Evtoushevsky but still they were not a failure. Sometimes he put together, chiefly from foreign books, a compilation which was very respectable and quite unnecessary to anyone and published it in a periodical equally respectable and equally unnecessary. He had a number of children and all of them, boys and girls, already gave indication of various talents: some wrote verses, some drew, some made rapid progress in music.

Peredonov said morosely:

"You're always down on me, Nikolai Vlashevitch. Perhaps someone has been slandering me to you, but I've done nothing of the kind."

"I beg your pardon," the Head-Master interrupted him, "I don't understand what slanders you have in mind. In the management of the *gymnasia* entrusted to me, I make use of my own observations, and I dare hope that my educational experience is sufficient to estimate with proper correctness what I see and what I hear, all the more in view of my close attention to my duties which I have made an unbreakable rule."

Khripatch said this quickly and decisively, and his voice sounded dry and clear, like the sharp noise given out by a zinc bar when bent. He went on:

"As far as it concerns my personal opinion of you, I still continue to think that there are sad lapses in your professional activity."

"Yes," said Peredonov morosely. "You've taken it into your head that I'm good for nothing. Yet I'm always preoccupied with the *gymnasia*."

Khripatch lifted his eyebrows in astonishment and glanced questioningly at Peredonov.

"You haven't noticed," continued Peredonov, "that there's a possibility of a scandal in our *gymnasia*. No one has noticed it—I alone have detected it."

"What scandal?" asked Khripatch with a dry smile, pacing up and down his study. "You arouse my curiosity, though, to speak candidly, I hardly believe in the possibility of a scandal in our school."

"Yes, but you don't know who you have recently admitted to the school," said Peredonov with such malevolence that Khripatch paused and looked attentively at him.

"I know all the new students perfectly well," he said dryly. "Besides, it goes without saying that the new boys in the first form have never been excluded from another school, and the only one who has just entered the fifth form came to us with such recommendations that preclude all possibility of suspicion."

"Yes, but he shouldn't have come to us but to some other kind of institution," said Peredonov morosely and as if reluctantly.

"Please explain, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Khripatch. "I hope you don't mean to say that Pilnikov ought to have been sent to a Reformatory."

"No, that creature should be sent to a pension where they don't learn ancient languages,"¹⁹ said Peredonov maliciously, and his eyes gleamed with spite.

Khripatch put his hands into the pockets of his short jacket and looked at Peredonov with unusual astonishment.

"What pension?" he asked. "Do you know what institutions are designated in that way? And if you do know, how could you venture to make such an unseemly suggestion?"

Khripatch flushed violently and his voice sounded drier and even more decisive. At another time these symptoms of the Head-Master's anger would have flustered Peredonov. But this time he was not flustered.

"Of course, you think Pilnikov's a boy," he said screwing up his eyes in derision, "but he's not a boy at all, but a girl, and what sort of a girl!"

Khripatch uttered a dry, abrupt laugh, but his laughter sounded affected, it was so loud and mechanical—he always laughed like that.

¹⁹ This expression implies a house of ill-fame.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he laughed mechanically, and when he had finished laughing he sat down in the chair and threw his head back as if he had dropped exhausted from laughing.

"You astonish me, my good Ardalyon Borisitch! Ha! Ha! Ha! Be so kind as to tell me upon what you base your supposition, if the premises which have led you to this conclusion are not secret! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Peredonov recounted everything that he had heard from Varvara, and incidentally he dilated on the poor qualities of Kokovkina. Khripatch listened and now and then gave vent to his dry, mechanical laughter.

"I'm afraid, my dear Ardalyon Borisitch, that your imagination has played pranks with you," he said, as he rose and caught Peredonov by the sleeve. "I, as well as many of my esteemed friends, have children, we're not in our swaddling clothes. Surely you don't think that we would have admitted a disguised girl as a boy?"

"That's your opinion," said Peredonov. "But if anything should happen who's going to be responsible?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Khripatch. "What consequences are you afraid of?"

"It'll demoralise the school," said Peredonov.

Khripatch frowned and said:

"You're presuming too far. All that you have told me so far doesn't give me the slightest cause for sharing in your suspicion."

That same evening Peredonov rapidly went round to all his colleagues, from the inspector down to the form-masters, and told everyone that Pilnikov was a girl in disguise. They all laughed and refused to believe him, but when he left several of them began to wonder if it were not true. The Masters' wives believed it immediately.

Next morning many came to their classes with the thought that Peredonov was possibly right. They did not speak of this openly, yet they no longer argued with Peredonov and limited themselves to indecisive and ambiguous answers; each was afraid that he would be considered stupid if he argued about the matter, should it afterwards prove to be true. Many would have liked to know what the Head-Master thought of it, but the Head-Master stopped in his own house more than usual. He came very late to the one lesson he gave that day to the sixth form, remained there hardly more than five minutes and then went to his study without speaking to anyone.

At last, before the fourth lesson, the grey-haired Divinity Master and two other instructors went to the Head-Master's study on the pretext of business and the

Divinity Master cautiously led up to the subject of Pilnikov. But the Head-Master laughed so confidently and so indifferently that all three became convinced that the whole thing was an invention. The Head-Master quickly went on to other subjects, told a new piece of town news, complained about his bad headache and said that he would probably have to call in the *gymnasia* doctor, Evgeny Ivanovitch. Then he told them in a very good-natured voice that his lesson that day had only made his headache worse, for, as it happened, Peredonov was in the next class and the students had for some reason or other laughed frequently and with extraordinary loudness. Khripatch laughed dryly and said:

"This year fate has not been kind to me—three times a week I am compelled to sit in a class-room next to Ardalyon Borisitch, And just imagine! There is constant boisterous laughter. One would think that Ardalyon Borisitch was not at all an amusing man and yet he always arouses merriment!"

And without giving them time to comment on this, Khripatch changed the subject.

It was true that recently there had been a good deal of laughter at Peredonov's classes—though they did not particularly please him. On the contrary, children's laughter annoyed Peredonov, but he could not restrain himself from saying things which were malapropos and unnecessary: now he would tell a stupid anecdote, now he would try to subdue one of the most quiet boys by sneering at him. In his classes there were also a number of boys who were glad of every opportunity to create disorder—and at every one of Peredonov's sallies they would roar with laughter.

After school Khripatch sent for the physician, picked up his hat and went into his garden which was situated between the school and the river-bank. The garden was large and shady. The little boys loved it. They were allowed to run about in it freely during recreation, but this was the reason why the assistant masters did not like it. They were afraid that something would happen to the boys. But Khripatch insisted that the boys should spend their recreation time in the garden. This was necessary in order to make his reports appear more imposing.

As he walked through the corridor he stopped outside the Gymnasium hall for a while, and then walked in with bent head. From his cheerless face and slow walk, everyone knew that he had a headache.

The fifth form was getting ready for its exercises. They stood in a row and the Athletic instructor, a lieutenant of the local reserve battalion, was about to give a command, but, on seeing the Head-Master, he went forward to meet him. Khripatch shook his hand and looking somewhat confusedly at the students asked:

"Are you satisfied with them? Do they work well? Do any of them get tired?"

The lieutenant deep in his heart detested those students, who, in his opinion, had not and could never have a military bearing. If they had been cadets he would have told them at once what he thought of them, but it was not worth while to tell the

unpleasant truth about these sluggards to the man on whom these lessons depended. And so with a smile on his thin lips he looked at the Head-Master in a friendly way and said:

"Oh, yes, they're fine boys."

The Head-Master walked past some of the boys in the line and was about to leave when he stopped short as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"And are you satisfied with the new boy? Is he doing well? Does he tire quickly?" he asked languidly and cheerlessly, putting his hand to his forehead.

The lieutenant said for the sake of variety—the boy in any case was a stranger:

"He's a little frail—he gets tired quickly."

But the Head-Master seemed not to listen to him and he left the hall.

The outdoor air rather refreshed Khripatch. He returned in half an hour and again standing in the door looked on at the exercises. The boys were using various gymnastic appliances. Two or three idle students who did not notice the Head-Master were leaning against the wall, taking advantage of the fact that the lieutenant was not looking at them. Khripatch walked up to them.

"But Pilnikov," he said, "why are you leaning against the wall?"

Sasha flushed violently, straightened himself and said nothing.

"If you get tired so quickly then perhaps the exercises are injurious to you," said Khripatch sternly.

"It's my fault, I'm not tired," said Sasha timidly.

"You must choose between two things," said Khripatch, "either not to attend the gymnastic exercises or... In any case come in and see me after the exercises."

He went away hurriedly and left Sasha standing confused and frightened.

"You're in for it," said the other boys to him. "He'll lecture you till evening."

Khripatch loved to deliver lengthy reprimands and the students dreaded his invitations above everything.

After the exercises Sasha timidly went to the Head-Master. Khripatch received him promptly. He went close to Sasha, looked intently into his eyes and asked:

"Tell me, Pilnikov, do the gymnastic exercises really tire you? You look quite a healthy youngster but 'appearances are deceptive.' Are you sure you haven't some illness? Perhaps it's injurious for you to do these exercises."

"No, Nikolai Vlashevitch, I'm quite well," answered Sasha, red with confusion.

"However," said Khripatch, "Aleksey Alekseyevitch was complaining about your languidness and that you get tired soon. And I myself noticed to-day that you had a tired look. Or perhaps I was mistaken?"

Sasha did not know how to shield his eyes from Khripatch's penetrating look. He muttered in a confused way:

"I'm very sorry—I won't do it again—I was just a little lazy—really I'm quite well. I will work hard at the exercises."

Suddenly, quite unexpectedly to himself, he burst into tears.

"You see," said Khripatch, "it's obvious that you're tired: you cry as if I had given you a severe scolding. Now, quiet yourself."

He laid his hand on Sasha's shoulder and said:

"I called you in not to lecture you but to make things clear.... Sit down, Pilnikov, I can see you're tired."

Sasha quickly dried his wet eyes with his handkerchief and said:

"I'm not a bit tired."

"Sit down, sit down," said Khripatch, not unkindly, and pushed a chair over to Sasha.

"Really I'm not tired, Nikolai Vlashevitch," Sasha assured him.

Khripatch took him by the shoulders and made him sit down, sat down himself opposite the boy and said:

"Let's talk the matter over quietly, Pilnikov. You yourself cannot tell the actual condition of your health. You're very good and conscientious in all respects. That is why I can understand your wanting to be relieved from the gymnastic exercises. By the way, I've asked Evgeny Ivanovitch to come here to-day as I don't feel quite myself; he might incidentally look at you. I hope you have nothing against that?"

Khripatch looked at his watch and without waiting for an answer began to talk with Sasha as to how he had spent the summer.

Evgeny Ivanovitch Sourovtshev, the school physician, a little dark alert man, soon appeared; he delighted in conversations on politics and news generally. His knowledge was not great but he attended his patients conscientiously, and as he preferred diet and hygiene to medicines he was generally successful in his cases.

Sasha was asked to undress. Sourovtshev examined him attentively but found nothing wrong with him. As for Khripatch he was now convinced that Sasha was not a girl. Though he was convinced of this even before, still he considered it proper that

in the event of any possible inquiries from the district, the school physician could certify to the facts without further investigation.

As Khripatch let Sasha go he said to him kindly:

"Now, we know that you're well, and I will tell Aleksey Alekseyevitch that he's not to let you off!"

Peredonov had no doubt that the discovery of a girl among the students would turn the attention of the authorities to himself, and that, aside from promotion, he would be given a decoration. This encouraged him to look vigilantly after the conduct of the students. As the weather for some days now had been bleak and cold, there were few people in the billiard-room, so there was nothing for him to do but to walk about town and visit students' lodgings, and even those students who lived with their parents.

Peredonov chose the parents who were simple folk; he would come, he would complain about the boy, the boy would be whipped—and Peredonov would be satisfied. In this way he first of all complained to Yosif Kramarenko's father, who kept a brewery in the town—he told him that Yosif misbehaved in church. The father believed him and punished his son. The same fate befell several others. Peredonov did not go to those who, he thought, would defend their sons—they might complain to the authorities.

Every day he visited at least one student's lodgings. He conducted himself then like an official, he reprimanded, gave orders and threatened. Still the students felt themselves more independent in their own lodgings than at school, and at times they were rebellious. Aside from this there was Flavitskaya, a tall, loud-voiced, energetic woman, who, acting on Peredonov's suggestion, beat severely her young lodger, Vladimir Boultakov.

On the following day Peredonov would relate his exploits to his class.

He did not name his victims but they usually gave themselves away by their embarrassment.

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CHAPTER 14

Rumours that Pilnikov was a disguised girl soon spread about the town. Among the first to hear of it were the Routilovs. The inquisitive Liudmilla always tried to see everything new with her own eyes. She had a burning curiosity about Pilnikov. Of course, she would have to see the masquerading trickster. She knew Kokovkina, and so one evening Liudmilla announced to her sisters:

"I'm going to take a look at this girl."

"Busybody!" said Darya indignantly.

"She's got on her best clothes," said Valeria with a restrained smile.

They were annoyed because they had not thought of it first and it would be awkward for the three of them to go. Liudmilla was dressed more elaborately than usual—she herself could not tell why. Apart from other considerations, she liked to dress up. She dressed more lightly than her sisters: her arms and her shoulders were a little more bared, her dress a little shorter, her shoes a little lighter, her stockings a little thinner, more transparent and of a flesh colour. At home she liked to go about in a petticoat, without stockings, but with shoes on her bared feet—moreover her petticoat and her chemise were very charmingly embroidered.

The weather was cold, windy, and the fallen leaves floated on the speckled pools. Liudmilla walked quickly, and under her thin cloak she almost did not feel the cold.

Kokovkina and Sasha were drinking tea. Liudmilla looked at them with searching eyes—they were sitting quietly, drinking tea, eating rolls and chatting. Liudmilla kissed Kokovkina and said:

"I've come on business, dear Olga Vassilyevna, but that can wait—first warm me up with a little tea. But who is this young man here?"

Sasha flushed and bowed uneasily. Kokovkina introduced them. Liudmilla sat down at the table and began to gossip in an animated way. The townspeople liked to see her because she could recount things prettily. Kokovkina, who was a stay-at-home, was openly glad to see her, and welcomed her heartily. Liudmilla chattered on merrily, laughed, and jumped up now and then to mimic someone and incidentally to tease Sasha. She said to Kokovkina:

"You must feel lonely, my dear, from sitting always at home with this grumpy little schoolboy. You might look in on us now and then."

"But how can I?" answered Kokovkina. "I'm too old to go visiting."

"Don't call it visiting," said Liudmilla. "Just come in when you like and make yourself at home. This infant needs no swaddling."

Sasha assumed an injured expression and blushed.

"What a stick-in-the-corner he is," said Liudmilla to annoy him, and nudged Sasha. "You ought to talk to your visitors."

"He's still only a youngster," said Kokovkina. "He's very modest."

"I'm modest too," said Liudmilla with a smile.

Sasha laughed and said ingenuously:

"Really, are you modest?"

Liudmilla burst out laughing. Her laughter, as always, was delightfully gay. As she laughed, she flushed very much and her eyes became mischievous and guilty, and their glance attempted to dodge those of her companions. Sasha was flustered and tried eagerly to explain.

"I didn't mean that—I wanted to say that you were very gay and not modest—and not that you were immodest."

Then feeling what he had said was not as clear as it might be, he grew more confused and blushed.

"What impertinence!" exclaimed Liudmilla laughing and flushing. "What a jewel he is!"

"You've embarrassed my Sashenka," said Kokovkina, looking affectionately at both Liudmilla and Sasha.

Liudmilla, leaning forward with a cat-like movement, stroked Sasha's head. He gave a loud, embarrassed laugh, turned from under her hands and ran into his room.

"My dear, find me a husband," said Liudmilla without any ado.

"Well, you've found a nice matchmaker, I must say!" said Kokovkina with a smile, but it was evident from the expression of her face that she would have undertaken to make a marriage with great enjoyment.

"How are you not a matchmaker and why shouldn't I make a bride?" said Liudmilla. "Surely you wouldn't be ashamed to make a marriage for me."

Liudmilla put her arms on her hips and danced a few steps in front of her hostess.

"Well," said Kokovkina, "what a wood flower you are!"

"You might do it in your spare time," said Liudmilla with a laugh.

"What sort of husband would you like?" asked Kokovkina with amusement.

"Let him be—let him be dark—my dear, he must certainly be dark, very dark, dark as a—well, you have a model here—your student—his eyebrows must be black and his eyes languishing, and his eyelashes must be long—long, blue-black eyelashes—your schoolboy's certainly handsome—really handsome—I'd like one of his sort."

Soon Liudmilla made ready to leave. It had grown quite dark. Sasha went out to escort her.

"Only as far as the cabby," said Liudmilla in a gentle voice, and looked at Sasha with her caressing eyes, blushing guiltily.

Once on the street Liudmilla became gay once more and began to cross-examine Sasha.

"Well, are you always at your lessons? Do you read much?"

"Yes, I love reading," replied Sasha.

"Andersen's fairy-tales?"

"No, not fairy-tales, but all sorts of books. I like history and poems too."

"Do you like poetry? And who's your favourite poet?" asked Liudmilla gravely.

"Nadson, of course,"²⁰ replied Sasha, with the deep conviction of the impossibility of any other answer.

"So, so!" said Liudmilla encouragingly. "I like Nadson too, but only in the morning. In the evening, my dear, I like to dress up. And what do you like to do?"

Sasha looked at her with his soft, dark eyes—they suddenly became moist—and he said quietly:

"I like to caress."

"Well, you are a nice boy," said Liudmilla, putting her arm on his shoulder. "So you like to caress? But do you like to splash²¹ in your bath?"

Sasha smiled. Liudmilla went on:

"In warm water?"

"Yes, in warm and in cold," said the boy shamefacedly.

"And what sort of soap do you like?"

²⁰ Simon Yakovlevitch Nadson (1862-86), a poet of considerable merit, who was popular in spite of his monotony and melancholy.

²¹ This word in Russian is "poloskatsya" and is a pun on "laskatsya," which is to caress.

"Glycerine."

"And do you like grapes?"

Sasha began to laugh.

"You're a queer girl! It's a different thing and you ask as if it were the same. You can't take me in."

"As if I wanted to!" said Liudmilla laughing.

"I know what you are—you're a giggler."

"Where did you get that?"

"Everyone says so," said Sasha.

"You're a little gossip," said Liudmilla with assumed severity.

Sasha blushed again.

"Well, here's a cabby. Cabby!" shouted Liudmilla.

"Cabby!" shouted Sasha also.

The cabman came up in his shaky drozhky.

Liudmilla told him where to go. He thought a while and demanded forty kopecks. Liudmilla said:

"Do you think it's far? That shows that you don't know the road."

"Well, how much will you give?" asked the cabman.

"You can take which half you like."

Sasha laughed.

"You're a cheerful young lady," said the cabby with a grin. "You might add another five-kopeck piece."

"Thank you for escorting me, my dear," said Liudmilla, as she pressed Sasha's hand tightly and seated herself in the drozhky.

Sasha ran back to the house thinking cheerfully about the cheerful maiden.

Liudmilla returned home in a cheerful mood, smiling and thinking of something pleasant. The sisters awaited her. They sat at a round table in the dining-room, lit up by a hanging lamp. The brown bottle of cherry-brandy on the white tablecloth looked

very cheerful; the silver paper round the bottle's neck glittered brightly. It was surrounded by plates containing apples, nuts, and sweets made of honey and nuts.

Darya was slightly tipsy. Her face was red and her clothes were a little dishevelled; she was singing loudly. Liudmilla as she came heard the last couplet but one of the well-known song:

"Her dress is gone, her reed is gone.
Naked, he leads her naked along the dune.
Fear drives out shame, shame drives out fear,
The shepherdess is all in tears:
'Forget what you have seen.'"

Larissa was also present. She was sprucely dressed. She was tranquilly cheerful and eating an apple, cutting off the slices with a small knife and was laughing.

"Well," she asked, "what did you see?"

Darya stopped singing and looked at Liudmilla. Valeria leaned her head on her hand with the little finger against her temple and smiled responsively at Larissa. She was slender, fragile, and her smile was unrepentant. Liudmilla poured herself a cherry-red liqueur and said:

"It's all nonsense! He's a real boy and quite sympathetic. He's very dark and his eyes sparkle, but he's quite young and innocent."

Then she burst into a loud laugh. The sisters when they looked at her began to laugh also.

"Well, what's one to say? It's all Peredonovian nonsense," said Darya, and waved her hand contemptuously; she grew thoughtful for a moment, leaning her head on her hands, with her elbows on the table. "I might as well go on singing," she said, and began to sing with piercing loudness.

There was an intensely grim animation in her squeals. If a dead man should be released from the grave on condition of his singing perpetually, he would sing in this way. But the sisters had already become used to Darya's tipsy bawling, and at times even joined in with her in purposely ranting voices.

"Well, she's let herself loose," said Liudmilla laughing. It was not that she objected to the noise, but she wanted her sisters to listen to her. Darya shouted angrily, interrupting her song in the middle of a word:

"What's the matter with you? I'm not interfering with you!"

And immediately she took up the song at the very place she had left off. Larissa said amiably:

"Let her sing."

"It's raining hard on me,
There's no roof for a girl like me—"

bawled Darya, imitating the sounds and drawing out the syllables as the simple folk-singers do to make a song more pathetic. For example, it sounded like this:

"O-o-oh; it's a-rai-ai-ning ha-a-a-rd on me-e-e!"

Particularly unpleasant were the sounds stretched out where the accents did not fall. It produced a superlative impression: it would have brought a mortal depression on a new listener. A sadness resounding through our native fields and villages, a sadness consuming with a hideous flame the living word, debasing a once living song with senseless howling....

Suddenly Darya sprang up, put her hand on her hips and began to shout out a gay song,²² dancing and snapping her fingers:

"Go away, young fellow, go away—
I am a robber's daughter
A fig for your good looks—
I'll stick a knife in your belly.
I'll not have a muzhik.
I'm going to love a bossiak."²³

Darya danced and sang, and her eyes seemed as motionless as the dead moon in its orbit. Liudmilla laughed loudly—and her heart now felt faint, now felt oppressed, from gay joyousness or from the cherry-sweet cherry brandy. Valeria laughed quietly with glass-sounding laughter, and looked enviously at her sisters; she wished she were as cheerful as they, but somehow she felt anything but cheerful—she thought that she was the last, the youngest, "the left-over"; hence her frailty and her unhappiness. And though she was laughing she was almost on the point of bursting into tears.

Larissa looked at her, and winked—and Valeria suddenly grew more cheerful. Larissa rose, and moved her shoulders—presently, in a single instant, all four sisters were whirling round madly, as in a mystic dance, and, following Darya's lead, were shouting new *chastushki*, one more gay and absurd than the other. The sisters were young, handsome, and their voices sounded loud and wild—the witches on the Bald hill might have envied this mad whirl.

²² The original word is "chastushka," which is a town song put to the tune of an old folk-song. This is a recent development of town life in Russia.

²³ "Bossiak" is literally "bare-foot," a vagabond. The "bossiak" has become quite a marked type in Russia since Gorky took to writing of him. The bossiak is often referred to in a satiric way in modern Russian literature.

All night Liudmilla dreamt such sultry African dreams!

Now she dreamt that she was lying in a smotheringly hot room, and her bedcover slipping from her left her hot body naked—and then a scaly, ringed serpent crept into the room, and climbing up a tree coiled itself round the branches of its naked, handsome limbs....

Then she dreamt of a hot summer evening by a lake under threatening, cumbrously-moving clouds—she was lying on its bank, naked, with a smooth golden crown across her forehead. There was a smell of tepid stagnant water and of grass withered by the heat—and upon the dark, ominous, calm water floated a white, powerful swan of regal stateliness. He beat the water noisily with his wings, and, hissing loudly, approached her and embraced her—and it felt delicious, and languorous and sad....

And both the serpent and the swan, in bending over her, showed Sasha's face, almost blue-pale, with dark, enigmatically sad eyes—their blue-black eyelids, jealously covering their witching glance, descended heavily and apprehensively.

Then Liudmilla dreamt of a magnificent chamber with low, heavy arches—it was crowded with strong, naked, beautiful boys—the handsomest of all was Sasha. She was sitting high, and the naked boys in turn beat one another. And when Sasha was laid on the floor, his face towards Liudmilla, and beaten, he loudly laughed and wept—she was also laughing, as one laughs only in dreams, when the heart begins to beat intensely, and when one laughs long, unrestrainedly, the laughter of oblivion and of death....

In the morning after all these dreams Liudmilla felt that she was passionately in love with Sasha. An impatient desire to see him seized hold of her—but the thought that she would see him dressed made her sad. How stupid that small boys don't go about naked! Or at least barefoot, like the streets gamins in summer upon whom Liudmilla loved to gaze because they walked about barefoot, and sometimes showed their bared legs quite high.

"As if it were so shameful to have a body," thought Liudmilla, "that even small boys hide it!"

CHAPTER 15

Volodin went punctually to the Adamenkos to give his lessons. His hopes that the young woman would invite him to take coffee were not realised. Each time he came he was taken straight to the little shanty used for carpentry. Misha usually stood in his linen apron at the joiner's bench, having got ready what was necessary for the lesson. He did obediently but unwillingly all that Volodin told him to do. In order to work less, Misha tried to drag Volodin into conversation, but Volodin wished to work conscientiously and refused to comply.

"Mishenka," he would say, "you had better do your work for a couple of hours and then, if you like, we can have a talk. Then as much as you like, but now not a bit—business before everything."

Misha sighed lightly and went on with his work, but at the end of the lesson he had no desire to talk: he said he had no time and that he had much home work to do.

Sometimes Nadezhda came to the lesson to see how Misha was getting along. Misha noticed—and made use of the fact—that in her presence Volodin could much more easily be lured into conversation. When Nadezhda saw that Misha was not working she immediately said to him:

"Misha, don't be lazy!"

And when she left she said to Volodin:

"I'm sorry that I've interrupted. If you give him a little leeway he gets very lazy."

At the beginning Volodin was mortified by Nadezhda's behaviour; then he thought that she hesitated to ask him to take coffee in case there should be gossip. Then he thought that she need not have come to look on at the lessons at all and yet she came—was it because she liked to see him? So Volodin reasoned to his advantage from the fact that Nadezhda from the very first had eagerly agreed that he should give lessons and had not stopped to bargain. He was encouraged in these suppositions by Peredonov and Varvara.

"It is clear that she's in love with you," said Peredonov.

"And what better fiancé could she have?" added Varvara.

Volodin tried to look modest and felt pleased with his prospects.

Once Peredonov said to him:

"You're a fiancé and yet you wear that shabby tie!"

"I'm not her fiancé yet, Ardasha," said Volodin soberly, nevertheless trembling with pleasure. "But I can easily get a new tie."

"Buy yourself one with a pattern in it," advised Peredonov. "So that it will be clear that love is burning within you."

"Better get a red one," said Varvara, "and the fancier the better. And a tie-pin. You can buy a tie-pin cheaply and with a stone too—it will be quite *chic*."

Peredonov thought that possibly Volodin had not enough money. Or he might think of economising and buy a simple black one. And that would be fatal, thought Peredonov: Adamenko is a fashionable girl and if he should come to propose to her in any kind of a tie she might be offended and reject him. Peredonov said:

"Only don't buy a cheap one. Pavloushka, you've won from me enough money to pay for a tie. How much do I owe you? I think it's one rouble forty kopecks, isn't it?"

"You're quite right about the forty kopecks," said Volodin with a wry smile, "only it's not one rouble but two."

Peredonov knew himself that it was two roubles, but it was more pleasant to pay only one. He said:

"You're a liar! What two roubles?"

"Varvara Dmitrievna's my witness," said Volodin.

"You'd better pay, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Varvara, "since you lost—and I remember that it was two forty."

Peredonov thought that as Varvara was interceding for Volodin, that meant that she was going over to his side. He frowned, produced the money from his purse and said:

"All right, let it be two forty—it won't ruin me. You're a poor man, Pavloushka. Well, here it is."

Volodin took the money, counted it, then assumed an offended expression and bent down his thick forehead, stuck out his lower lip and said in a bleating, cracked voice:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, you happen to be in debt to me and therefore you've got to pay, and that I happen to be poor has nothing to do with the matter. I haven't yet come down to begging my bread off anyone, and as you know the only poor devil is the one that hasn't any bread to eat, and as I eat bread, and butter with it, that means I'm not poor."

And he became mollified and at the same time blushed with joy to think that he had answered so cleverly, and twisted his lips into a smile.

At last Peredonov and Volodin decided to go and fix up the match. They arranged themselves very elaborately and they had a solemn and more than usually stupid look. Peredonov put on a white stock. Volodin a vivid red tie with green stripes. Peredonov argued thus:

"As I am to do the match-making, mine is a sober role. I must live up to it. So I must wear a white tie, and you, the lover, should show your flaming feelings."

With intense solemnity Peredonov and Volodin seated themselves in the Adamenkos' drawing-room. Peredonov sat on a sofa and Volodin in an arm-chair. Nadezhda looked at her visitors in astonishment. The visitors talked about the weather and various bits of news, with the look of people who had come upon a delicate affair and did not know how to approach it. At last Peredonov coughed, frowned and began:

"Nadezhda Vassilyevna, we've come on business."

"On business," said Volodin, making a significant face; and he protruded his lips.

"It's about him," said Peredonov, and pointed at Volodin with his forefinger.

"It's about me," echoed Volodin, and pointed his own forefinger at his breast.

Nadezhda smiled.

"Please go on," she said.

"I'm going to speak for him," said Peredonov. "He's bashful, he can't make up his mind to do it himself. He's a worthy, non-drinking, good man. He does not earn much, but that's nothing. Everyone needs a different thing—one needs money, another needs a man. Well, why don't you say something?" He turned to Volodin, "Say something!"

Volodin lowered his head and spoke in a trembling voice, like a bleating ram:

"It's true I don't earn high wages. But I shall always have my crumb of bread. It's true that I didn't go to a university, but I live as may God grant everyone to do. But I don't know anything against myself—and besides, let everyone judge for himself. But I, well, I'm satisfied with myself."

He spread out his arms, lowered his forehead as if he were about to butt and grew silent.

"And so, as you see," said Peredonov, "he's a young man. And he shouldn't live like this. He ought to marry. In any case the married man is always better off."

"And if his wife suits him, what can be better?" added Volodin.

"And you," continued Peredonov, "are a girl. You also ought to marry."

From behind the door there came a slight rustle, abrupt smothered sounds, as though someone were breathing or laughing with a closed mouth. Nadezhda looked sternly in the direction of the door and said coldly:

"You are too concerned about me," with an annoying emphasis on the word "too."

"You don't want a rich husband," said Peredonov, "you're rich yourself. You need someone to love you and gratify you in everything. And you know him, you could understand him. He's not indifferent to you and perhaps you're not indifferent to him either. So you see I have the merchant and you have the goods. That is, you are the goods yourself."

Nadezhda blushed and bit her lip to keep from laughing. The same sounds continued behind the door. Volodin bashfully lowered his eyes. It seemed to him that his affair was going well.

"What goods?" asked Nadezhda cautiously. "Pardon me, I don't understand."

"What do you mean, 'you don't understand'?" asked Peredonov incredulously. "Well, I'll tell you straight. Pavel Vassilyevitch has come to ask for your hand and heart. I ask on his behalf."

Behind the door something fell to the floor and rolled and snorted and panted. Nadezhda, growing red with suppressed laughter, looked at her visitors. Volodin's proposal seemed to her a ridiculous impertinence.

"Yes," said Volodin, "Nadezhda Vassilyevna, I've come to ask for your hand and heart."

He grew red and rose from his chair—his foot awkwardly rumpled the carpet—bowed and quickly sat down again. Then he got up again, put his hand on his heart and said as he looked tenderly at the girl:

"Nadezhda Vassilyevna, permit me to say a few words! As I have loved you for some time you surely will not say 'no' to me?"

He threw himself forward and let himself down on one knee before Nadezhda and kissed her hand.

"Nadezhda Vassilyevna, believe me! I swear to you!" he exclaimed, and lifted his hand high in the air and with a wild swing hit himself full on the chest so that the sound re-echoed through the room.

"What's the matter with you! Please get up," said Nadezhda in embarrassment. "Why are you doing this?"

Volodin rose and with an injured expression on his face returned to his seat. There he pressed both his hands on his chest and again exclaimed:

"Nadezhda Vassilyevna, do believe me! Until death, from all my soul."

"I'm sorry," said Nadezhda, "but I really can't. I must bring up my brother—even now he's crying behind the door."

"Bring up your brother," said Volodin, protruding an offended lip. "I fail to see why that should prevent it."

"No, in any case it concerns him," said Nadezhda, rising hurriedly. "He must be asked. Just wait."

She quickly ran from the drawing-room, rustling with her bright yellow dress, caught Misha by the shoulder behind the door and ran with him to his room; as she stood there by the door panting with running and suppressed laughter, she said in a breathless voice:

"It's quite useless to ask you not to listen behind doors. Must I really be very stern with you?"

Misha, catching her by the waist, with his head against her, laughed and shook with his efforts to suppress his laughter. She pushed Misha into his room, sat down on a chair near the door and began to laugh.

"Did you hear what he's thinking of, your Pavel Vassilyevitch?" she said. "Come with me into the drawing-room and don't you dare to laugh. I will ask you in their presence and don't you dare say 'yes.' Do you understand?"

"Oo-hoo," blurted out Misha, and stuck a corner of his handkerchief in his mouth to stop his laughing, but with little success.

"Cover your face with your handkerchief when you want to laugh," his sister advised him, and led him by his shoulder into the drawing-room.

There she placed him in an arm-chair and sat down on a chair at his side. Volodin looked offended and lowered his head like a little ram.

"You see," she said, pointing at her brother, "I've barely dried his tears, poor boy! I have to be a mother to him, and he has a sudden idea that I'm going to leave him."

Misha covered his face with his handkerchief. His whole body shook. In order to hide his laughter he uttered a protracted moan:

"Oo-oo-oo."

Nadezhda embraced him, pinched his hand secretly and said:

"Well, stop crying, my dear, stop crying."

Misha for a moment unexpectedly felt touched and tears came into his eyes. He lowered his handkerchief and looked angrily at his sister.

"The youngster might suddenly get into a fit," thought Peredonov, "and begin to bite; human spit, they say, is poisonous."

He moved closer to Volodin, so that in case of danger he could hide behind him. Nadezhda said to her brother:

"Pavel Vassilyevitch asks for my hand."

"Hand and heart," corrected Peredonov.

"And heart," added Volodin modestly but with dignity.

Misha covered his face with his handkerchief and choking with suppressed laughter said:

"No, don't marry him. What would become of me?"

Volodin, hurt but agitated, said in a trembling voice:

"I'm surprised, Nadezhda Vassilyevna, that you are asking your brother, who is besides quite a child. Even if he were a grown-up young man you might speak for yourself. But at your asking him now, Nadezhda Vassilyevna, I am not only surprised but shocked."

"To ask little boys seems ridiculous to me," said Peredonov gravely.

"Whom have I to ask? It's all the same to my aunt, and as I'm responsible for his upbringing how can I marry you. Perhaps you would treat him harshly. Isn't it so, Mishka, that you're afraid of his harshness?"

"No, Nadya," said Misha, looking out with one eye from behind his handkerchief. "I'm not afraid of his harshness. Why should I? But I am afraid that Pavel Vassilyevitch would spoil me and not allow you to put me in the corner."

"Believe me, Nadezhda Vassilyevna," said Volodin, pressing his hands to his heart, "I won't spoil Mishenka. I always think: 'Why should a boy be spoiled?' He's well fed, well dressed, well shod, as for spoiling—no! I too can put him into the corner and not spoil him at all. I can do even more. As you're a girl, that is, a young lady, it's a little inconvenient to you, but I could easily birch him."

"He's not only going to put me into a corner," said Misha whimpering, having again covered his face with his handkerchief, "but he'll even birch me! No, that doesn't suit me. No, Nadya, don't you dare to marry him."

"Well, do you hear? I decidedly can't," said Nadezhda.

"It seems very strange to me, Nadezhda Vassilyevna, that you're acting in this way," said Volodin. "I come to you with all my affections and one might even say with fiery feelings, and you give your brother as an excuse. If you now give your brother as an excuse, another might give her sister, a third her nephew, or perhaps some other relative, and so no one would marry—so that the whole human race would come to an end."

"Don't worry about that, Pavel Vassilyevitch," said Nadezhda, "the world is not threatened yet by such a possibility. I don't want to marry without Misha's consent, and he, as you have heard, is not willing. Besides, as it's clear that you have promised to beat him straight away, you might also beat me."

"Please, Nadezhda Vassilyevna, surely you don't think that I would permit myself such a disgraceful action," exclaimed Volodin desperately.

Nadezhda smiled.

"And I myself have no desire to marry," she said.

"Perhaps you think of entering a nunnery?" asked Volodin in an offended voice.

"More likely you'll join the Tolstoyan sect," corrected Peredonov, "and manure the fields."

"Why should I go anywhere?" asked Nadezhda coldly, as she rose from her seat.

"I'm perfectly well off here."

Volodin rose also, protruded his lips in a hurt way and said:

"Since Mishenka feels this way towards me and you are on his side, then I suppose I'd better stop the lessons, for how can I go to the lessons if Mishenka behaves towards me in this way?"

"Why not?" asked Nadezhda. "That's quite another affair."

Peredonov thought he ought to make yet another effort to prevail upon the young woman: perhaps she would consent.

He said to her gloomily:

"You'd better think it over well, Nadezhda Vassilyevna—why should you do it post-haste? He's a good man. He's my friend."

"No," said Nadezhda. "What is there to think about? I thank Pavel Vassilyevitch very much for the honour, but I really can't."

Peredonov looked angrily at Volodin and rose. He thought that Volodin was a fool, he couldn't make the young woman fall in love with him.

Volodin stood beside his chair with lowered head. He asked reproachfully:

"So that means it's all over, Nadezhda Vassilyevna? Ah! If so," said he waving his hand, "then may God be good to you, Nadezhda Vassilyevna. It means that is my miserable fate. Ah! A youth loved a maiden and she did not love him. God sees all! Ah, well, I'll grieve and that's all."

"You're rejecting a good man and you don't know what sort you may get," persisted Peredonov.

"Ah!" exclaimed Volodin once more and turned to the door.

But suddenly he decided to be magnanimous and returned to shake hands with the young woman and even with the juvenile offender Misha.

In the street Peredonov grumbled angrily. All the way Volodin complained bleatingly in an offended voice.

"Why did you give up your lessons?" growled Peredonov. "You must be a rich man!"

"Ardalyon Borisitch, I only said that if this is so I ought to give them up, and she said to me that I needn't give them up, and as I replied nothing then it follows that she begged me to continue. And now it all depends upon me—if I like, I'll refuse; if I like, I'll continue them."

"Why should you refuse?" said Peredonov. "Keep on going as if nothing had happened."

"Let him at least get something out of this—he'll have less cause for envy," thought Peredonov.

Peredonov felt terribly depressed. Volodin was not yet settled. "If I don't keep a look-out on him he may begin plotting with Varvara. Besides, it's possible that Adamenko will have a grudge against me for trying to marry her to Volodin. She has relatives in Peterburg; she might write to them and hurt my chances."

The weather was unpleasant. The sky was cloudy; the crows flew about cawing. They cawed above Peredonov's head, as if they taunted him and foreboded new and worse disappointments. Peredonov wrapped his scarf round his neck and thought that in such weather it was easy to catch cold.

"What sort of flowers are those, Pavloushka?" he asked as he pointed out to Volodin some small yellow flowers by a garden fence.

"That's *liutiki*,²⁴ Ardasha," said Volodin sadly. Peredonov recalled that many such flowers grew in his own garden, and what a terrible name they had! Perhaps they

²⁴ *Liutiki*, a sort of buttercup. The word "liuti" means "cruel, ferocious, violent," which gives the point of Peredonov's reflection.

were poisonous. One day Varvara would take a handful of them and boil them instead of tea, and would poison him—then when the inspector's certificate arrived, she would poison him and make Volodin take his place. Perhaps they had already agreed upon it. It was not for nothing that he knew the name of this flower. In the meantime Volodin was saying:

"Let God be her judge! Why did she humiliate me? She's waiting for an aristocrat and it doesn't occur to her that there are all sorts of aristocrats—she might be miserable with one of them; but a simple, good man might make her happy. And now I'll go to church and put a candle for her health and pray: May God give her a drunken husband, who will beat her, who will squander her money and leave her penniless in the world. Then she will remember me, but it will be too late. She will dry her tears with her hand and say, 'What a fool I was to reject Pavel Vassilyevitch. There's no one to direct me now. He was a good man!'"

Touched by his own words, a few tears came into Volodin's eyes and he wiped them from his sheepish, bulging eyes with his hands.

"You'd better break some of her windows one night," advised Peredonov.

"Well, God be with her," said Volodin sadly. "I might be caught. No, and what a miserable little boy that is! O Lord, what have I done to him that he should think of harming me? Haven't I tried hard for him, and look what mischief he's done me! What do you think of such an infant; what will become of him? Tell me."

"Yes," said Peredonov savagely, "you couldn't even manage the little boy. Oh, you lover!"

"Well, what of that?" said Volodin. "Of course I'm a lover. I'll find another. She needn't think that I'll grieve for her."

"Oh, you lover," Peredonov continued to taunt him. "And he put a new tie on! How can a chap like you expect to be a gentleman? Lover!"

"Well, I'm the lover and you're the match-maker, Ardasha," argued Volodin. "You yourself aroused hopes in me and couldn't fulfil them. Oh, you matchmaker!"

And they began zealously to taunt one another and to argue as if they were discussing some important business matter.

Nadezhda escorted her visitors to the door and returned to the drawing-room. Misha was lying on the sofa laughing. His sister pulled him off the sofa by his shoulders and said:

"But you have forgotten that you oughtn't to listen behind doors."

She lifted her hands and made as if to cross her little fingers at an angle, a sign for him to go into the corner, but suddenly burst out laughing, and the little fingers did not come together. Misha threw himself towards her. They embraced and laughed for a long time.

"All the same," she said, "you ought to go in the corner for listening."

"You ought to let me off," said Misha. "I saved you from that bridegroom, so you ought to be grateful."

"Who saved whom? You heard how they were talking of giving you a birching. Now go into the corner."

"Well, I'd better kneel here," said Misha.

He lowered himself on to his knees at his sister's feet and laid his head in her lap. She caressed him and tickled him. Misha laughed, scrabbling with his knees on the floor. Suddenly his sister pushed him from her and sat down on the sofa. Misha remained alone. He stayed awhile on his knees, and looked questioningly at his sister. She seated herself more comfortably and picked up a book as if to read, but watched her brother over it.

"Well, I'm tired now," he said plaintively.

"I'm not keeping you there, you put yourself there," answered Nadezhda, smiling over her book.

"Well, I've been punished, let me go, please," entreated Misha.

"Did I put you on your knees?" said Nadezhda in a voice of assumed indifference.

"Why do you bother me?"

"I'll not get up until you've forgiven me."

Nadezhda burst out laughing, put the book aside, and taking hold of Misha's shoulders, pulled him to her. He gave a squeal and threw himself into her arms exclaiming:

"Pavloushka's bride!"

CHAPTER 16

The dark-eyed boy occupied all Liudmilla's thoughts. She often talked about him with her own family and with acquaintances, sometimes unseasonably. Almost every night she saw him in a dream, sometimes quiet and ordinary but often in a wild and fantastic guise. Her accounts of these dreams became so habitual with her that her sisters began to ask her every morning how she had dreamed of Sasha. She spent all her leisure thinking about him.

On Sunday Liudmilla prevailed on her sisters to ask Kokovkina in after Mass and to keep her a while. She wanted to find Sasha alone. She herself did not go to church. She instructed her sisters: "Tell her that I overslept myself."

Her sisters laughed at her plot but agreed to help her. They lived very amicably together. Besides this suited them admirably—Liudmilla would occupy herself with a boy and that would leave them the more eligible young men. And they did as they promised—they invited Kokovkina to come in after Mass.

In the meantime Liudmilla got ready to go. She dressed herself very gaily and handsomely and scented herself with soft syringa perfume, and she put a new bottle of scent and a small sprinkler into her white bead-trimmed hand-bag, and stood just behind the blind in the drawing-room so that she could see whether Kokovkina was coming. She had thought of taking the scent before this—to scent the schoolboy so that he would not smell of his detestable Latin, ink and boyishness. Liudmilla loved perfumes, ordered them from Peterburg and consumed a great deal of them. She loved aromatic flowers. Her room was always full of some sweet scent—with flowers, with perfumes, with pines, and in the spring with birch-twigs.

But here were the sisters, and Kokovkina with them. Liudmilla ran through the kitchen, across the vegetable garden, by the little gate, along a lane in order not to meet Kokovkina. She smiled happily, walked quickly towards Kokovkina's house and playfully swung her hand-bag and white parasol. The warm autumn day gladdened her and it seemed as if she were bringing with her and spreading around her her own spirit of gaiety.

At Kokovkina's the maid told her that her mistress was not at home. Liudmilla laughed noisily and joked with the red-cheeked girl who opened the door.

"But perhaps you're fooling me," she said; "perhaps your mistress is hiding from me."

"He-he! Why should she hide?" replied the maid with a laugh. "But you can come in if you don't believe me."

Liudmilla looked into the drawing-room and shouted playfully:

"Is there a live person in the place? Ah, a student!"

Sasha looked out from his room and was delighted to see Liudmilla, and seeing his joyous eyes Liudmilla became even gayer. She asked:

"And where's Olga Vassilyevna?"

"She's not at home," replied Sasha, "that is, she hasn't come back yet. She must have gone somewhere after church. Here I'm back and she's not here yet."

Liudmilla pretended to be astonished. She swung her parasol and said as if in annoyance:

"How can it be? Everyone else is back from church. She's always at home, and then I come and she's out. Is it because you make such a noise, young man, that the old woman can't sit at home?"

Sasha smiled quietly. He was delighted to hear Liudmilla's voice, Liudmilla's cheerful laughter. He was wondering at the moment how he could best offer to escort her—so that he would be with her even a few more minutes, to look at her and to listen to her.

But Liudmilla did not think of going. She looked at Sasha with a shy smile and said:

"Well, why don't you ask me to sit down, you polite young man? Don't you see that I'm tired! Let me rest for a moment."

And she entered the drawing-room laughing and caressing Sasha with her quick, tender eyes. Sasha grew red with confusion but was glad that she would remain longer with him.

"If you like I'll scent you," said Liudmilla gaily. "Would you like it?"

"What a person you are!" said Sasha. "You suddenly want to suffocate²⁵ me! Why are you so cruel?"

Liudmilla burst out laughing and threw herself back in her chair.

"You stupid! You don't understand. I don't mean to suffocate with the hands, but with scents."

Sasha said:

"Ah! Scents! I don't mind that."

Liudmilla took the sprinkler from her hand-bag and turned before Sasha's eyes the pretty little glass vessel, dark red with gold ornaments, with its rubber ball and bronze mouthpiece, and said:

²⁵ "Doosheet" means "to scent" and also "to suffocate."

"Do you see, I bought a new sprinkler and I forgot to take it out of my bag at home."

Then she took out a large scent-bottle with a varicoloured label—Guerlain's Roa-Rosa.

Sasha said:

"What a deep hand-bag you've got!"

Liudmilla answered:

"Well, you needn't expect anything else. I haven't brought you any ginger-bread."

"Ginger-bread!" repeated Sasha in amusement.

He looked on with curiosity as Liudmilla uncorked the scent-bottle. He asked:

"And how will you pour it out from that without a funnel?"

"I expect you to get me a funnel," said Liudmilla.

"But I haven't one," said Sasha.

"Do as you like, but you must get me a funnel," persisted Liudmilla, laughing.

"I would get one from Milanya, only it's used for paraffin," said Sasha.

Liudmilla again burst into gay laughter.

"Oh, you dull young man, get me a piece of paper, if you can spare it—and there's your funnel."

"That's true," exclaimed Sasha joyously, "it's easy to make one from paper. I'll get it at once."

Sasha ran into his room.

"Shall I take it from an exercise-book?" he shouted from his room.

Liudmilla replied:

"You can tear it out from a book—a Latin grammar if you like. I don't mind."

"No, I'd better take it from the exercise-book," said Sasha laughingly.

He found a clean exercise-book, tore out the middle page and was about to run back to the drawing-room when he saw Liudmilla at the door.

"May I come in, master of the house?" she asked playfully.

"Please, I shall be very glad!" exclaimed Sasha.

Liudmilla seated herself at his table and twisted a funnel from a piece of paper. With a preoccupied expression, she began to pour the scent from the bottle into the sprinkler. The paper funnel, at the bottom and the side, where the trickle of scent ran, became wet and dark. The aromatic liquid accumulated in the funnel and dripped into the sprinkler below. There was a warm, sweet aroma of rose mixed with a poignant odour of spirit. Liudmilla poured half of the scent from the bottle into the sprinkler and said:

"That'll be enough."

And she began to screw the top on the scent-sprinkler. Then she rolled up the piece of wet paper and rubbed it between the palms of her hands.

"Smell!" she said to Sasha and put her palm to his face.

Sasha bent over, closed his eyes, and inhaled. Liudmilla laughed, lightly touched his lips with her palm and held her hand to his mouth. Sasha blushed and kissed her warm, scented hand with a gentle contact of his trembling lips. Liudmilla sighed; a tender expression crossed her attractive face, and then changed to her habitual expression of careless gaiety. She said:

"Now, just keep still while I sprinkle you."

And she pressed the rubber bulb. The aromatic spray-dust spurted out, spreading into minute drops upon Sasha's blouse. Sasha laughed as he turned obediently when Liudmilla pushed him.

"It smells nice, eh?" she asked.

"Very nice," replied Sasha. "What sort of scent is it?"

"What a baby you are!" said Liudmilla in a teasing voice. "Look on the bottle and you'll see."

Sasha looked at the label and said:

"It smells of oil of roses."

"Oil!" she said reproachfully, and struck Sasha lightly on the shoulder.

Sasha laughed, gave a slight scream and thrust out his tongue, curving it in the shape of a tube. Liudmilla rose, and began to turn over Sasha's school books.

"May I look?" she asked.

"Of course," said Sasha.

"Where are your ones and your noughts? Show me."

"I haven't yet had any such thing," said Sasha with an injured look.

"No, you're fibbing," asserted Liudmilla. "I'm sure you get noughts. You must have hidden them."

Sasha smiled.

"I'm sure you're bored with Latin and Greek," said Liudmilla.

"No," answered Sasha, but it was evident that the mere conversation about school-books would bring upon him their habitual tediousness. "It is a little boring to learn mechanically," he admitted. "But I have a good memory. I only like solving problems—that I like."

"Come to me to-morrow after lunch," said Liudmilla.

"Thank you, I will," said Sasha blushing.

He felt very happy that Liudmilla had invited him. Liudmilla asked:

"Do you know where I live? Will you come there?"

"Yes, I know. I'll come there," said Sasha happily.

"Now, be sure to come," repeated Liudmilla sternly. "I'll wait for you, do you hear!"

"But suppose I should have a lot of lessons?" asked Sasha, more from scruple than from any idea that he would not come because of his lessons.

"That's all nonsense. You must come," insisted Liudmilla. "They won't give you a nought."

"But why?" asked Sasha laughingly.

"Because you've got to come. Come, for I've something to tell you and something to show you," said Liudmilla dancing about and humming a song, and lifting her skirt as she did so, and playfully sticking out her pink little fingers.

"Come to me, sweet one, sober one, golden one," she sang.

Sasha began to laugh.

"You'd better tell me to-day," he entreated.

"I mustn't to-day. And how can I tell you to-day? You won't come to-morrow if I do. You'll say there's nothing to come for."

"Very well, I'll come without fail, if they'll let me."

"Of course they'll let you. No one's holding you on a chain."

When she said good-bye, Liudmilla kissed Sasha's forehead, and put her hand to his lips—he had to kiss it. And Sasha was happy to kiss again her white, gentle hand—

and a little shy. And why not? But Liudmilla, as she left, smiled archly and tenderly. And she looked back several times.

"How charming she is," thought Sasha. He was left alone.

"How soon she left," he thought. "She suddenly went and it's hard to realise that she's gone. She might have stayed a little longer." And he felt ashamed that he had not offered to escort her. "It wouldn't have been a bad idea to walk along with her," he thought. "Shall I run after her? Has she gone far, I wonder. Perhaps if I run fast I might overtake her."

"But perhaps she would laugh," he continued to himself. "And besides she might not like it."

And so he could not make up his mind to go after her. He suddenly felt depressed and uneasy. The gentle tremor from the contact of her hand still remained on his lips, and on his forehead her kiss still burned.

"How gently she kisses," Sasha mused. "Like a sweet sister."

Sasha's cheeks burned. He felt deliciously ashamed. Vague reveries stirred within him.

"If she were only my sister," thought Sasha tenderly, "then I might go to her and kiss her and say an affectionate word. Then I might call her 'Liudmillotchka dearest,' or I might call her by some special pet-name: 'Booba' or 'Strekoza.' And she would respond. Now that would be a joy.

"But instead," thought Sasha sadly, "she's a stranger. Lovely, but a stranger. She came and she went. And it's likely she's not even thinking about me. And she's left behind her a sweet scent of rose and lilac, and the feeling of two gentle kisses—and a vague movement in the soul giving birth to a sweet vision as the waves gave birth to Aphrodite."

Soon Kokovkina returned.

"Phew! how strong it smells here," she said.

Sasha blushed.

"Liudmillotchka was here," he said. "And she didn't find you at home, so she sat a while and sprinkled me with scent and left."

"What tenderness!" said the old woman in astonishment, "and Liudmillotchka too!"

Sasha laughed confusedly and ran into his own room. As for Kokovkina, she thought that the Routilov sisters were very gay and affectionate girls—and that they could captivate both the young and the old with their affectionate ways.

On the next day, from the morning onward, Sasha felt happy because he had been invited to the Routilovs. At home he waited impatiently for lunch. After lunch, blushing with embarrassment, he asked permission of Kokovkina to go to the Routilovs till seven o'clock. Kokovkina was astonished but let him go. Sasha ran off gaily. He had carefully combed his hair and put pomade on it. He felt happy and slightly nervous, as one is before something important and pleasant. It pleased him to think that he would come and kiss Liudmilla's hand and that she would kiss his forehead—and then when he left the same kisses would be exchanged. He thought with delight of Liudmilla's white gentle hand.

All the three sisters met Sasha in the hall. They liked to sit by the window and look out on the street and that was why they saw him from a distance. Gay, well-dressed, chattering, they surrounded him with a noisy, impetuous gaiety—and he at once felt at ease with them and quite happy.

"Here he is, the mysterious young person!" exclaimed Liudmilla.

Sasha kissed her hand and he did it gracefully and with great pleasure to himself. At the same time he kissed Darya's hand and Valeria's—it was impossible to pass them by—and found this also very agreeable. All the more, since all three of them kissed his cheek. Darya kissed him loudly and indifferently, as though he were a board; Valeria kissed him gently, lowering her eyes with a sidelong glance, smiled slightly and barely brushed him with her light lips—touching his cheek with the faint colour of an apple—while Liudmilla gave him a gay, strong kiss.

"He's my visitor," she announced, as she took Sasha by the shoulders and led him to her room.

Darya was rather annoyed at this.

"Ah, so he's yours. Well, you can go on kissing him!" she exclaimed. "You've found a treasure. As if anyone would want to take him away from you."

Valeria said nothing but only smiled—it was not interesting, after all, to talk with a mere boy! What could he understand?

Liudmilla's room was spacious, cheerful and very light, because of two large windows giving on to the garden; these were curtained with light, yellow tulle. There was a perfume in the room. Everything was neat and bright. The chairs and the arm-chairs were covered with a golden yellow chintz, marked with a white almost

indistinguishable pattern. Various bottles of scents and scented waters, and small jars, boxes and fans and several Russian and French books lay about the room.

"I saw you in a dream last night," Liudmilla began with a laugh. "You were swimming in the river and I was sitting on the bridge and I caught you with a fishing-rod."

"And I suppose you put me in a little jar?" asked Sasha jokingly.

"Why in a little jar?"

"Where, then?"

"Where? Why, I simply pulled you by the ears and threw you back in the water." And Liudmilla laughed for a long time.

"You're a strange girl," said Sasha. "But what is it you were going to tell me to-day?"

But Liudmilla went on laughing and did not reply.

"I see you've fooled me," said he. "And you also promised to show me something," he said reproachfully.

"I'll show you! Would you like something to eat?" asked Liudmilla.

"I've had lunch," said Sasha. "But you are a deceiver."

"As if I needed to deceive you! But what a strong smell of pomade?" Liudmilla suddenly exclaimed.

Sasha blushed.

"I can't stand pomade," said Liudmilla with annoyance. "You're smeared up like a young lady!"

She ran her hand down his hair and struck his cheek with her grease-smeared palm.

"Please don't you dare to use pomade," she said.

Sasha felt flustered.

"Very well, I won't do it," he said. "How severe you are! But you scent yourself with perfumes!"

"Scents are one thing, but pomade is another, you stupid. A fine comparison!" exclaimed Liudmilla. "I never pomade myself. Why should one glue one's hair down! It's different with scents. Now, let me scent you. Would you like it? Let us say lilac. Would you like it?"

"Yes, I would like it," said Sasha.

It was pleasant to think that he would take that scent home again and astonish Kokovkina.

"Who would like it?" asked Liudmilla, taking the bottle and looking archly at Sasha.

"I'd like it," repeated Sasha.

"You like it—so you bark do you?"²⁶ she teased him.

Sasha and Liudmilla both laughed.

"So you're not afraid that I'll suffocate you?" asked Liudmilla. "Do you remember how you were afraid yesterday?"

"I wasn't afraid at all," replied Sasha hotly.

Liudmilla, smiling and still teasing the boy, began to sprinkle him with lilac scent. Sasha thanked her and once more kissed her hand.

"And please you must get your hair cut," said Liudmilla sternly. "What's the use of wearing long locks? You only frighten the horses."

"All right, I'll have my hair cut," agreed Sasha. "You're terribly severe! My hair is very short. Not more than half an inch. The inspector never grumbled at me for it."

"I like young people with short hair," said Liudmilla impressively, and threatened him with her finger. "But I'm not an inspector, I've got to be obeyed!"

From that time on Liudmilla made it a habit to go frequently to Kokovkina—to see Sasha. She tried, especially at the beginning, to go when Kokovkina was not at home. Sometimes she even tried little tricks to lure the old woman out of the house. Darya once said to her:

"Ah, what a coward you are! You're afraid of an old woman. You'd better go when she's at home and take him out for a walk."

Liudmilla followed this advice and began to call at odd times. If she found Kokovkina at home she would sit with her for a while and then take Sasha out for a walk, in which case she always kept him for a short time only.

Liudmilla and Sasha became friends with a gentle yet not tranquil friendship. Without noticing it herself Liudmilla had awakened in Sasha premature though as yet vague inclinations and desires. Sasha often kissed Liudmilla's hands and her thin, supple wrists, covered with a soft elastic skin; through her thin yellow sleeve showed her

²⁶ There is a pun here. The phrase "ti zhelayesh" means, "You like, you want it." When split into three words, "ti zhe layesh," it means, "You do bark."

frail, sinuous, blue veins. And above were her long slender arms which could be kissed to the very elbows when the sleeves were pushed back.

Sasha sometimes concealed from Kokovkina the fact that Liudmilla had been to the house. He didn't lie about it, but he kept silent. It was impossible for him to lie—as the maid-servant could easily have contradicted him. And to remain silent about Liudmilla's visits was also difficult for Sasha: Liudmilla's laughter echoed in his ears. He wanted to talk about her. But to talk about her was somehow awkward.

Sasha quickly made friends with the other sisters also. He would kiss their hands and soon even began to call the girls "Dashenka," "Liudmillotchka" and "Valerotchka."

CHAPTER 17

Liudmilla met Sasha one day in the street and said to him:

"To-morrow the Head-Master's wife is having a birthday party for her eldest daughter—is the old lady going?"

"I don't know," said Sasha.

But already the hope stirred within him, not so much a hope as a desire, that Kokovkina would go and Liudmilla come and stay with him a while. In the evening he reminded Kokovkina of the morrow's party.

"I'd almost forgotten it," said Kokovkina, "of course, I must go. She's such a charming girl."

And, next day, as soon as Sasha had returned from school, Kokovkina went to the Khripatch's. Sasha was delighted with the idea that he had helped to get Kokovkina out of the house that day. He felt certain that Liudmilla would find time to come.

So it happened—Liudmilla came. She kissed Sasha's cheek and gave him her hand to kiss, and again she laughed and he blushed. A moist, sweet and flower-like odour came from Liudmilla's clothes—rose and orris, the fleshly and voluptuous orris blooming among roses. Liudmilla brought a long narrow box wrapped up in thin paper through which showed dimly a yellow label. She sat down, put the box on her knees, and looked archly at Sasha.

"Do you like dates?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," said Sasha with an amused grimace.

"Well, I've got some here for you," she said with a serious air.

She took the cover from the box and said:

"Take some."

She herself took the dates one by one from the box and put them in Sasha's mouth, making him kiss her hand after each. Sasha said:

"But my lips are sticky."

"That doesn't matter much. Kiss, it's good for your health," replied Liudmilla gaily. "I don't object."

"Perhaps I'd better give you all the kisses at once," said Sasha laughingly.

And he stretched out his hand to take a date himself.

"You'll cheat me! You'll cheat, me!" exclaimed Liudmilla, and quickly shut the lid down, pinching Sasha's fingers.

"What an idea! I'm quite honest. I won't cheat you," said Sasha reassuringly.

"No, no, I don't believe you," asserted Liudmilla.

"Well, if you like I'll give you the kisses beforehand," suggested Sasha.

"That looks more like business," said Liudmilla. "Here you are."

She stretched out her hand to Sasha. He took her long thin fingers, kissed them once and asked with a sly smile, without letting go of her hand:

"And you'll not cheat me, Liudmillotchka?"

"Do you think I'm dishonest!" answered Liudmilla. "You can kiss without suspicion."

Sasha bent over her hand and gave it quick kisses; he covered her hand with loud kisses, pressing his open lips against her hand, and feeling happy that he could kiss her so often. Liudmilla carefully counted the kisses. When she had counted ten, she said:

"It must be very awkward for you to stand and bend over."

"Well, I'll make myself more comfortable," said Sasha.

He went down on his knees and kissed her hand with renewed zeal.

Sasha loved sweets. He was pleased that Liudmilla had brought him some sweet things. For this he loved her still more tenderly.

Liudmilla sprinkled Sasha with lusciously aromatic scents. Their aroma astonished Sasha. It was at once overpoweringly sweet, intoxicating and radiantly hazy—like a sinful golden sunrise seen through an early white mist. Sasha said:

"What a strange perfume!"

"Try it on your hand," advised Liudmilla.

And she gave him an ugly, four-cornered jar, rounded at the edges. Sasha looked at it against the light. It was a bright yellow liquid. It had a large, highly coloured label with a French inscription—it was cyclamen from Piver's. Sasha took hold of the flat glass stopper, pulled it out and smelled at the perfume. Then he did as Liudmilla liked to do—he put his palm on the mouth of the bottle, turned it over quickly and then turned it upright again. Then he rubbed between his palms the few drops of

cyclamen that remained and smelled his hand attentively. The spirit in the scent evaporated and the pure aroma remained. Liudmilla looked at him with expectancy.

Sasha said indecisively:

"It smells a little of insects."

"Don't tell lies, please," said Liudmilla in vexation.

She put some of the scent on her hand and smelled it. Sasha repeated:

"Yes, of insects."

Liudmilla suddenly flared up, so that small tears glistened in her eyes. She struck Sasha across the cheek and cried:

"Oh, you wicked boy! That's for your insects!"

"That was a healthy smack," said Sasha, and he laughed and kissed Liudmilla's hand. "But why are you so angry, dearest Liudmillotchka? What do you think it does smell of?"

He was not at all angry at the blow—he was completely bewitched by Liudmilla.

"What does it smell of?" asked Liudmilla, and caught hold of Sasha by the ear. "I'll tell you what, but first I'm going to pull your ear for you."

"Oi-oi-oi! Liudmillotchka darling, I won't do it again!" exclaimed Sasha, frowning with pain and pulling away from her.

Liudmilla let go of the reddened ear, gently drew Sasha to her, seated him on her knees and said:

"Listen—three scents live in the cyclamen—the poor flower smells of ambrosia—that is for working bees. You know, of course, that in Russian this is called 'sow-bread.'"

"Sow-bread," repeated Sasha laughingly. "That's a funny name."

"Now, don't laugh, you young scamp," said Liudmilla as she caught hold of his other ear, and continued: "Ambrosia, and the bees humming over it, that's the flower's joy. The flower also smells of vanilla. Now this is not for the bees, but for him of whom they dream, and this is the flower's desire—the flower and the golden sun above it. The flower's third perfume smells of the sweet tender body for the lover, and this is its love—the poor flower and the heavy midday sultriness. The bee, the sun and the sultriness—do you understand, my dear?"

Sasha silently shook his head. His smooth face flamed and his long dark eyelashes trembled slightly. Liudmilla looked dreamily into the distance and said:

"It gives one joy—the gentle and sunny cyclamen—it draws one towards desires, which give sweetness and shame, and it stirs the blood. Do you understand, my little sun, when it feels sweet and happy and sad and one wants to cry? Do you understand? That's what it is."

She pressed her lips in a long kiss on Sasha's. Liudmilla looked pensively in front of her. Suddenly a smile came across her lips. She lightly pushed Sasha away and asked:

"Do you like roses?"

Sasha sighed, opened his eyes, smiled tenderly and whispered:

"Yes."

"Large roses?" asked Liudmilla.

"Yes, all sorts—large and small," replied Sasha quickly, and he gracefully left her knees.

"And so you like *rosotchki*²⁷ (little roses)?" asked Liudmilla gently, and her sonorous voice trembled from suppressed laughter.

"Yes, I like them," answered Sasha quickly. Liudmilla began to laugh.

"You stupid, you like *rosotchki* (strokes with a rod), and there's no one to whip you," she exclaimed.

They both laughed and flushed.

Desires innocent by reason of their being aroused unavoidably, made the chief charm of their relation for Liudmilla. They stirred one, and yet they were far from the coarse, repulsive attainment.

They began to argue as to who was the strongest. Liudmilla said:

"Well, suppose you are the strongest, what then? The thing is, who's the quickest."

"Well, I'm also the quickest," boasted Sasha.

"So you're quick," exclaimed Liudmilla teasingly.

They discussed the matter at length. At last Liudmilla suggested:

"Well, let's wrestle."

Sasha laughed and said:

²⁷ "Rosotchki" means "little roses" and also "rods" and "strokes from a rod."

"Well, you can't get the best of me!"

Liudmilla began to tickle him.

"So that's your way," he exclaimed as he giggled, and he wriggled away from her and caught her around the waist.

Then a tussle began. Liudmilla saw at once that Sasha was the stronger. As she could not beat him by strength, she cunningly made the best of an opportune moment and tripped up Sasha's foot—he fell and pulled Liudmilla down with him. Liudmilla easily freed herself and pressed him down on the floor. Sasha cried:

"That's not fair!"

Liudmilla put her knees on his stomach and held him on the floor with her hands. Sasha made great efforts to get free. Liudmilla began to tickle him again. Sasha's loud laughter mingled with hers. She laughed so much that she had to let Sasha go. She fell to the floor, still laughing. Sasha jumped to his feet. He was red and rather provoked.

"Russalka (water nymph)!" he shouted.

But the Russalka was lying on the floor, laughing.

Liudmilla seated Sasha on her knees. Tired with the wrestling, they sat happily and closely, looking into each other's eyes and smiling.

"I'm heavy for you. I shall hurt your knee. You'd better let me go."

"Never mind, sit still," replied Liudmilla affectionately. "You yourself said you liked to caress."

She stroked his head. He gently put his head against her. She said:

"You're very handsome, Sasha."

Sasha grew red and laughed.

"What an idea!" said he.

Conversations and thoughts about beauty, when applied to himself, somehow perplexed him; he had never as yet been curious to find out whether people considered him handsome or a monster.

Liudmilla pinched Sasha's cheek, which made him smile. A pretty red spot showed on his cheek. Liudmilla pinched the other cheek also. Sasha did not protest. He only took her hand, kissed it and said:

"You've done enough pinching. It hurts me, and you'll make your fingers stiff."

"It may be painful, but what a flatterer you've become."

"I shall have to do my lessons," said Sasha. "You must caress me a little while longer for good luck, so that I can get a five for my Greek."

"So you're sending me away," said Liudmilla.

She caught hold of his hand and rolled the sleeve above the elbow.

"What are you doing?" asked Sasha in confusion, blushing guiltily.

But Liudmilla looked at his arm admiringly and turned this way and that way.

"What beautiful arms you've got!" she said clearly and happily, and suddenly kissed it near the elbow.

Sasha tried to drag his arm away. Liudmilla held it and kissed it several more times. Sasha became still and cast down his eyes. And a strange expression came over his clear, half-smiling lips—and under the shadow of his thick eyelashes his hot cheeks began to pale.

They said good-bye to each other. Sasha escorted Liudmilla as far as the gate. He would have gone further but she forbade it. He paused at the gate and said:

"Come again oftener, my dear, bring sweeter cakes, do you hear?"

He used the familiar "thou" to her for the first time, and it sounded in her ear like a gentle caress. She embraced and kissed him impetuously, and ran away. Sasha stood like one dazed.

Sasha had promised to come. The appointed hour had passed by and Sasha had not arrived. Liudmilla waited impatiently—she fidgeted about and felt distressed and looked out of the window. Whenever she heard steps in the street she put her head out of the window. Her sisters teased her. She said angrily:

"Let me alone!"

Then she threw herself stormily at them with reproaches, because they laughed at her. It was already evident that Sasha would not come. Liudmilla cried with vexation and disappointment.

Darya continued to tease her.

Liudmilla spoke quietly between her sobs, and in the midst of her distress she forgot to be angry with them:

"That detestable old hag wouldn't let him come. She keeps him tied to apron strings to make him learn Greek."

"Yes, and he's a hobbledehoy, because he couldn't get away," said Darya with rough sympathy.

"She has tied herself up with a child," said Valeria contemptuously. Both sisters, though they laughed, sympathised with Liudmilla. They loved each other, and they loved tenderly but not strongly: a superficial, tender love. Darya said:

"Why are you crying? Why should you weep your eyes out for a young milksop? Well, you might say that the devil has bound himself to an infant!"

"Who's a devil?" shouted Liudmilla angrily.

"Why you," answered Darya calmly, "are young, but ..."

Darya did not end her sentence, but whistled piercingly.

"Nonsense," said Liudmilla, and her voice sounded strangely.

A strange, severe smile shone on her face through her tears, like a bright, flaming ray at sunset through the last drops of a weary rain. Darya said in a rather annoyed way:

"What do you find interesting in him? Tell me, please."

Liudmilla, still with the same curious smile on her face, said slowly and pensively:

"How beautiful he is! How many untouched possibilities he has!"

"That's very cheap," said Darya decidedly. "All small boys have them."

"No, it isn't cheap," said Liudmilla. "They're unclean boys."

"And is he clean?" asked Valeria; she pronounced the word "clean" rather contemptuously.

"A lot you understand," said Liudmilla, and again began to speak quietly and pensively. "He's quite innocent."

Darya smiled.

"Oh, is he?" said Darya ironically.

"The best age for a boy is fourteen or fifteen. He doesn't understand anything and yet he has a kind of intuition. And he hasn't a disgusting beard."

"A wonderful pleasure!" said Valeria with a contemptuous grimace.

She was feeling sad. It seemed to her that she was small, weak and frail, and she envied her sisters—she envied Darya her gay laughter and even Liudmilla's tears. Liudmilla said again:

"You don't understand anything. I don't love him at all as you think. To love a boy is better than to fall in love with a commonplace face with moustaches. I love him innocently. I don't want anything from him."

"If you don't want anything from him, why do you torment him?" said Darya harshly.

Liudmilla grew red and a guilty expression came on to her face. Darya took pity on her; she walked up to Liudmilla, put her arms round her and said:

"Don't mind what we say—it's only our spitefulness!"

Liudmilla began to cry again, and pressing against Darya's shoulder, said sadly:

"I know there's nothing for me to hope for from him but if he would only caress me a little!"

"What's the matter?" said Darya as she walked away from Liudmilla; she put her hands on her hips and sang loudly:

"Last night I left my darling ..."

Valeria broke into a clear, fragile laugh. And Liudmilla's eyes looked gay and mischievous again. She walked into her room impetuously and sprinkled herself with Korylopsis—the sweet, piquant, odour seized upon her seductively. She walked out into the street, in her best clothes, feeling distraught; and an indiscreet attractiveness was wafted from her. "Perhaps I shall meet him," she thought.

She did meet him.

"Well, you're a nice one," she exclaimed reproachfully and yet happily.

Sasha felt both confused and glad.

"I had no time," he said. "There are too many lessons to do. Really I had no time."

"You're fibbing, little one, but come along."

He resisted for a while, but it was clear that he was glad to let Liudmilla take him away with her. And Liudmilla brought him home.

"I've found him," she said to her sisters triumphantly, and taking Sasha by the shoulders, she led him into her room.

Sasha, putting his hands inside his belt, stood uneasily in the middle of the room, and felt both happy and sad. There seemed to be an odour of new pleasant scents

there, and in this odour there was something that provoked and irritated the nerves like the contact of living rough little snakes.

CHAPTER 18

Peredonov was returning from the lodgings of one of his pupils. Quite suddenly he was caught in a drizzling rain. He tried to think where he could shelter for a while, so as not to spoil his new silk umbrella in the rain. Across the way was a detached, two-storeyed, stone house; on it was the brass plate of the Notary Public, Goudayevsky. The notary's son was a pupil in the second form of the *gymnasia*. Peredonov decided to go in. Incidentally he would make a complaint against the notary's son.

He found both parents at home. They met him with a good deal of fuss. Everything was done there in that way.

Nikolai Mikhailovitch Goudayevsky was a short, robust, dark man, bald and with a long beard. His movements were impetuous and unexpected. He seemed not to walk but to flutter along. He was small like a sparrow, and it was always impossible to tell from his face and attitude what he would do the next minute. In the midst of a serious conversation he would suddenly throw out his knee, which would not so much amuse people as perplex them as to his motive. At home or when visiting he would sit quiet for a long time and then suddenly jump up without any visible cause, pace quickly up and down the room, and exclaim or knock something. In the street he would walk, then suddenly pause, or make some gesture or gymnastic exercise, and then he would continue his walk. On the documents which he drew up or attested Goudayevsky liked to write ridiculous remarks, as, for example, instead of writing about Ivan Ivanitch Ivanov that he lived on the Moscow Square in Ermilova's house, he would write Ivan Ivanitch Ivanov who lived on the Market Square in that quarter where it was impossible to breathe for the stench; and so forth; and he even made a note sometimes of the number of geese and hens kept by the man whose signature he was attesting.

Julia Goudayevskaya was a tall, slim, bony woman, passionate and extremely sentimental, who, in spite of the disparity of their figures, resembled her husband in certain habits: she had the same impetuous and disproportionate movements, unlike those of other people. She was dressed youthfully and in colours, and whenever she made her quick movements the long variegated ribbons, with which she loved to adorn in abundance her dress and hair, flew in all directions.

Antosha, a slender, alert boy, bowed courteously. Peredonov was seated in the drawing-room and he immediately began to complain of Antosha: that he was lazy, inattentive, and did not listen in class but chattered and laughed, and was mischievous during recess. Antosha was astonished—he did not know that he was considered such a wicked boy—and he began to defend himself hotly. Both parents were annoyed.

"Will you be good enough to tell me," shouted the father, "in what precisely his mischievousness consists?"

"Nika, don't defend him," cried the mother. "He shouldn't get up to mischief."

"But what mischief has he done?" enquired the father, running, almost rolling on his short legs.

"He's generally mischievous. He raises a racket and he fights," said Peredonov morosely. "He's always in mischief."

"I don't fight at all," exclaimed Antosha dolefully. "Ask anyone you like. I haven't fought with anybody."

"He doesn't let anyone pass," said Peredonov.

"Very well, I'll go to the *gymnasia* myself and I'll ask the inspector," said Goudayevsky decisively.

"Nika, Nika, why don't you believe him?" cried Julia. "Would you like to see Antosha turn out a good-for-nothing? He needs a beating."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" cried the father.

"I'll give him a beating without fail," exclaimed Julia, as she caught her son by the shoulder and was about to drag him into the kitchen.

"Antosha!" she cried. "Come along; I'll give you a whipping."

"I'll not let you have him," cried the father, tearing his son away from her.

His mother held on to him; Antosha made despairing outcries, and the parents tustled with each other.

"Help me, Ardalyon Borisitch," cried Julia. "Hold this monster while I settle with Antosha."

Peredonov went to help. But Goudayevsky got his son away from Julia, pushed her aside, sprang towards Peredonov and cried threateningly:

"Don't you come here! When two dogs are fighting the third one had better keep away! Yes, and I'll see to you!"

Red, unkempt, perspiring, he shook his fist in the air. Peredonov retreated, muttering inaudible words. Julia ran round her husband and tried to catch hold of Antosha. His father hid him behind and pulled him by the arm, now to the right, now to the left. Julia, her eyes gleaming, cried:

"He'll grow up to be a cut-throat! He'll get into gaol! Hard labour'll be his fate."

"A plague on your tongue!" cried Goudayevsky. "Shut up, you wicked fool."

"Oh, you tyrant!" screamed Julia, and running up to her husband hit him with her fist on the back and ran impetuously out of the drawing-room.

Goudayevsky clenched his fists and ran up to Peredonov.

"So you've come to raise a riot here!" he cried. "You say Antosha's mischievous? You're a liar. He's not mischievous. And if he were, I should know it without you; and I don't want anything to do with you. You go about the town taking in fools. You beat their little boys, and expect to get a Master's diploma for birching. But you've come to the wrong place. Sir, I ask you to clear out!"

As he was saying this he jumped towards Peredonov and got him into a corner. Peredonov was frightened and would have been glad to run away, but Goudayevsky in his excitement did not notice that he was standing in his way. Antosha seized hold of the tails of his father's frock-coat and began to tug at them. His father angrily turned on him and tried to kick him. But Antosha quickly jumped aside without, however, letting go of his father's coat.

"Be quiet there," exclaimed Goudayevsky. "Don't forget yourself, Antosha."

"Papotchka," cried Antosha, continuing to tug at his father's coat-tails, "you are keeping Ardalyon Borisitch from going."

Goudayevsky quickly jumped to the side, Antosha barely managed to escape him.

"I beg your pardon," said Goudayevsky and pointed to the door, "that's the way out, and I won't detain you."

Peredonov quickly left the room. Goudayevsky put his fingers to his nose at him, then made a motion with his knee as if he were kicking him out. Antosha sniggered. Goudayevsky turned on him savagely:

"Antosha, don't forget yourself! Don't forget to-morrow. I'm going to the *gymnasia*, and if it's true I'll hand you over to your mother for a whipping!"

"I wasn't mischievous. He's a liar," said Antosha piteously and in a squeaking voice.

"Antosha, don't forget yourself," shouted his father. "You shouldn't say that he's a liar, but that he's made a mistake. Only little boys tell lies—grown-ups make mistakes."

In the meantime Peredonov managed to find his way into the half-dark hall, discovered his overcoat with some difficulty and began to put it on. His fear and nervousness hindered him from finding his sleeve. No one came to his assistance. Quite suddenly Julia ran out from a side door, rustling her flying ribbons, and

whispered excitedly in his ear, making wild gestures and standing on tip-toe. Peredonov did not at first understand.

"I'm so grateful to you," he heard at last. "It's so good of you to take such an interest in the boy. Most people are so indifferent, but you understand a mother's difficulties. It is so hard to bring children up; you can't imagine how hard it is. I have only two and they give me no end of worry. My husband is a tyrant; he's a terrible, terrible man. Don't you think so? You've seen for yourself."

"Yes," mumbled Peredonov. "Well, your husband—er—well, he shouldn't ... I give a good deal of attention to it and he ..."

"Oh, don't say any more," whispered Julia, "he's a terrible man. He's bringing me down to my grave, and he'll be glad of it, and then he'll corrupt my children, my dear Antosha. But I'm a mother, I won't give him up; I'll give him a beating all the same."

"He won't let you," said Peredonov, and jerked his head in the direction of the drawing-room.

"Wait till he goes to his club. He won't take Antosha with him! He'll go and I shall keep quiet until then, as if I agreed with him; but once he goes I'll give Antosha a beating and you will help me. You will help me, won't you?"

Peredonov reflected and then said:

"Very well, but how shall I know when to come?"

"I'll send for you," whispered Julia. "You wait, and as soon as he goes to his club I'll send for you."

In the evening Peredonov received a note from Goudayevskaya. It ran:

"MOST ESTEEMED ARDALYON BORISITCH,

"My husband has gone to his club, and now I am free from his savagery until one o'clock. Do me the kindness to come as soon as you can and help me with my misbehaving son. I realise that he must be rid of his faults while he's still young, for afterwards it may be too late.

"With genuine respect,

"JULIA GOUDAYEVSKAYA.

"P.S.—Please come as soon as possible, otherwise Antosha will go to sleep and I shall have to wake him."

Peredonov quickly put on his overcoat, wrapped a scarf round his neck and prepared to go.

"Where are you going so late, Ardalyon Borisitch?" asked Varvara.

"I'm going on business," replied Peredonov morosely, and left abruptly.

Varvara reflected sadly that again she would be unable to sleep for some time. If she could only hasten the marriage. Then she could sleep both night and day—that would be bliss!

Once in the street, Peredonov was assailed by doubts. Suppose it was a trap? And suppose it suddenly turned out that Goudayevsky was at home, and they should seize him and beat him? Wouldn't it be better for him to turn back.

"No, I'd better go as far as the house, and then I shall see," Peredonov decided.

The night was quiet, cold and dark. It enveloped him on all sides and compelled him to walk slowly. Fresh gusts of wind blew from the neighbouring fields. Light, rustling noises could be heard in the grass along the fences, and everything around him seemed suspicious and strange—perhaps someone was following stealthily behind and watching him. All objects were strangely and unexpectedly concealed by the darkness, as if another different nocturnal life awoke in them, incomprehensible to man and hostile to him. Peredonov walked quickly in the streets and mumbled:

"You won't gain anything by following me. I'm not going on any bad business. I'm going in the interest of my work. So there!"

At last he reached Goudayevsky's house. A light was visible in one of the windows facing the street; the remaining four were dark. Peredonov ascended the steps very quietly, stood a while and put his ears to the door and listened—everything was quiet. He lightly pulled the brass handle of the bell—a distant, faint tinkle of a bell was heard. But, faint though it was, it frightened Peredonov, as if this sound would awaken all the hostile powers and make them come to this door. Peredonov quickly ran down the steps and hid behind a post, pressing close against the wall.

Several moments passed. Peredonov's heart jumped and beat heavily.

Presently light footsteps could be heard and the noise of a door opening. Julia looked out into the street and her black, passionate eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"Who's there?" she asked in a loud whisper.

Peredonov stepped a little away from the wall and looked into the narrow opening of the door where it was dark and quiet, and asked also in a tremulous whisper:

"Has Nikolai Mikhailovitch gone?"

"Yes, he's gone, he's gone," she whispered joyously.

Peredonov glanced timidly around him and followed her into the dark passage.

"I'm sorry I have no light," whispered Julia, "but I'm afraid someone might see and they might gossip."

She led Peredonov up the staircase into a corridor, where a small lamp hung, throwing a dim light on the upper stairs. Julia laughed quietly and joyously, and her ribbons trembled from her laughter.

"Yes, he's gone," she whispered gleefully, as she looked around and scrutinised Peredonov with passionately burning eyes. "I was afraid he would remain at home to-night as he was in a great rage. But he couldn't do without his game of whist. I've even sent the maid away—there's only the baby's nurse in the house—otherwise we might be interrupted. For you know what sort of people there are nowadays."

A heat came from Julia—she was hot and dry, like a splinter. Once or twice she caught Peredonov by the sleeve, and these quick contacts seemed to send small dry fires through his whole body. They walked quietly and on tip-toe through the corridor, past several closed doors, and stopped at the last—it was the door of the children's room....

Peredonov left Julia at midnight, when she began to expect her husband's return. He walked in the dark streets, morose and gloomy. It seemed to him that someone had been standing by the house and was now following him. He mumbled:

"I went on account of my work. It wasn't my fault. She wanted it herself. You can't deceive me—you've got the wrong man."

Varvara was not yet asleep when he returned. Her cards were lying in front of her.

It seemed to Peredonov that someone might step in when he entered. It was possible that Varvara herself had let the enemy come in. Peredonov said:

"If I go to sleep you'll bewitch me with the cards. Give me the cards, or you'll bewitch me."

He took the cards away and hid them under his pillow. Varvara smiled and said:

"You're making a fool of yourself. I haven't the power to bewitch anyone, and as if I wanted it!"

He felt vexed and frightened because she was smiling: that meant, he thought, that she might bewitch him even without cards. The cat was shrinking under the bed, and his green eyes sparkled—one might be bewitched by his fur, if it were stroked in the dark so that electric sparks flew from it. Behind the chest of drawers the grey nedotikomka gleamed again—was it not Varvara who called it up at nights with a slight whistle like a snore!

Peredonov dreamed a repulsive, terrible dream: Pilnikov came, stood on the threshold, beckoned him and smiled. It was as if someone drew him towards Pilnikov, who led him through dark, dirty streets while the cat ran beside and his green eyes gleamed and shone....

CHAPTER 19

Peredonov's strange behaviour worried Khripatch more and more. He consulted the school physician and asked him whether Peredonov were not out of his mind. The doctor laughingly replied that Peredonov had no mind to be out of, and that he was simply acting stupidly. There were also complaints. Adamenko's was the first: she sent to the Head-Master her brother's exercise-book which had been given only one mark for a very good piece of work. The Head-Master, during one of the recesses, asked Peredonov to come and see him.

"Yes, it's quite true, he does look a little mad," thought Khripatch when he saw traces of perplexity and terror on Peredonov's dull, gloomy face.

"I've got a bone to pick with you," said Khripatch quickly and dryly. "Whenever I have to work in a room next to yours my head is split—there's such an uproar of laughter in your class. May I request you to give lessons of a less cheerful nature? 'To scoff and always scoff—don't you get tired?'"²⁸

"It isn't my fault," said Peredonov, "they laugh by themselves. It is impossible to mention anything from the grammar or the satires of Kantemir without their laughing. They are a bad lot. They ought to be well scolded."

"It's desirable and even necessary that the work in class should be of a serious character," said Khripatch sarcastically. "And another thing——"

Khripatch showed Peredonov two exercise-books and said:

"Here are two exercise-books from two students of one class on your subject: Adamenko's and my son's. I have compared them and I am compelled to make the inference that you are not giving your full attention to your work. Adamenko's last work which was done very satisfactorily was marked one, while my son's work, written much worse, was marked four. It is evident that you have made a mistake, that you have given one pupil's marks to another and vice versa. Though it is natural for a man to make mistakes, still I must ask you to avoid such errors in future. It quite properly arouses dissatisfaction in the parents and in the pupils themselves."

Peredonov mumbled something inaudible.

From spite he began to tease the smaller boys who had been recently punished at his instigation. He was especially severe on Kramarenko. The boy kept silent and went pale under his dark tan; his eyes gleamed.

²⁸ A quotation from Griboyedov's, "The Misfortune of Being too Clever."

As Kramarenko left the *gymnasia* that day, he did not hasten home. He stood at the gates and watched the entrance. When Peredonov went out Kramarenko followed him at some distance, waiting till a few passers-by had got between him and Peredonov.

Peredonov walked slowly. The cloudy weather depressed him. During the last few days his face had assumed a duller expression. His glance was either fixed on something in the distance or wandered strangely. It seemed as if he were constantly looking into an object. To his eyes objects appeared vague or doubled or meaningless.

Who was he scrutinising so closely? Informers. They concealed themselves behind every object, they whispered and laughed. Peredonov's enemies had sent against him a whole army of informers. Sometimes Peredonov tried quickly to surprise them. But they always managed to escape in time—as if they sank through the earth.... Peredonov suddenly heard quick, bold footsteps on the pavement behind him, and looked around him in fright—Kramarenko paused near him and looked at him decidedly, resolutely and malignantly, with burning eyes; pale, thin, like a savage ready to throw himself at an enemy. This look frightened Peredonov.

"Suppose he should suddenly bite me?" he thought.

He walked quicker, but Kramarenko did not leave him; he walked slowly and Kramarenko kept pace with him. Peredonov paused and said angrily:

"Why are you following me, you little dark wretch? I'll take you to your father at once."

Kramarenko also paused and continued to look at Peredonov. They stood facing one another on the loose pavement of the deserted street, beside the grey, depressing fence. Kramarenko trembled and said in a hissing voice:

"Scoundrel!"

He smiled and turned to go away.

He made three steps, paused, looked around and repeated louder:

"What a scoundrel! Vermin!"

He spat and walked away. Peredonov looked after him and then turned homewards. Confused and timorous thoughts crowded through his head. Vershina called to him. She stood smoking behind the bars of her garden-gate, wrapped up in a large black shawl. Peredonov did not at once recognise her. Something malignant in her figure seemed to threaten him. She stood like a black sorceress and blew out smoke, as if she were casting a spell. He spat and pronounced an exorcism. Vershina laughed and asked:

"What's the matter with you, Ardalyon Borisitch?"

Peredonov looked vaguely at her and said at last:

"Ah, it's you! I didn't recognise you."

"That's a good sign. It means I'll soon be rich," said Vershina.

This did not please Peredonov, he wanted to be rich himself.

"Get away!" he exclaimed angrily. "Why should you be rich—you'll always be what you are now."

"Never mind, I shall win twenty thousand," said Vershina with a wry smile.

"No, I shall win the twenty thousand," argued Peredonov.

"I shall be in one drawing and you'll be in another," said Vershina.

"You're lying," said Peredonov angrily. "Who ever heard of two people winning at once in the same town. I tell you I'm going to win it."

Vershina noticed that he was angry. She ceased to argue. She opened the gate to entice him in and said:

"There's no reason for you to stand there. Come in, Mourin's here."

Mourin's name recalled something pleasant to Peredonov—drink and *zakouska*. He entered.

In the drawing-room, darkened by the trees outside, sat Marta, looking very happy, with a red sash on and with a kerchief round her neck, Mourin, more unkempt than usual, and very cheerful for some reason or other, and a grown-up schoolboy, Vitkevitch. He paid attentions to Vershina, and imagined that she was in love with him: he thought of leaving the school, marrying Vershina and managing her estate.

Mourin met Peredonov with exaggeratedly cordial exclamations, his expression became even gayer and his little eyes looked fat—all this did not go with his stout figure and untidy hair in which even some wisps of straw could be seen.

"I'm attending to business," he said loudly and hoarsely. "I've business everywhere, and here these charming ladies are spoiling me with tea."

"Business?" replied Peredonov gruffly. "What sort of business have you got? You are not in Government Service and you've got money coming in. Now I have business."

"Well, what if you have, it's only getting other people's money," said Mourin with a loud laugh.

Vershina smiled wryly and seated Peredonov near the table. On a round table near the sofa glasses and cups of tea, rum and cranberry jam were crowded together with a filigree silver dish, covered with a knitted doyley, a small cake-basket of tea-cake and home-made gingerbread stuck with almonds.

A strong odour of rum came from Mourin's glass of tea, while Vitkevitch put a good deal of jam into a small glass plate, shaped like a shell. Marta was eating little slices of tea-cake with visible satisfaction. Vershina offered Peredonov refreshments—he refused to take tea.

"I might be poisoned," he thought. "It's very easy to poison you—you simply drink and don't notice anything—there are sweet poisons—and then you go home and turn up your toes."

And he felt vexed because they put jam before Mourin, and when he came they didn't take the trouble to get a new jar of better jam. They hadn't cranberry jam only but several other kinds.

Vershina really did give a good deal of attention to Mourin. Seeing that she had little hope of Peredonov, she was looking elsewhere for a husband for Marta. Now she was trying to catch Mourin. Half-civilised by his pursuit of hard-earned gains, this landed proprietor eagerly fell to the lure. Marta pleased him.

Marta was happy because it was her constant desire to find a husband and to have a good house and home—that would be complete happiness. And she looked at Mourin with loving eyes. The huge forty-years-old man, with his coarse voice and plain face, seemed to her in every movement a model of manly strength, cleverness, beauty and goodness.

Peredonov noticed the loving glances exchanged by Mourin and Marta—he noticed them because he expected Marta to pay attention to him. He said gruffly to Mourin:

"You sit there like a bridegroom. Your whole face is shining."

"I have reason to be happy," said Mourin in a brisk, cheerful voice. "I have managed my business very well."

He winked at his hostesses. They both had gay smiles. Peredonov asked gruffly, contemptuously screwing up his eyes:

"What is it? Have you found a bride? Has she a big dowry?"

Mourin went on as if he had not heard these questions:

"Natalya Afanasyevna there—may God be good to her—has agreed to take charge of my Vaniushka. He'll live here as if he were in Christ's bosom, and my mind will be at rest, knowing that he won't be spoiled."

"He'll get into mischief with Vladya," said Peredonov morosely. "They'll burn the house down."

"He wouldn't dare," shouted Mourin. "Don't you worry about that, my dear Natalya Afanasyevna, you'll find him as straight as a fiddle-string."

To cut short this conversation, Vershina said with her wry smile:

"I should like to eat something tart."

"Perhaps you'd like some bilberries and apples—I'll get them," said Marta quickly rising from her chair.

"Do, please."

Marta ran out of the room. Vershina did not even look after her. She was used to taking Marta's services for granted. She was sitting deep in her sofa puffing out blue curling clouds of smoke, and compared the two men talking to each other, looking at Peredonov angrily and indifferently, at Mourin gaily and animatedly. Mourin pleased her more of the two. He had a good-natured face, while Peredonov could not even smile. She liked everything in Mourin—he was large, stout, attractive, spoke in an agreeable, low voice, and was very respectful to her. Vershina even thought at certain moments that she ought to arrange the matter so that Mourin should become engaged not to Marta but to herself. But she always ended her reflections by magnanimously yielding him to Marta.

"Anyone would marry me," she thought, "because I have money. I can choose almost anyone I like. If I liked, I could even take this young man," and she rested her glance, not without satisfaction, on Vitkevitch's youthful, impudent, yet handsome face—a boy who spoke little, ate a great deal and looked continuously at Vershina, smiling insolently.

Marta brought the bilberries and apples in an earthen-ware cup and began to relate how she had dreamed the night before that she had gone to a wedding as a brides-maid, where she ate pine-apples and pancakes with mead; on one pancake she had found a hundred-rouble note and she cried when they took it from her, and woke up in tears.

"You should have hidden it on the quiet so that no one could see it," said Peredonov rather gruffly. "If you can't even keep money in a dream, what sort of a housewife will you make?"

"There's no reason to feel sorry for this money," said Vershina. "There are many things seen in dreams!"

"I feel as if I'd really lost the money," said Marta ingenuously. "A whole hundred roubles!"

Tears appeared in her eyes, and she forced a laugh in order not to cry. Mourin anxiously put his hands into his pocket and exclaimed:

"My dear Marta Stanislavovna, don't feel so put out about it, we can soon mend the matter."

He took a hundred-rouble note from his wallet, put it before Marta on the table, and slapped his hand into her palm, shouting:

"Permit me! No one will take this away!"

Marta was about to rejoice but suddenly flushed violently and said in confusion:

"Oh, Vladimir Ivanovitch, I didn't mean that! I can't take it. Really you are ..."

"Now, don't offend me by refusing it," said Mourin with a laugh, not taking up the money. "Let's say that your dream has become realised."

"No, but how can I? I feel ashamed. I wouldn't take it for anything." Marta resisted, looking with desirous eyes upon the hundred-rouble note.

"Why do you protest when it's given to you?" said Vitkevitch. "It's good luck falling right into your hands," he continued with an envious sigh.

Mourin stood in front of Marta and said in a persuasive voice:

"My dear Marta Stanislavovna, believe me, I give it with all my heart—please take it! And if you don't want to take it for nothing, then take it for looking after Vaniushka. As to my agreement with Natalya Afanasyevna, let that stand. But this is for you—for looking after Vanya."

"But how can I, it's too much," said Marta irresolutely.

"It's for the first half-year," and he bowed very low to Marta. "Don't offend me by refusing it. Take it and be a sister to Vaniushka."

"Well, Marta, you'd better take it," said Vershina. "And thank Vladimir Ivanitch."

Marta, flushing with shame and pleasure, took the money.

Mourin began to thank her ardently.

"You'd better marry at once—it would be cheaper," said Peredonov gruffly. "How generous he's got all of a sudden!"

Vitkevitch roared with laughter, which the others pretended they had not heard. Vershina began to tell a dream of her own, but Peredonov interrupted her before she had finished by saying good-bye. Mourin invited him to his house for the evening.

"I must go to Vespers," said Peredonov.

"Ardalyon Borisitch has suddenly become very zealous in church-going," said Vershina with a quick, dry laugh.

"I always go," he answered. "I believe in God—unlike the others. Perhaps I am the only one of that kind in the *gymnasia*. That's why I'm persecuted. The Head-Master is an atheist."

"When you are free, let me know," said Mourin.

Peredonov said, twisting his cap irritably in his hands:

"I have no time to go visiting."

But suddenly he recalled that Mourin was very hospitable with food and drink, so he said:

"Well, I can come to you on Monday."

Mourin showed great pleasure at this, and was about to ask Vershina and Marta also, but Peredonov said:

"I don't want any ladies. We might get a little tipsy and blurt out something which would be awkward in their presence."

When Peredonov left, Vershina said sneeringly:

"Ardalyon Borisitch is acting curiously. He would very much like to be an inspector, and it looks to me as if Varvara were leading him by the nose. So he's up to all sorts of tricks."

Vladya—who had hidden himself while Peredonov was there—came out and said with a malicious smile:

"The locksmith's sons have found out from someone that it was Peredonov who told about them."

"They'll break his windows," exclaimed Vitkevitch laughing gleefully.

Everything in the street seemed hostile and ominous to Peredonov. A ram stood at the cross-roads and looked stupidly at him. This ram so closely resembled Volodin that Peredonov felt frightened. He thought that possibly Volodin had turned into a ram to spy upon him.

"How do we know?" he thought. "Perhaps it is possible; science has not discovered everything and it's possible someone does know something. Now there are the French—a learned people, and yet magicians and mages have begun to spread there." And a fear took possession of him. "This ram might kick me," he thought.

The ram began to bleat, and its bleat resembled Volodin's laughter. It was sharp, piercing and unpleasant.

Then he met the Officer of the gendarmerie. Peredonov went up to him and said in a whisper:

"You'd better watch Adamenko. She corresponds with Socialists. She's one of them."

Roubovsky looked at him in silent astonishment. Peredonov walked on further and thought dejectedly:

"Why do I always keep coming across him? He must be watching me, and he has put policemen everywhere."

The dirty streets, the gloomy sky, the pitiful little houses, the ragged, withered-looking children—all these breathed depression, neglect and a hopeless sadness.

"It's a foul town," thought Peredonov. "The people here are disgusting and malignant; the sooner I get to another town the better, where the instructors would bow down to one and the schoolboys will be afraid and whisper in fear: 'The inspector is coming.' Yes! The higher officials always live differently in the world."

"Inspector of the second District of the Rouban Government," he mumbled under his nose. "The Right Honourable the State Councillor, Peredonov—that's the way! Do you know who I am? His Excellency, Head-Master of the National Schools of the Rouban Government, the Actual State Councillor Peredonov. Hats off! Hand in your resignation! Get out! I'll manage you!"

Peredonov's countenance became arrogant. In his poor imagination he had already received his share of power.

When Peredonov returned home, while he was taking off his overcoat, he heard shrill sounds from the dining-room—it was Volodin laughing. Peredonov's spirits fell.

"He's managed to get here already," he thought. "Perhaps he's now conspiring with Varvara against me. That's why he's laughing; he's glad because Varvara agrees with him."

He walked angrily and dejectedly into the dining-room. The table was already set for dinner. Varvara met Peredonov with an anxious face.

"Ardalyon Borisitch," she exclaimed, "think what's happened! The cat's run away."

"Well," exclaimed Peredonov with an expression of fear in his face, "why did you let it go?"

"You didn't expect me to sew his tail to my petticoat, did you?" asked Varvara in irritation.

Volodin sniggered. Peredonov thought it had perhaps gone to the Officer of the gendarmerie to purr out all it knew about Peredonov and about where and why he went out at night—she would reveal everything and would even mew a little more than had happened. More troubles! Peredonov sat down on a chair at the table, bent his head, twirled the end of the tablecloth in his fingers and became lost in gloomy reflections.

"Cats always run back to their old home," said Volodin, "because cats get used to a place and not to their master. A cat should be swung round several times and then taken to her new home. She mustn't be shown the way or otherwise she'll go back."

Peredonov listened and felt consoled.

"So you think he's gone back to the old house, Pavloushka?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly, Ardasha," replied Volodin.

Peredonov rose and shouted:

"Well, we'll have a drink, Pavloushka!"

Volodin sniggered.

"That's a possibility, Ardasha," he said. "It's always possible to take a drink."

"We must get that cat back," decided Peredonov.

"A treasure," replied Varvara sarcastically. "I'll send Klavdiushka for it after dinner."

They sat down to dinner. Volodin was in a cheerful mood and chattered and laughed a great deal. His laughter sounded to Peredonov like the bleating of the ram he had met in the street.

"Why has he got evil intentions against me?" thought Peredonov. "What does he want?"

And Peredonov thought that he would get Volodin on his side.

"Listen, Pavloushka," he said, "if you'll stop trying to injure me, then I'll buy you a pound of the best sugar-candy every week—you can suck it to my good health."

Volodin laughed, but immediately afterwards looked hurt and said:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, I have no idea of injuring you, and I don't want your sugar-candy because I don't like it."

Peredonov became depressed. Varvara said sneeringly:

"You've made a big enough fool of yourself, Ardalyon Borisitch. How can he do you any injury?"

"Any fool can do you harm," said Peredonov dejectedly.

Volodin thrust out an offended lip, shook his head and said:

"If you have such an idea about me, Ardalyon Borisitch, then I can only say one thing: I thank you most humbly. If you think that way about me, what have I to say? What shall I understand by this, in what sense?"

"Take a drink, Pavloushka, and pour me one too," said Peredonov.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Pavel Vassilyevitch," said Varvara consolingly. "He's only talking, his heart doesn't know what his tongue blabs."

Volodin said nothing, and preserving his injured look began to pour the vodka from the decanter into the glasses. Varvara said sarcastically:

"How is it, Ardalyon Borisitch, that you're not afraid to drink vodka when he pours it out? Perhaps he's exorcising it—don't you see his lips moving?"

Peredonov's face bore an expression of terror. He caught the glass which Volodin had filled and flung the vodka on to the floor, shouting:

"Chure me! Chure—chure—chure! A spell against the spell-weaver—may the evil tongue die of thirst, may the black eye burst. To him Karachoun [death], to me chure-perechure!"

Then he turned to Volodin with a malignant face, snapped his fingers and said:

"That's for you. You're cunning, but I'm more cunning."

Varvara laughed uproariously.

Volodin bleating in an offended, trembling voice said:

"It's you, Ardalyon Borisitch, who know and pronounce all sorts of magic words, but I never occupied myself with black magic. I hadn't any idea of bedevilling your vodka or anything else, but it's possible that it's you who've bewitched my brides from me."

"What an idea!" said Peredonov angrily. "I don't want your brides. I can get them by cleaner means."

"You've cast a spell to burst my eyes," continued Volodin, "but mind your spectacles don't burst sooner."

Peredonov caught his glasses in fear.

"What nonsense!" he growled. "You let your tongue run away with you."

Varvara looked warningly at Volodin and said crossly:

"Don't be spiteful, Pavel Vassilyevitch, eat your soup, or else it'll get cold. Eat, you spiteful thing!"

She thought that Ardalyon Borisitch had exorcised himself in time. Volodin began to eat his soup. They were all silent for a while, and presently Volodin said in a hurt voice:

"No wonder I dreamed last night that I was being smeared with honey. Did you smear me, Ardalyon Borisitch?"

"That's not the way you ought to be smeared," said Varvara still crossly.

"Why should I be? Be good enough to tell me. I don't see why I should be," said Volodin.

"Well, because you've got a nasty tongue," explained Varvara. "You oughtn't to babble everything that comes into your mind immediately."

CHAPTER 20

In the evening Peredonov went to the Club—he had been invited to play cards. Goudayevsky, the notary, was also there. Peredonov was frightened when he saw him, but Goudayevsky conducted himself quietly and Peredonov felt reassured.

They played a long time and drank a good deal. Late at night in the refreshment room Goudayevsky ran up to Peredonov and without any explanation hit him several times in the face, broke his glasses and quickly left the Club. Peredonov showed no resistance, pretended he was drunk, then fell to the floor, and began to grunt. They shook him and carried him home.

The next day the whole town was talking about this scuffle.

That same evening Varvara found an opportunity to steal the first forged letter from Peredonov. Grushina had insisted on this so that no discrepancies might be found by comparing the two forgeries. Peredonov carried this letter about with him, but on this evening he happened to leave it at home: while changing into his dress clothes, he had taken the letter from his pocket, put it under a text-book on the chest of drawers and promptly forgotten it. Varvara burnt it over a candle at Grushina's.

When Peredonov returned home late that night and Varvara saw his broken spectacles, he told her that they had burst of themselves. She believed him and imagined that it was all the fault of Volodin's evil tongue. Peredonov also persuaded himself that it was due to Volodin. The next day, however, Grushina told Varvara the details of the scuffle at the Club.

In the morning, when dressing, Peredonov suddenly remembered the letter, looked for it unavailingly, and felt terrified. He shouted in a savage voice:

"Varvara! Where's that letter?"

Varvara was disconcerted.

"What letter?" she asked, looking at Peredonov with frightened eyes.

"The Princess's!" shouted Peredonov.

Varvara somehow collected herself.

She said with an impudent smile:

"How should I know where it is? You must have thrown it among the waste paper and Klavdiushka has probably burnt it. You'd better look in your pockets for it, if it's still to be found."

Peredonov went to the *gymnasia* in a gloomy state of mind. Yesterday's unpleasantness came into his mind. He thought of Kramarenko: how did this impudent boy dare to call him a scoundrel? That meant that he was not afraid of Peredonov. Perhaps the boy knew something about him and would inform against him.

In class Kramarenko stared at Peredonov and smiled, which terrified Peredonov even more. After the third class, Peredonov was again called to see the Head-Master. He went, vaguely apprehending something unpleasant.

Rumours of Peredonov's doings reached Khripatch from all sides. That morning he had been told about last night's occurrence at the Club. Yesterday, also, after lessons, Volodya Boultiyakov had come to see him—the boy who had been punished by his landlady at Peredonov's request. To prevent a repetition of this visit with similar consequences the boy complained to the Head-Master.

In a dry, sharp voice Khripatch repeated to Peredonov the reports that had reached him—from reliable sources, he added—of how Peredonov had been going to his students' homes giving their parents and guardians false information about the children's conduct and progress, demanding that the boys should be whipped, in consequence of which certain disagreeable incidents had occurred among the parents, as, for instance, last night's affair at the Club with the notary Goudayevsky.

Peredonov listened fearfully and yet irritatedly. Khripatch was silent.

"What of that?" said Peredonov in a surly voice. "It was he who struck me. Is that the way to behave? He had no right to fly into my face. He doesn't go to church. He believes in a monkey and he's corrupting his son into the same sect. He ought to be reported—he's a Socialist."

Khripatch listened attentively to Peredonov and said insinuatingly:

"All this is not our affair, and I don't understand at all what you mean by the original expression 'he believes in a monkey.' In my opinion there's no need to enrich the history of religion with newly-devised cults. As for the affront you received, you ought to have brought him before a court of magistrates. But the very best thing for you to do, is to leave the school. This would be the best way out for you personally and for the *gymnasia*."

"I shall be an inspector," said Peredonov angrily.

"But until then," continued Khripatch, "you should restrain yourself from these extraordinary visits. You will agree that such conduct is unbecoming to a schoolmaster, and it loses the master his dignity in the eyes of his pupils. To go about from house to house, whipping young boys—this you must agree ..."

Khripatch did not finish, and merely shrugged his shoulders.

"But after all," said Peredonov, "I did it for their good."

"Please don't let us argue about it," Khripatch interrupted him sharply. "I request you most emphatically not to let this happen again."

Peredonov looked angrily at the Head-Master.

That evening they decided to have a house-warming. They invited all their acquaintances. Peredonov walked about the rooms to see that everything was in order and that there was nothing which could be the cause of his being informed against. He thought:

"Well, everything seems all right—there are no forbidden books visible, the ikon-lamps are alight, the Royal portraits are hanging in the place of honour on the wall."

Suddenly Mickiewicz winked at him from the wall.

"He might get me into trouble," thought Peredonov in fear. "I'd better take the portrait and put it in the privy and bring Pushkin back here."

"After all Pushkin was a courtier," he thought, as he hung the portrait on the dining-room wall.

Then he remembered that they would play cards in the evening, so he decided to examine the cards. He took the opened pack of cards which had only been used once and looked through them as if he were trying to find something. The faces of the court cards did not please him—they had such big eyes.

Latterly when he was playing it seemed to him that the cards smiled like Varvara. Even the ordinary six of spades had an insolent and unfriendly look.

Peredonov gathered together all the cards he had and put out the eyes of all the kings, queens and knaves, so that they should not stare at him. He did this first with the cards that had already been used, and afterwards he unsealed the new packs. He did this with furtive glances around him, as if he were afraid that he would be detected. Luckily for him, Varvara was busy in the kitchen and did not come into the rooms,—how could she leave such an abundance of eatables: Klavdia might help herself. When she wanted anything from one of the rooms, she sent Klavdia. Each time Klavdia came into the room, Peredonov trembled, hid the scissors in his pocket and pretended that he was dealing the cards for patience. While Peredonov was in this way depriving the kings and queens of any possibility of their irritating him with their stares, an unpleasantness was approaching him from another side. The hat, which Peredonov had thrown on the stove of his former house in order to keep from wearing it, had been found by Ershova. She suspected that the hat had not been left there by a simple accident: her former tenants detested her and it was likely, Ershova thought, that they had put a spell in the hat which would prevent others from taking the house. In fear and vexation she took the hat to a sorceress. The latter

looked at the hat, whispered something over it mysteriously and severely, spat to each of the four quarters and said to Ershova:

"They've done you some harm and you ought to pay them back. A strong sorcerer has made the spell, but I am more cunning and I will outdo him and I'll get the better of him."

And for a long time she recited her spells over the hat, and having received generous gifts from Ershova she told her that she was to give the hat to a young man with red hair, and that he should take it to Peredonov's house, give it to the first person he met there and then run away without turning round.

As it happened, the first red-haired boy whom Ershova met was one of the locksmith's sons, who had a grudge against Peredonov for revealing their nocturnal prank. He took with great satisfaction the five-kopeck piece Ershova gave him, and on the way he spat zealously into the hat on his own account. He met Varvara herself in the dark hall of Peredonov's house. He stuck the hat into her hand and ran away so quickly that Varvara had not time to recognise him.

Peredonov had barely time enough to blind the last knave, when Varvara entered his room, astonished and rather frightened, and said in a trembling voice:

"Ardalyon Borisitch! Look at this!"

Peredonov looked and almost fell over in his terror. The very hat which he had tried to get rid of was now in Varvara's hands, all crumpled up, dusty, with scarcely a trace of its former magnificence. He asked, panting with fear:

"Where did it come from?"

Varvara recounted in a frightened voice how she had received the hat from a nimble boy who seemed to rise from the ground in front of her and then vanish into it again. She said:

"It must be Ershikha. She has thrown a spell on to your hat. There can't be any doubt about it."

Peredonov mumbled something incoherent, and his teeth chattered with fear. Gloomy fears and forebodings tormented him. He walked up and down frowning and the grey nedotikomka ran under the chairs and sniggered.

The guests arrived early. They brought many tarts, apples and pears to the house warming. Varvara accepted everything gladly, saying, merely from politeness:

"Why did you take the trouble to bring such lovely things?"

But if she thought that someone had brought something poor or cheap she felt angry. She was also displeased when two guests brought the same thing.

They lost no time, but sat down at once to play cards. They played stoukolka.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Grushina suddenly. "I've got a blind king!"

"And my queen has no eyes," said Prepolovensky, examining her cards. "And the knave too!"

The guests laughingly examined their cards. Prepolovsky said:

"I wondered why these cards kept catching each other. That's the reason. I kept feeling. Why is it, I thought, that they have such rough backs? Now I see it comes from these little holes. That's it—it's the backs that are rough!"

Everyone laughed except Peredonov, who looked morose. Varvara said with a smile:

"You know my Ardalyon Borisitch has strange whims. He's always thinking of different tricks."

"Why did you do it?" asked Routilov with a loud laugh.

"Why should they have eyes?" said Peredonov morosely. "They don't need to see!"

Everyone roared with laughter, but Peredonov remained morose and silent. It seemed to him that the blinded figures were making wry faces, mocking at him and winking with the gaping little holes in their eyes.

"Perhaps," thought Peredonov, "they've managed to learn to see with their noses."

He had bad luck, as he nearly always did, and it seemed to him that the faces of the kings, queens and knaves expressed spite and mockery; the queen of spades even gritted her teeth, evidently enraged by his blinding her. Finally, after a heavy loss, Peredonov seized the pack of cards and in his rage began to tear them to shreds. The guests roared with laughter. Varvara said with a smile:

"He's always like that—whenever he takes a drop he always does strange things."

"You mean when he's drunk," said Prepolovensky spitefully. "Do you hear, Ardalyon Borisitch, what your cousin thinks of you?"

Varvara flushed and said angrily:

"Why do you twist my words?"

Prepolovensky smiled and was silent.

A new pack of cards was produced in place of the torn pack, and the game was continued.

Suddenly a crash was heard—a pane of glass was broken and a stone fell on the floor near Peredonov. Under the window could be heard a whispering, laughter and

then quickly receding footsteps. Everyone jumped from his place in alarm; the women screamed—as they always do. They picked up the stone and examined it fearfully; no one ventured near the window—they first sent Klavdia into the street, and only when she came back, saying that the street was deserted, did they examine the broken window.

Volodin suggested that the stone had been thrown by some schoolboys. His guess seemed a likely one, and everyone looked significantly at Peredonov. Peredonov frowned and mumbled something incoherently. The guests began to talk of the boys of the place, remarking how impudent and wild they were.

It was, of course, not the schoolboys, but the locksmith's sons.

"The Head-Master put the boys up to it," announced Peredonov suddenly, "he's always trying to pick a quarrel with me. He's thought of this to annoy me."

"Well, that *is* a fine idea," shouted Routilov with a loud laugh.

Everyone laughed.

Grushina alone said:

"Well, what do you expect? He's such a poisonous man. Anything might be expected of him. He doesn't do it himself, but puts his sons up to it."

"It doesn't make any difference that they're aristocrats," bleated Volodin in an injured tone. "Anything might be expected from aristocrats."

Many of the guests then began to think that perhaps it was time they stopped laughing.

"You seem to have bad luck with glass, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Routilov. "First your spectacles were broken and now they've smashed your window."

This evoked a new outburst of laughter.

"Broken windows mean long life," said Prepolovenskaya with a restrained smile.

When Peredonov and Varvara were going to bed that night, it seemed to him that Varvara had something evil in her mind; he took from her the knives and forks and hid them under the mattress. He mumbled in a slow, dull way:

"I know you: as soon as you marry me you'll inform against me in order to get rid of me. You'll get a pension and I'll be in Petropavlosk jail working on the treadmill."

That night Peredonov's mind wandered. Dim, terrible figures walked about noiselessly, kings and knaves, swinging their sceptres. They whispered to each other, tried to hide from Peredonov, and stealthily crept towards him under the pillow. But soon they grew bolder and began to walk and run and stir around Peredonov

everywhere, upon the floor, upon the bed, upon the pillows. They whispered, they mocked at Peredonov, thrust out their tongues at him, made terrible grimaces before him, stretching out their mouths into deformed shapes. Peredonov saw that they were little and mischievous, that they would not kill him, but were only deriding him, and foreboding evil. But he felt a terrible fear—now he muttered exorcisms, fragments of spells he had heard in his childhood, now he began to curse them and to drive them from him, waving his arms and shouting in a hoarse voice.

Varvara woke and called out irately:

"What are you making such a row about, Ardalyon Borisitch? You won't let me sleep."

"The queen of spades is annoying me. She's got a quilted capote on," mumbled Peredonov.

Varvara rose, grumbling and cursing, and gave Peredonov some medicine.

In the local district newspaper a short article appeared recounting how a certain Madame K. whipped schoolboys who lived in her house—sons of the best local gentry. The notary, Goudayevsky, carried this news over the whole town and waxed indignant.

And various other absurd rumours about the local *gymnasia* went through the town: they talked about the girl who was dressed up as a schoolboy, later the name of Pilnikov came gradually to be mentioned with Liudmilla's. Sasha's companions began to tease him about his love for Liudmilla. At first he regarded their jests lightly, but later he would sometimes get indignant and defend Liudmilla, trying to convince them that nothing of the sort had happened.

This made him ashamed to go to Liudmilla, and yet it drew him more strongly to her: confused, burning feelings of shame and attraction agitated him and vaguely passionate visions filled his imagination.

•—————•

CHAPTER 21

On Sunday when Peredonov and Varvara were lunching, someone entered the hall. Varvara went up to the door stealthily, as was her habit, and looked out. With the same stealthiness she returned to the table and whispered:

"The postman. We'd better give him a vodka—he's brought another letter."

Peredonov silently nodded,—he didn't grudge anyone a glass of vodka. Varvara shouted:

"Postman! Come in here."

The postman entered the room. He rummaged in his bag and pretended to be searching for the letter. Varvara filled a large vodka-glass and cut off a piece of pie. The postman watched her greedily. In the meantime Peredonov was trying to think whom the postman resembled. At last he recalled—he was the same red-pimpled knave who had made him lose so heavily at cards.

"He'll trick me again," thought Peredonov dejectedly, and made a Koukish²⁹ in his pocket.

The red-haired knave gave the letter to Varvara.

"It's for you," he said respectfully, thanked them for the vodka, drank it, grunted with satisfaction, picked up the piece of pie and walked out.

Varvara turned the letter and without opening it held it out to Peredonov.

"There, read it—I think it's from the Princess," she said with a smile. "What's the good of her writing? It would be much better if she gave you the job instead."

Peredonov's hands trembled. He tore open the envelope and quickly read the letter. Then he jumped up from his place, waved the letter and cried out:

"Hurrah! Three inspector's jobs, and I can have which one I want. Hurrah, Varvara, we've got it at last!"

He began to dance and twirl round the room. With his immovably red face and dull eyes he seemed like a monstrously large mechanical dancing doll. Varvara smiled and looked at him happily. He shouted:

"Now it's decided, Varvara—we'll get married."

²⁹ Koukish, a clenched fist with the thumb thrust between the first and second fingers. This gesture is a great insult in Russia. To make it is as much as to say, "A fig for you!"

He caught Varvara by the shoulders and began to whirl her around the table, stamping with his feet.

"A Russian dance, Varvara!" he shouted.

Varvara put her arms akimbo and glided off into a dance, Peredonov danced before her in the Russian squat.

Volodin entered and bleated joyously:

"The future inspector is hopping the *trepak*!"³⁰

"Dance, Pavloushka!" cried Peredonov.

Klavdia looked in at the door. Volodin shouted at her, laughing and grimacing:

"Dance, Klavdiusha, you too! All together! We'll make merry with the future inspector."

Klavdia gave a hoot and glided into the dance, moving her shoulders. Volodin adroitly whirled round in front of her—now he squatted, now he whirled round, now he jumped forward, clapping his hands together. He was especially adroit when he lifted his knee and clapped his hands underneath the knee. The floor vibrated under their heels. Klavdia was overjoyed to have such a clever partner.

When they got tired they sat down at the table and Klavdia ran off into the kitchen laughing gaily. They drank vodka and they drank beer. They jingled bottles and glasses, they shouted, laughed, waved their arms, embraced and kissed each other. Afterwards Peredonov and Volodin went off to the Summer-garden—Peredonov was in a hurry to boast about the letter.

In the billiard-room they found the usual company. Peredonov showed his letter to his friends. It created a great impression. Everyone examined it trustfully. Routilov went pale, muttered something and spat.

"The postman brought it when I was there!" exclaimed Peredonov. "I unsealed the letter myself. That means that there's no mistake."

His friends looked at him with respect. A letter from a Princess!

Peredonov went impetuously from the Summer-garden to Vershina's. He walked quickly and evenly, swinging his arms measuredly and mumbling to himself; his face had no apparent expression of any kind—it was motionless like that of a wound-up doll—and a sort of avid fire gleamed dully in his eyes.

³⁰ A Russian popular dance.

The day turned out clear and warm. Marta was knitting a sock. Her thoughts were confused and devout. At first she thought about sins, but later she turned her thoughts to something more pleasant and began to reflect about virtues. Her thoughts became over-clouded with drowsiness and assumed the forms of definite images, and proportionately at their comprehensibility ceased to be expressible in words, their chimerical contours increased in clearness. The virtues stood up before her like big pretty dolls in white dresses, all shining and fragrant. They promised her rewards, and keys jingled in their hands, and bridal veils fluttered on their heads.

One among them was curious and different from the others. She promised nothing but looked reproachfully, and her lips moved with a noiseless threat; it seemed that if she spoke a word one would feel terrible. Marta guessed that this was Conscience. She was in black, this strange painful visitor, with black eyes, and black hair—and she suddenly began to talk about something very quickly and glibly. She began to resemble Vershina. Marta started, answered something to her question, answered almost unconsciously and then drowsiness again overcame her.

Whether it was Conscience, or whether it was Vershina sitting opposite her, talking quickly and glibly but incomprehensibly, smoking something exotic, this person was assertive, quiet and determined that everything should be as she wanted it. Marta tried to look this tedious visitor straight in the eyes but somehow she couldn't—the visitor smiled strangely, grumbled, and her eyes wandered off somewhere and rested on distant, unknown objects, which Marta found fearful to look at....

Loud talk awakened Marta. Peredonov stood in the summer-house and greeted Vershina in a loud voice. Marta looked around in fear. Her heart beat, her eyes were still half-shut, and her thoughts were still wandering, where was Conscience? Or had she not been there at all? And ought she to have been there?

"Ah, you've been snoozing there," said Peredonov to her. "You were snoring in all sorts of ways. Now you're a pine."³¹

Marta did not understand his pun, but smiled, guessing from the smile on Vershina's lips that something had been said which had to be accepted as amusing.

"You ought to be called Sofya," continued Peredonov.

"Why?" asked Marta.

"Because you're Sonya³² and not Marta."

Peredonov sat down on the bench beside Marta and said:

"I have a very important piece of news."

³¹ "Sosna" means "pine" and "so sna" "from sleep." Peredonov puns on it.

³² Variation on the pun. "Sonya" is another form of "Sofya."

"What sort of news can you have?" said Vershina. "Share it with us."

And Marta immediately envied Vershina because she had such a vast number of words to express the simple question: "What is it?"

"Guess!" said Peredonov in a morose, solemn voice.

"How can I guess what sort of news you have?" replied Vershina. "You tell us, and then we shall know what your news is."

Peredonov felt unhappy because they did not want to try and guess his news. He sat there silently, hunched up awkwardly, dull and heavy, and looked motionlessly before him. Vershina smoked and smiled wryly, showing her dark yellow teeth.

"Why should I guess your news this way?" she said after a short silence. "Let me find it out in the cards. Marta, bring the cards here."

Marta rose but Peredonov gruffly stopped her:

"Sit still, I don't want them. Find out without them, but don't bother me with the cards. But now you can't do it at my expense. I'll show you a trick that'll make you open your mouths wide."

Peredonov took his wallet quickly from his pocket and showed Vershina a letter in an envelope, without letting it go from his hands.

"Do you see?" he said. "Here's the envelope. And here's the letter."

He took out the letter and read it slowly with a dull expression of gratified spite in his eyes. Vershina was dumbfounded. To the very last she had not believed in the Princess, but now she understood that the affair with Marta was conclusively off. She smiled wryly and said:

"Well, you're in luck."

Marta with an astonished and frightened face, smiled in a flustered way.

"Well, what do you think now?" said Peredonov maliciously. "You thought I was a fool, but I've come out best. You spoke about the envelope. Well, here's the envelope. No, there's no mistake about it."

He hit the table with his fist, neither violently nor loudly—and his movement and the sound of his words remained somehow strangely distant, as if he were foreign and indifferent to his own affairs.

Vershina and Marta exchanged glances in a perplexed way.

"Why are you looking at each other?" said Peredonov crossly. "There's nothing for you to look at each other about: everything's settled now and I shall marry Varvara. There were a lot of little girls trying to catch me here."

Vershina sent Marta for cigarettes and Marta gladly ran from the summer-house. She felt herself free and light-spirited as she went over the little sandy paths strewn with the bright-coloured autumn leaves. Near the house she met Vladya barefoot—and she felt even gayer and more cheerful.

"He's going to marry Varvara, that's decided," she said happily in a low voice as she drew her brother into the house.

In the meantime Peredonov, without waiting for Marta, abruptly took his leave.

"I have no time," he said, "getting married is not making a pair of *lapti*."³³

Vershina did not detain him and said good-bye to him coldly. She was intensely vexed: until now she still had kept the frail hope that she would marry Marta to Peredonov and keep Mourin for herself. And now the last hope had vanished.

Marta caught it hot that day! That made her cry.

Peredonov left Vershina and thought he would like to smoke. He suddenly saw a policeman—standing in the corner of the street, shelling dry sunflower seeds.³⁴ Peredonov felt depressed.

"Another spy," he thought, "they're watching so as to have some excuse for finding fault with me."

He did not dare to light the cigarette which he had taken from his pocket, but walked up to the policeman and asked timidly:

"Mr. Policeman, is one allowed to smoke here?"

The policeman touched his cap and inquired respectfully:

"Why do you ask me, sir?"

"A cigarette," explained Peredonov, "may one smoke a cigarette here?"

"There's been no law about it," replied the policeman evasively.

"There hasn't been any?" repeated Peredonov in a depressed voice.

"No, there hasn't been any. We aren't ordered to stop gentlemen from smoking, and if such a rule has been passed I don't know about it."

"If there hasn't been any, then I won't begin," said Peredonov humbly, "I am a law-abiding person. I will even throw the cigarette away. After all, I'm a State Councillor."

³³ *Lapti*, rough shoes worn by the peasants.

³⁴ Russians eat dried sunflower seeds as Americans eat peanuts.

Peredonov crumpled up the cigarette and threw it on the ground, and already began to fear that he had said something inadvised, and walked rapidly home. The policeman looked after him in perplexity and at last decided that the gentleman "had had a drop too much," and, comforted by this, recommenced his peaceful shelling of sunflower seeds.

"The street is standing up on end," muttered Peredonov. The hill ran up a not very steep incline and then went down abruptly on the other side. At the crest of the street between two hovels was a sharp outline against the blue, melancholy evening sky. Poor life seemed to have shut herself in within these quiet narrow limits and suffered keen torments. The trees thrust their branches over the fences, they peered over and obstructed the way, and there was a taunt and menace in their whispering. A ram stood at the cross-roads and looked dully at Peredonov. Suddenly the sound of bleating laughter came from round a corner; Volodin appeared and went to greet Peredonov. Peredonov looked at him gloomily and thought of the ram which had been there a moment ago and had now disappeared.

"That," he thought, "is certainly because Volodin can turn himself into a ram. He doesn't resemble a ram for nothing, and it's difficult to tell whether he's laughing or bleating."

These thoughts so preoccupied him that he did not hear what Volodin was saying to him.

"Why are you kicking me, Pavloushka?" he said dejectedly.

Volodin smiled and said bleatingly:

"I'm not kicking you, Ardalyon Borisitch, I'm shaking hands with you. It's possible that in your village they kick with their hands, but in my village they kick with their feet. And even then it is not people but, if I may say so, ponies."

"You'll butt me yet," growled Peredonov.

Volodin was offended and said in a trembling voice:

"I haven't grown any horns yet, Ardalyon Borisitch, but it's very likely you'll grow them before I do."

"You've got a long tongue that babbles nonsense," said Peredonov angrily.

"If that's your idea of me, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Volodin quickly, "then I'll be silent."

And his face bore an injured expression and his lips protruded; nevertheless he walked at Peredonov's side; he had not yet dined and he counted on having dinner with Peredonov: luckily they had invited him that morning.

An important piece of news awaited Peredonov at home. While still in the hall it was easy to guess that something unusual had happened—a bustling could be heard in the rooms mingled with frightful exclamations. Peredonov at once thought that the dinner was not ready, and that when they saw him coming they had been frightened and were now hurrying. It was pleasant to him to know that they were afraid of him! But it turned out to be quite another matter. Varvara ran out into the hall and shouted:

"The cat's been sent back!"

In her excitement she did not notice Volodin at first. As usual, her dress was untidy—a greasy blouse over a grey dirty skirt and worn-out house slippers. Her hair was uncombed and tousled. She said to Peredonov excitedly:

"It's Irishka again! She's played us a new trick out of spite. She sent a boy here again to throw the cat in here—and the cat has rattles on its tail and they keep on rattling. The cat has got under the sofa and won't come out."

Peredonov felt terribly alarmed.

"What's to be done now?" he asked.

"Pavel Vassilyevitch," said Varvara, "you're younger, fetch the cat out from under the sofa."

"We'll fetch him out, we'll fetch him out," said Volodin with a snigger, and went into the parlour.

Somehow they managed to drag out the cat from under the sofa and took the rattles off his tail. Peredonov found some thistle heads and began to stick them into the cat's fur. The cat spat violently and ran into the kitchen. Peredonov, tired of his messing about with the cat, sat down in his usual position—his elbows on the arms of the chair, his fingers interlaced, his legs crossed, his face motionless and morose.

Peredonov kept the Princess's second letter more zealously than the first: he always carried it about with him in his wallet and showed it to everyone, looking mysterious as he did so. He looked vigilantly to see that no one took the letter away from him. He did not give it into anyone's hands, and after each showing he put it away in his wallet, which he put into the side-pocket of his frock-coat, buttoned up his coat and looked gravely and significantly at his companions.

"Why do you hide it away like that?" Routilov once asked him laughingly.

"As a precaution," said Peredonov morosely, "who can tell? You might take it from me."

"It'd be a case for Siberia," said Routilov with a contemptuous laugh, slapping Peredonov on the back.

But Peredonov preserved an imperturbable dignity. In general he had lately been assuming an air of greater importance. He often boasted:

"I'll be an inspector. You will go sour here, but I shall have two districts to begin with. And then perhaps three, Oh—ho—ho!"

He was quite convinced that he would receive his inspector's position very soon. More than once he said to the schoolmaster, Falastov:

"I'll get you too out of here, old chap."

And the schoolmaster, Falastov, was more respectful in his bearing to Peredonov.

CHAPTER 22

Peredonov began to attend church frequently. He always stood in a conspicuous place. At one time he crossed himself more often than was necessary, at another he stood like a person in a trance and looked stupidly before him. It seemed to him that spies were hiding behind the columns, and were peeping out from there, trying to make him laugh. But he did not yield. Laughter, the quiet, faint laughter, the giggling and the whispering of the Routilov girls, sounded in Peredonov's ears, and grew at times to an extraordinary pitch—as if the cunning girls were laughing straight into his ears, to make him laugh and to disgrace him. But Peredonov did not yield.

At times a smoke-like, bluish nedotikomka appeared among the clouds of incense smoke; its eyes gleamed like little fires; with a slight rustle it lifted itself into the air, though not for long, but for the most part it rolled itself at the feet of members of the congregation, it jeered at Peredonov and tormented him obtrusively. Of course, it wanted to frighten him so that he would leave the church before Mass was over. But he understood its cunning design—and he did not yield.

The church service—so dear to many people not in its words and ceremonies but in its innermost appeal—was incomprehensible to Peredonov. That is why it frightened him. The swinging of the censers frightened him as if it had been a mysterious incantation.

"What's he swinging it so hard for?" he thought.

The vestments of those serving the Mass seemed to him coarse, vari-coloured rags—and when he looked at the array of priests he felt malignant, and he wanted to tear the vestments and break the sacred vessels. The church ceremonies and mysteries seemed to him an evil witchcraft, intended to subject the common people.

"He's crumbled the wafer into the communion cup," he thought angrily of the priest. "It's cheap wine. They deceive the people to get more money for their church celebrations."

The mystery of the eternal transformation of inert matter into a force breaking the fetters of death was for ever hidden from him. A walking corpse! The absurd mingling of unbelief in a living God and His Messiah, with his absurd belief in sorcery!

The people were leaving the church. The village schoolmaster, Machigin, a simple young man, was standing near the girls, smiling and conversing freely with them. Peredonov thought that it was not quite becoming for him to conduct himself so freely before the future inspector. Machigin wore a straw hat. But Peredonov remembered that in the summer he had seen him just outside the town wearing an

official cap with a badge. Peredonov decided to complain about it. As it happened, Inspector Bogdanov was also present. Peredonov walked up to him and said:

"Your Machigin has been wearing a cap with a badge. He's trying to look like a gentleman."

Bogdanov was alarmed, trembled, and his grey Adam's apple quivered.

"He has no right! No right whatever!" he exclaimed anxiously, blinking his red-rimmed eyes.

"He has no right, but he's been wearing it," complained Peredonov. "He ought to be stopped—I told you that long ago. Or else any boor of a muzhik can wear a badge; and what will come of it?"

Bogdanov, who had been frightened by Peredonov before, was even more alarmed.

"How does he dare, eh?" he wailed. "I will call him up at once, at once. And I'll reprimand him most severely."

He left Peredonov and quickly ran off home.

Volodin walked at Peredonov's side and said in a reproachful, bleating voice:

"He's wearing a badge. What do you think of that! As if he had an official rank! Why is it allowed!"

"You mustn't wear a badge either," said Peredonov.

"I mustn't and I don't want to," said Volodin. "Still I sometimes put on a badge—only I know where and when one can do it. I go out of the town and I put it on there. It gives me great pleasure, and there's no one to stop me. And when you meet a muzhik you get more respect——"

"A badge doesn't become your mug, Pavloushka," said Peredonov; "and keep farther off, you're making me dusty with your hoofs."

Volodin relapsed into an injured silence, but still walked beside him. Peredonov said in a preoccupied way:

"The Routilov girls ought to be informed against too. They only go to church to chatter and to laugh. They rouge themselves, they dress themselves up and then go to church. And then they steal incense to make scents of—that's why they have such a strong smell."

"What do you think of that?" said Volodin shaking his head with his bulging, dull eyes.

The shadow of a cloud ran quickly over the ground, and brought a feeling of dread on Peredonov. Sometimes the grey nedotikomka glimmered in the clouds of dust.

Whenever the grass stirred in the wind Peredonov saw the nedotikomka running through it, feeding on the grass.

"Why is there grass in the town?" he thought. "What neglect; it ought to be rooted out."

A twig stirred in the tree, it rolled up, cawed and flew away in the distance. Peredonov shivered, gave a wild cry and ran off home. Volodin ran after him anxiously, and, with a perplexed expression in his bulging eyes, clutched at his bowler hat and swung his stick.

That same day Bogdanov asked Machigin to come and see him. Before entering the inspector's house Machigin stood in the street with his back to the sun, took off his hat and combed his hair with his fingers, noticing from his shadow that his hair was unkempt.

"Explain yourself, young man. What are you thinking of, eh?" Bogdanov assailed Machigin with these words.

"What is the matter?" asked Machigin unconcernedly, playing with his straw hat and swinging his left foot.

Bogdanov did not ask him to sit down as he intended to reprimand him.

"How is it, young man, how is it that you've been wearing a badge, eh? What made you infringe the rule?" he asked, assuming an expression of sternness and shaking his Adam's apple. Machigin flushed but answered boldly:

"What of it? Haven't I a right to?"

"Are you an official, eh? An official?" said Bogdanov excitedly. "What sort of an official are you, eh? A copying clerk, eh?"

"It's a sign of a schoolmaster's calling," said Machigin, boldly, and suddenly smiled as he called to mind what the dignity of a schoolmaster's vocation was.

"Carry a stick in your hand, a stick. That's the sign of your schoolmaster's calling," said Bogdanov shaking his head.

"But please, Sergey Potapitch," said Machigin in an injured tone, "what's the good of a stick? Anyone can do that, but a badge gives a man prestige."

"What sort of prestige, eh? What sort of prestige?" Bogdanov shouted at him. "What sort of prestige do you want, eh? Are you an official?"

"Oh, but forgive me, Sergey Potapitch," said Machigin persuasively and reasonably. "Among the ignorant peasant classes a badge immediately arouses a feeling of respect—they've been much more respectful lately."

Machigin stroked his red moustache in a self-satisfied way.

"It can't be allowed, young man, it can't be allowed under any consideration," said Bogdanov shaking his head stiffly.

"But please, Sergey Potapitch, a schoolmaster without a badge is like the British lion without a tail," protested Machigin. "He's only a caricature."

"What's a tail got to do with it, eh? Why drag in the tail, eh?" said Bogdanov excitedly. "Why are you mixing it up with politics, eh? What business is it of yours to discuss politics, eh? No, young man, you'd better dispense with the badge. For Heaven's sake, give it up. No, it's impossible. How could it be possible. God preserve us, we can't tell who might find it out!"

Machigin shrugged his shoulders and was about to say something else, but Bogdanov interrupted him—what Bogdanov considered a brilliant idea flashed into his head.

"But you came to me without the badge, without the badge, eh? You yourself feel that it's not the right thing to do."

Machigin was nonplussed for a moment, but found an answer even to this:

"As we are rural schoolmasters we need this privilege in the country, but in town we are known to belong to the intellectual classes."

"No, young man, you know very well that this is not allowed. And if I hear of it again we shall have to get rid of you."

From time to time Grushina arranged evening parties for young people, from among whom she hoped to find another husband. To conceal her purpose she also invited married people.

The guests came early to one of these parties.

Pictures covered in thick muslin hung on the walls of Grushina's drawing-room. There was really nothing indecent in them. When Grushina, with an arch, wanton smile, raised these curtains, the guests gazed at badly-drawn figures of naked women.

"Why is this woman so crooked?" asked Peredonov morosely.

"She's not crooked at all," Grushina defended the picture warmly. "She's only bending over."

"She is crooked," repeated Peredonov, "and her eyes are not the same—like yours."

"Much you understand about it," said Grushina offendedly. "These pictures are very good and very expensive. Artists always prefer such models."

Peredonov suddenly burst out laughing: he recalled the advice he had given Vladya a few days ago.

"What are you neighing at?" asked Grushina.

"Nartanovitch, the schoolboy, is going to singe Marta's dress. I advised him to," he explained.

"Let him just do it! He's not such a fool," said Grushina.

"Of course he'll do it," said Peredonov confidently. "Brothers always quarrel with their sisters. When I was a kid I always played tricks on my sisters—I pummelled the little ones and I used to spoil the older ones' clothes."

"Everyone doesn't," said Routilov. "I don't quarrel with my sisters."

"Well, what do you do? Kiss them?" asked Peredonov.

"You are a swine and a scoundrel, Ardalyon Borisitch, I'll give you a black eye," said Routilov calmly.

"I don't like such jokes," said Peredonov, and moved away from Routilov.

"Yes," thought Peredonov, "he might really do it. He's got such a mean face."

"She has only one dress, a black one," he went on, referring to Marta.

"Vershina will make her a new one," said Varvara with spiteful envy, "she'll make all her dowry for her. She's such a beauty that even the horses are frightened," she grumbled on quietly, looking maliciously at Mourin.

"It's time for you to marry too," said Prepolovensky. "What are you waiting for, Ardalyon Borisitch?"

The Prepolovensky already saw that after the second letter Peredonov was determined to marry Varvara. They also believed in the letter. They began to say that they had always been on Varvara's side. There was no good in their quarrelling with Peredonov—it was profitable to play cards with him. As for Genya, there was nothing to do but to wait—they would have to look for another husband.

"Of course you ought to marry," said Prepolovensky. "It will be a good thing in itself, and you'll please the Princess; the Princess will be pleased that you're married, and

so you will please her and you'll do a good thing, yes, a good thing, and yes, really, you'll be doing a good thing and you'll please the Princess."

"Yes, and I say the same thing," said Prepolovensskaya.

But Prepolovensky was unable to stop, and seeing that everyone was walking away from him he sat down beside a young official and began to explain the same thing to him.

"I've decided to get married," said Peredonov, "only Varvara and I don't know how to do it. I really don't know how to go about it."

"It's not such a difficult business," said Prepolovensskaya. "Now, if you like, my husband and I will arrange everything. You just sit still and don't think about anything."

"Very well," said Peredonov, "I'm agreeable. Only everything must be done well and in proper style. I don't mind what it costs."

"Everything will be quite all right, don't worry about that," Prepolovensskaya assured him.

Peredonov continued to state his conditions:

"Other people through stinginess buy thin wedding rings or silver ones gilt over, but I don't want to do that. I want pure gold ones. And I even prefer wedding bracelets to wedding rings—they are more expensive and more dignified."

Everyone laughed.

"Bracelets are impossible," said Prepolovensskaya smiling slightly. "You must have rings."

"Why impossible?" asked Peredonov in vexation.

"Simply because it's not done."

"But perhaps it is done," said Peredonov incredulously. "I will ask the priest. He knows best."

Routilov advised him with a snigger:

"You'd better order wedding belts, Ardalyon Borisitch."

"I haven't got money enough for that," said Peredonov, not noticing the smiles. "I'm not a banker. Only the other day I dreamed that I was being married, and that I wore a velvet frock-coat and that Varvara and I had gold bracelets. And behind us were two head-masters holding the crowns over us, singing 'Hallelujah.'"

"I also had an interesting dream last night," announced Volodin. "But I don't know what it can mean. I was sitting, as it were, on a gold throne with a gold crown on, and there was grass in front of me and on the grass were little sheep, all little sheep, all little sheep, ba-a!—ba-a! And the little sheep walked about and moved their heads like this and kept on their ba-a! ba-a! ba-a!"

Volodin walked up and down the room, shaking his head, protruded his lips and bleated. The guests laughed. Volodin sat down on a chair with an expression of bliss on his face, looked at them with his bulging eyes and laughed with the same sheep-like bleating laughter.

"What happened then?" asked Grushina, winking at the others.

"Well, it was all little sheep and little sheep, and then I woke up," concluded Volodin.

"A sheep has sheepish dreams," growled Peredonov. "It isn't such great shakes being Tsar of the sheep."

"I also had a dream," said Varvara with an impudent smile, "only I can't tell it before men. I'll tell it to you alone."

"Ah, my dear Varvara Dmitrievna, it's strange I had one too," sniggered Grushina, winking at the others.

"Please tell us, we're modest men, like the ladies," said Routilov.

The other men also besought Varvara and Grushina to tell them their dreams. But the pair only exchanged glances, laughed meaningly and would not tell.

They sat down to play cards. Routilov assured everyone that Peredonov played cards well. Peredonov believed him. But that evening he lost as usual. Routilov was winning. This elated him and he talked more animatedly than usual.

The nedotikomka mocked at Peredonov. It was hiding somewhere near by—it would show itself sometimes, peering out from behind the table or from behind someone's back, and then hide again. It seemed to be waiting for something. He felt dismayed. The very appearance of the cards dismayed him. He saw two queens in the place of one.

"And where's the third," thought Peredonov.

He dully examined the queen of spades, then turned it round to see if the third queen was hiding on the back.

Routilov said: "Ardalyon Borisitch is looking behind the queen's shirt."³⁵

³⁵ "Roubaska" generally means "shirt," but also is used to express the "back" of a card. Hence Routilov's pun.

They all laughed.

In the meantime two young police officials sat down to play *douratchki*.³⁶ They played their hands very quickly. The winner laughed with joy and made a long nose at the other. The loser growled.

There was a smell of food. Grushina called the guests into the dining-room. They all went, jostling each other, and with an affected politeness. Somehow they managed to seat themselves.

"Help yourselves, everyone," said Grushina hospitably. "Now then, my dears, stuff without fears to your very ears."

"Eat the cake for the hostess' sake," shouted Mourin gleefully.

He felt very gay, looking at the vodka and thinking about his winnings.

Volodin and the two young officials helped themselves more lavishly than anyone else, they picked out the choicest and most expensive things, and ate caviare greedily.

Grushina said with a forced laugh:

"Pavel Ivanitch is drunk, but still knows the difference between bread and cake." As if she had bought the caviare for him! And under the pretext of serving the ladies she took the best dishes away from him. But Volodin was not disconcerted and was glad to take what was left: he had managed to eat a good deal of the best things and it was all the same to him now.

Peredonov looked at the munchers and it seemed to him that everyone was laughing at him. Why? For what reason? He ate piggishly and greedily everything that came to his hand.

After supper they sat down to play cards again. But Peredonov soon got tired of it. He threw down the cards and said:

"To the devil with you! I have no luck. I'm tired! Varvara, let's go home."

And the other guests got up at the same time. Volodin saw in the hall that Peredonov had a new stick. He smiled and turned the stick over in front of him, asking:

"Ardasha, why are these fingers bent into a little roll? What does it mean?"

Peredonov angrily took the stick from him and put the handle with a Koukish carved out of black wood on it to Volodin's nose and said:

"A fig with butter for you!"

³⁶ Diminutive of "dourak"—fool. A Russian card game.

Volodin looked offended.

"Allow me to say, Ardalyon Borisitch," he said, "that I eat bread with butter, but that I do not want to eat a fig with butter."

Peredonov, without listening to him, was solicitously wrapping up his neck in a scarf and buttoning up his overcoat. Routilov said with a laugh:

"Why are you wrapping yourself up, Ardalyon Borisitch? It's quite warm."

"Health before everything," replied Peredonov.

It was quiet in the street—the street was stretched out in the darkness as if asleep and snored gently. It was dark, melancholy and damp. Heavy clouds moved across the sky. Peredonov growled:

"They've let loose the darkness. Why?"

He was not afraid now—he was walking with Varvara and not alone.

Soon a small, rapid, continuous rain began to fall. Everything was still. And only the rain babbled something obtrusively and quickly, sobbing out incoherent, melancholy phrases.

Peredonov felt in nature the reflection of his own dejection, his own dread before the mask of her hostility to him—he had no conception of that inner life in all nature which is inaccessible to external decrees, the life which alone creates the true, deep and unfailing relations between man and nature, because all nature seemed to him permeated with petty human feelings. Blinded by the illusions of personality and distinct existence he could not understand elemental Dionysian exultations rejoicing and clamouring in nature. He was blind and pitiful, like so many of us.

CHAPTER 23

The Prepolovensky's undertook the arrangement of the wedding. It was decided that they should be married in a village six versts from the town. Varvara felt uneasy about marrying in the town, after they had lived together so many years as relatives. The day fixed for the wedding was concealed. The Prepolovensky's spread a rumour that it was to take place on Friday, but it was really to be on Wednesday. They did it to prevent curiosity seekers from coming to the wedding. Varvara more than once said to Peredonov:

"Ardalyon Borisitch, don't you say a word of when the wedding is to be or they might hinder us."

Peredonov gave the expenses for the wedding unwillingly and with humiliations for Varvara. Sometimes he brought his stick with the Koukish head and said to Varvara:

"Kiss the Koukish and I'll give you the money. If you don't, I won't."

Varvara kissed the Koukish.

"What of that, it won't split my lips," she said.

The date of the wedding was kept secret even from the bride's-men until the day itself, so that they might not chatter about it. At first Routilov and Volodin were invited as bride's-men and both eagerly accepted; Routilov looked for an amusing experience, while Volodin felt flattered to play such an important role at such a distinguished event in the life of such an esteemed personage. Then Peredonov considered that one bride's-man was not enough for him. He said:

"Varvara, you can have one, but I must have two. One isn't enough for me—it will be difficult to hold the crown³⁷ over me. I'm a tall man."

And Peredonov invited Falastov as his second bride's-man.

Varvara grumbled:

"To the devil with him! We've got two, why should we have any more?"

"He's got gold spectacles. He'll look important," said Peredonov.

On the morning of the wedding Peredonov washed in hot water, as he always did, to avoid catching cold, and then demanded rouge, explaining:

"Now I have to rouge myself every day or else they'll think I'm getting old and they won't appoint me as inspector."

³⁷ Crowns are held over the bride and bridegroom at Russian weddings in church.

Varvara disliked giving him any of her rouge, but she had to yield—and Peredonov coloured his cheeks. He muttered:

"Veriga himself paints so as to look younger. You don't expect me to get married with white cheeks."

Then, shutting himself in his bedroom, he decided to mark himself, so that Volodin could not change places with him. On his chest, on his stomach, on his forearms and in various other places he marked in ink the letter "P".

"Volodin ought to be marked too. But how can he be? He would see it and rub it off," thought Peredonov dejectedly.

Then a new thought came into his mind—to put on a pair of corsets so that he should not be taken for an old man if he happened to bend over. He asked Varvara for a pair of corsets, but Varvara's corsets proved to be too tight—they would not come together.

"They ought to have been bought earlier," he said savagely. "You never think of anything in time."

"What man wears corsets?" said Varvara. "No one does."

"Veriga does," said Peredonov.

"Yes, Veriga is an old man, but you, Ardalyon Borisitch, thank God, are in your prime."

Peredonov smiled with self-satisfaction, looked in the mirror and said:

"Of course, I shall live another hundred and fifty years."

The cat sneezed under the bed. Varvara said with a smile:

"There, even the cat's sneezing! That shows it's true."

But Peredonov suddenly frowned. The cat now aroused dread in him and its sneezing seemed to him a sign of ominous cunning.

"He'll sneeze something that's not wanted," he thought, and got under the bed and began to drive the cat out. The cat mewed savagely, pressed against the wall, and suddenly with a loud, piercing mew, jumped between Peredonov's hands and ran out of the room.

"A Dutch devil," Peredonov abused the animal savagely.

"He's certainly a devil," affirmed Varvara. "He's become altogether wild. He won't let himself be stroked, as if the devil had got into him."

The Prepolovensky's sent for the bride's-men early in the morning. At ten o'clock all had gathered at Peredonov's. Grushina also came, and Sofya with her husband. They were handed vodka and the usual *zakouska*.

Peredonov ate little and thought dejectedly as to how he could distinguish himself from Volodin.

"He's curled like a sheep," he thought maliciously, and suddenly imagined that he too might comb his hair in a special way. He rose from the table and said:

"You go on eating and drinking—I don't object; but I'll go to the hairdresser and I'll have my hair done in the Spanish style."

"What is the Spanish style?" asked Routilov.

"Wait and you'll see."

When Peredonov went to get his hair trimmed, Varvara said:

"He's always inventing new notions. He sees devils. If he only drank less gin, the cursed tippler!"

Prepolovenskaya said with a sly smile:

"Well, as soon as you are married, Ardalyon Borisitch will get his place and settle down."

Grushina sniggered. She was amused by the secrecy of this wedding, and she was excited by an intense desire to create an ignominious spectacle of some sort and yet not be mixed up with it. On the day before she had whispered in an underhand way to her friends the place and hour of the wedding. And early that morning she had called in the blacksmith's younger son, had given him a five-kopeck piece, and hinted to him that towards evening he should wait outside the town where the newly married couple would pass, to throw rubbish at them. The boy gladly agreed and gave his sworn promise not to betray her. Grushina reminded him:

"You did give away Cherepnin when they beat you."

"We were fools," said the boy. "Now, let 'em hang us and we won't tell."

And the boy, in confirmation of his oath, ate a small handful of loam. For this Grushina added another three kopecks.

At the hairdresser's Peredonov demanded the barber himself. The barber, a young man who had lately finished a course at the town school and who had read books from the rural library, was just finishing cutting the hair of a landed proprietor. When he had finished, he came up to Peredonov.

"Let him go first," said Peredonov angrily.

The man paid and left. Peredonov sat down in front of the mirror.

"I want my hair trimmed and properly arranged," said he. "I have an important affair on to-day, something special, and so I want my hair arranged in the Spanish style."

The boy apprentice, who stood at the door, snorted with amusement. His master looked sternly at him. He had never had occasion to trim anyone's hair in Spanish style, and did not know what the Spanish style was or even if there were such a style. But if the gentleman demanded such a thing, then it must be assumed that he knew what he wanted. The young hairdresser did not want to betray his ignorance. He said respectfully:

"It's impossible to do it with your hair, sir."

"Why impossible?" said Peredonov taken aback.

"Your hair is badly nourished," explained the hairdresser.

"Do you expect me to pour beer over it?" growled Peredonov.

"Excuse me, why beer?" said the hairdresser affably. "When your hair is trimmed your head shows signs of baldness and what's left isn't enough to do the thing in the Spanish style."

Peredonov felt himself crushed by the impossibility of having his hair trimmed in the Spanish style. He said dejectedly:

"Well, cut it as you like."

He began to wonder whether the hairdresser had been persuaded not to cut his hair in a distinguished style. He ought not to have spoken about it at home. Evidently, while he was walking gravely and sedately along the street, Volodin had run like a little sheep by back streets and had conspired with the hairdresser.

"Would you like a spray, sir?" said the hairdresser, having finished trimming his hair.

"Spray me with mignonette. The more, the better," demanded Peredonov. "You might at least make up by spraying me with plenty of mignonette."

"I'm sorry, but we don't keep mignonette," said the hairdresser in confusion. "How will opopanax do?"

"You can't do anything I want," said Peredonov bitterly. "Go ahead, and spray me with whatever you've got."

He returned home in vexation. It was a windy day. The gates kept banging, yawning and laughing in the wind. Peredonov looked at them dispiritedly. How could he face the drive? But everything arranged itself.

Three carriages were waiting—they had to sit down and drive away at once, in order not to attract attention. Many curiosity mongers might collect and follow them to the wedding, if the carriages waited about too long. They took their places and drove off: Peredonov with Varvara, the Prepolovensky with Rouilov, Grushina with the other bride's-men.

A cloud of dust rose in the square. Peredonov heard a noise of axes. Barely visible through the dust, a wooden wall loomed and grew. They were building a fortress. Muzhiks, savage and morose-looking, glimmered in their red shirts through the dust.

The carriages ran past; the terrible vision flashed by and vanished. Peredonov looked around in terror, but nothing was visible, and he could not decide to tell anyone about his vision.

A sadness tormented Peredonov the whole way. Everything looked hostilely at him. The wind blew ominously. The sky was black. The wind was in their faces and seemed to moan for something. The trees gave no shadow—they kept their shadows within themselves. But the dust rose, a long grey, half-transparent serpent. The sun hid behind the clouds—did it look out from under them?

The road was undulating. Unexpected bushes, copses and fields rose from behind low hillocks, and streams appeared under the hollow-sounding, wooden arched bridges.

"The eye-bird flew by," said Peredonov morosely, looking into the whitish, misty distance of the sky. "One eye and two wings, and nothing more."

Varvara smiled. She thought that Peredonov had been drunk since the morning. But she did not argue with him—"for," she thought, "he might get angry and refuse to go to the wedding."

All four of Rouilov's sisters were already in a corner of the church, hiding behind a column. Peredonov did not see them at first, but later during the ceremony when they appeared from their ambush and came forward, he saw them and felt frightened. They actually did not do anything unpleasant, they did not demand (as he had been afraid at first) that he should chase Varvara away and take one of them. They only kept laughing all the time. And their laughter, quiet at first, resounded louder and more evil in his ears all the time, like the laughter of untameable furies.

There were practically no outsiders in the church. Only two or three old women came from somewhere or other. And this was fortunate, for Peredonov conducted himself curiously and stupidly. He yawned, mumbled, nudged Varvara, complained about the smell of incense, wax and muzhiks.

"Your sisters are always laughing," he grumbled, turning to Rouilov. "They'll perforate their livers with laughing."

Besides that, the nedotikomka disturbed him. It was dirty and dusty and kept hiding under the priest's vestments.

Both Varvara and Grushina thought the church ceremonies amusing. They giggled continuously. The words about a woman cleaving to her husband evoked special merriment. Routilov also giggled. He considered it his duty always and everywhere to amuse the ladies. Volodin conducted himself sedately, and crossed himself, preserving an expression of profundity on his face. The church ceremonies did not suggest to his mind anything but that they were an established custom which ought to be fulfilled, and that the fulfilment of all ceremonies leads one to a certain inner convenience: he went to church on Sundays, and he prayed, and was absolved, he had sinned and repented and again he was absolved. Now this is excellent and convenient—all the more convenient because once outside the church he did not have to think about churchly matters, but was guided entirely by quite different and worldly rules.

The ceremony was barely over and they had not yet had time to leave the church when suddenly a drunken crowd tumbled noisily into the church. It was Mourin and his friends.

Mourin, dusty and tousled, as usual, embraced Peredonov and shouted:

"You can't hide it from us, old boy! We're such fast friends that you can't part us by pouring cold water on us. And yet you hid it from us, you tricky fellow!"

Exclamations came from all sides:

"Villain, you didn't invite us!"

"But we're here all the same!"

"Yes, we found it out without you!"

The new-comers embraced and congratulated Peredonov. Mourin said:

"We missed the way because we stopped for a drink, or else we'd have conferred the pleasure of our company on you earlier."

Peredonov looked at them gloomily and did not reply to their congratulations. Malevolence and fear tormented him.

"They're always tracking me everywhere," he thought dejectedly.

"You might have crossed your foreheads," he said angrily. "Or possibly you were thinking evil against me."

The visitors crossed themselves, laughed and joked. The young officials especially distinguished themselves. The deacon reproached them.

Among the visitors was a young man with red moustaches whom Peredonov did not even know. He resembled a cat to an extraordinary degree. Wasn't it their cat turned into human shape? It was not for nothing that this young man kept snarling—he had not forgotten his cattish habits.

"Who told you?" asked Varvara angrily of the new guests.

"A nice young woman told us," replied Mourin. "But we have forgotten who it was."

Grushina turned around and winked at them. The new guests smiled back but did not give her away. Mourin said:

"As you like, Ardalyon Borisitch, but we're coming with you and you must give us champagne. Don't be a skinflint. You can't pour cold water on such friends as we are, and yet you've tried to get married on the quiet."

When the Peredonovs returned from the wedding the sun had gone down, but the sky was all fiery and golden. But this did not please Peredonov. He growled:

"They've dabbed pieces of gold on the sky and they're falling off. Who ever saw such a waste!"

The locksmith's sons met them just outside the town in a crowd of other street boys. They ran alongside and hooted. Peredonov trembled with fear. Varvara uttered curses, spat at the boys, and showed them the Koukish. The guests and the bride's-men roared with laughter.

At last they reached home. The entire company tumbled into Peredonov's house with a shout, a hubbub and whistling. They drank champagne, then took to vodka and began to play cards. They kept on drinking all night. Varvara got tipsy, danced, and was happy; Peredonov was also happy—Volodin had not yet been substituted for him. As always, the visitors conducted themselves disrespectfully and indecently towards Varvara; this seemed to her to be in the order of things.

After the wedding the Peredonovs' existence changed very little. Only Varvara's attitude towards her husband became more assured and independent. She ran about less for her husband—but, through deep-rooted habit, she was still a little afraid of him. Peredonov, also from habit, shouted at her as he used to do and sometimes even beat her. But he too scented the assurance she had acquired with her new position. And this depressed him. It seemed to him that if she was not so afraid of him as she had been, it was because she had strengthened her criminal idea to leave him and get Volodin into his place.

"I must be on my guard," he thought.

Varvara triumphed. She, together with her husband, paid visits to the town ladies, even to those with whom she was little acquainted. At these visits she showed a ridiculous pride and awkwardness. She was received everywhere though in many houses with astonishment. Varvara had ordered in good time for these visits a hat from the best local modiste. The large vivid flowers set abundantly on the hat delighted her.

The Peredonovs began their visits with the Head-Master's wife. Then they went to the wife of the Marshal of the Nobility.

On the day that the Peredonovs had prepared to make the visits—of which, of course, the Routilovs knew beforehand—the sisters went to Varvara Nikolayevna Khripatch, to see out of curiosity how Varvara Peredonov would conduct herself. The Peredonovs soon arrived. Varvara made a curtsy to the Head-Master's wife, and in a more than usually jarring voice said:

"Well, we've come to see you. Please love us and be kind to us."

"I'm very glad," replied the Head-Master's wife constrainedly. And she seated Varvara on the sofa.

Varvara sat down with obvious pleasure in the place indicated, spread out her rustling green dress, and said, trying to appear at ease:

"I've been a Mam'zell until now, but now I've become a Madam. We're namesakes—I'm Varvara and you're Varvara—and we've not been to each other's houses. While I was a Mam'zell, I sat at home most of the time. What's the good of sitting by one's stove all the time! Now Ardalyon Borisitch and I will live more socially. Grant me a favour—we will come to you and you will come to us, Mossure to Mossure and Madame to Madame."

"But I hear that you're not going to stay here long," said the Head-Master's wife. "I'm told that you and your husband are going to be transferred."

"Yes, the paper will come soon and then we shall leave here," replied Varvara. "But as the paper has not yet come, we must stay here a little longer and show ourselves."

Varvara had hopes of the inspector's position. After the wedding she wrote a letter to the Princess. She had not yet received an answer. She decided to write again at the New Year.

Liudmilla said:

"But we thought, Ardalyon Borisitch, that you were going to marry the young lady, Pilnikov?"

"What's the good of me marrying anyone else?" said Peredonov. "I need patronage."

"But how did your affair with Mademoiselle Pilnikov get broken off," Liudmilla teased him. "Didn't you pay her attentions? Did she refuse you?"

"I'll show her up yet," growled Peredonov morosely.

"That's an *idée fixe* of Ardalyon Borisitch," said the Head-Master's wife with a dry laugh.

CHAPTER 24

The Peredonov's cat acted wildly, snarled and refused to come when called—it had become quite incorrigible. The animal alarmed Peredonov. He sometimes pronounced exorcisms over it.

"I wonder whether it will help," he thought. "There's strong electricity in a cat's fur. That's where the trouble is."

Once the idea came into his mind to have the cat shorn. No sooner thought of than done. Varvara was not at home. She had gone to Grushina's, after having put a bottle of cherry brandy into her pocket. There was no one to hinder her. Peredonov tied the cat on a cord—he had made a collar out of a pocket handkerchief—and led the animal to the hairdresser. The cat mewed wildly, and struggled. Sometimes it threw itself in desperation at Peredonov—but Peredonov kept it at a distance with his stick. A crowd of small boys ran behind him, hooting and laughing. Passers-by paused to look. People looked out of their windows to see what the noise was about. Peredonov morosely dragged the cat along on the cord without the least embarrassment.

He succeeded in getting the cat to the hairdresser and said:

"Shave the cat, barber, the closer the better."

The small boys crowded at the shop door, roaring with laughter and making faces. The hairdresser felt offended and grew red. He said in a slightly trembling voice:

"I beg your pardon, sir, we don't undertake such jobs. And who ever heard of a shaved cat? It must be the very latest fashion which hasn't reached us yet."

Peredonov listened to him with stupefied disappointment. He shouted:

"You'd better admit that you can't do it, incompetent!"

And he walked away, dragging after him the cat, which mewed continuously. On the way he thought dejectedly that everywhere and always everyone laughed at him and no one wanted to help him. His sadness oppressed his heart.

Peredonov went with Volodin and Routilov to the Summer-garden to play billiards. The marker said to them with embarrassment:

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, you can't play to-day."

"Why not?" asked Peredonov irritably.

"Well, I'm sorry to say there are no billiard balls," replied the marker.

"Someone pinched them when he wasn't looking," said the bar-tender sternly, leaning across the counter.

The marker trembled and suddenly twitched his reddened ears, as a hare does, and whispered:

"They were stolen."

Peredonov exclaimed in a frightened voice:

"Good Lord! Who stole them?"

"It's not known," said the marker; "no one seemed to have been here, and then when I went to look for the balls they weren't there."

Routilov sniggered and exclaimed:

"What a funny thing!"

Volodin assumed an injured look and scolded the marker:

"If you allow the billiard balls to be stolen when you are somewhere else and the billiard balls disappear, then you ought to have provided others for us to have something to play with. We come here and want to play, and if there are no billiard balls, how can we play?"

"Don't whine, Pavloushka," said Peredonov, "it's bad enough without you. Now, marker, you go and look for those balls, we must play—but meanwhile bring us a couple of beers."

They began to drink the beer. But it was tedious. The billiard balls could not be found. They wrangled with one another and they cursed the marker. The latter felt guilty and said nothing.

Peredonov detected in this theft a new intrigue, hostile to himself.

"Why?" he thought dejectedly, and could not understand.

He went into the garden, sat down on a bench near the pond—he had never sat there before—and fixed his eyes dully on the weed-clogged water.

Volodin sat down beside him and shared his grief, looking also at the pond with his sheepish eyes.

"Why is there such a dirty mirror here, Pavloushka," said Peredonov, pointing at the pond with his stick.

Volodin smiled and replied:

"It's not a mirror, Ardasha, it's a pond. And as there's no breeze just now the trees are reflected in it as if in a mirror."

Peredonov looked up; a fence on the other side of the pond separated the garden from the street. Peredonov asked:

"Why is the cat on that fence?"

Volodin looked in the same direction and said with a snigger:

"It was there, but it's gone."

There really had been no cat—it was an illusion of Peredonov's—a cat with wide green eyes, his cunning, tireless enemy.

Peredonov began to think about the billiard balls:

"Who needed them? Has the nedotikomka devoured them? Perhaps that's why I haven't seen it to-day," thought Peredonov. "It must have gorged itself and be asleep somewhere now."

Peredonov went home dejectedly.

The sunset was fading. A small cloud was wandering across the sky. She moved stealthily on her soft shoes, and peeped out at him. On her dark edges a reflection smiled enigmatically.

Above the stream, which flowed between the garden and the town, the shadows of the houses and the bushes wavered, whispered to each other, and seemed to be searching for someone.

And on the earth, in this dark and eternally hostile town, all the people he met were evil and malicious. Everything became mingled in a general ill-will towards Peredonov, the dogs laughed at him and the people barked at him.

The ladies of the town began to visit Varvara. Some of them with an eager curiosity had managed to pay a visit on the second or third day, to see how Varvara looked at home. Others delayed a week or more. And still others did not come at all—as, for instance, Vershina.

The Peredonovs awaited return visits every day with anxious impatience; they counted up those who had not yet come. They awaited the Head-Master and his wife with special impatience. They waited and were immensely agitated for fear that the Khripatches should suddenly arrive.

A week had passed. The Khripatches had not yet come. Varvara had got into a temper and began to pour out abuse. This waiting plunged Peredonov into a deeply

depressed state of mind. Peredonov's eyes became entirely vacant. It was as if they were becoming extinguished, and sometimes they seemed like the eyes of a dead man. Absurd fears tormented him. Without any visible cause he began to be afraid of one or another object. An idea somehow came into his head—and tormented him for several days—that they would cut his throat; he was afraid of everything sharp and hid the knives and the forks.

"Perhaps," he thought, "they've been bewitched by whispered spells. It might happen that I might cut myself with them."

"Why are there knives?" he asked Varvara. "Chinamen eat with chopsticks."

For a whole week after this they did not cook any meat, but lived on cabbage-soup and gruel.

Varvara, to get even with Peredonov for the troubles he had caused her before their wedding, sometimes agreed with him and encouraged him to think that his fancies and superstitions had a basis in reality. She told him that he had many enemies and that they had every reason to envy him. More than once she told Peredonov tauntingly that he had been informed against and slandered to the authorities and the Princess. And she rejoiced at his visible fear.

It seemed clear to Peredonov that the Princess was dissatisfied with him. Why couldn't she have sent him for his wedding an ikon or cake. He thought: Oughtn't he to earn her favour? But how? By falsehood? Should he slander someone, calumniate someone, inform against someone? He knew that all women love tittle-tattle—and so couldn't he invent something, something pleasant and *risqué* about Varvara and write it to the Princess? She would laugh and give him the place.

But Peredonov was not able to write the letter, and felt apprehensive about writing to a Princess. And later he forgot all about this scheme.

Peredonov gave ordinary visitors vodka and the cheapest port-wine. But he bought a three-rouble bottle of Madeira for the Head-Master. He considered this wine extremely expensive, kept it in his bedroom and showed it to his visitors, saying:

"It's for the Head-Master!"

Routilov and Volodin were once sitting at Peredonov's. Peredonov showed them the Madeira.

"What's the good of looking at the outside, it doesn't taste well," said Routilov with a snigger, "you might treat us to some of your expensive Madeira."

"What an idea!" exclaimed Peredonov angrily. "What should I give the Head-Master?"

"The Head-Master could drink a glass of vodka," said Routilov.

"Head-Masters don't drink vodka, they have to drink Madeira," said Peredonov reasonably.

"But suppose he likes vodka?" persisted Routilov.

"Good heavens! You don't suppose a general would like vodka!" said Peredonov with conviction.

"All the same you'd better give us some of it," insisted Routilov.

But Peredonov quickly took away the bottle and they heard the click of the lock on the little cupboard in which he kept the wine. When he came back to his guests he began to talk about the Princess to change the conversation. He said quite gravely:

"The Princess! Why she sold rotten apples in the market and managed to get hold of a Prince."

Routilov burst out laughing and shouted:

"Do Princes walk about markets?"

"Oh, she knew how to entice him in," said Peredonov.

"You're making it up, Ardalyon Borisitch, it's a cock-and-bull story," argued Routilov.

"The Princess is a born lady."

Peredonov looked at him malignantly and thought:

"He's defending her. That means he's siding with the Princess. It's clear that she's bewitched him although she lives at a distance."

And the nedotikomka wriggled about him, laughed noiselessly and shook all over with laughter. It reminded Peredonov of various dreadful circumstances. He looked around timidly and whispered:

"In every town there's a sergeant of the gendarmes in the secret service. He wears civilian clothes, sometimes he's in the civil service, sometimes he's a tradesman, or he does something else, but at night when everyone is asleep he puts on his blue uniform and suddenly becomes a sergeant of the gendarmes."

"But why the uniform?" inquired Volodin reasonably.

"Because no one dares to appear before the authorities without a uniform. You might get beaten for doing it."

Volodin sniggered. Peredonov bent over him closer and whispered:

"Sometimes he even lives in the shape of a were-wolf. You may think it's simply a cat, but that's an error, it's really a gendarme running about. No one hides from a cat, and he listens to everything that's said."

At last, after a week and a half, the Head-Master's wife paid a visit to Varvara. She arrived with her husband on a week-day at four o'clock, all dressed up, attractive-looking, bringing a perfume of violets with her—altogether unexpectedly for the Peredonovs, who for some reason had expected the Khripatches on a Sunday, earlier in the day. They were dumbfounded. Varvara was in the kitchen half-dressed and dirty. She rushed away to get dressed and Peredonov received the visitors, looking as if he had been just awakened.

"Varvara will be here immediately," he mumbled, "she's dressing herself. She was working—we have a new servant who doesn't understand our ways. She's a hopeless fool."

Soon Varvara came in, dressed somehow, with a flushed, frightened face. She extended to her visitors a dirty, damp hand, and said in a voice trembling with agitation:

"You must forgive me for keeping you waiting—we didn't expect you on a week-day."

"I seldom go out on a Sunday," said Madame Khripatch. "There are drunkards in the street. I let my servant-maid have her day out."

The conversation somehow started, and the kindness of the Head-Master's wife somewhat encouraged Varvara. Madame Khripatch treated Varvara with a slight contemptuousness, but graciously—as with a repented sinner who had to be treated kindly but who might still soil one's hands. She gave Varvara several hints, as if incidentally, about clothes and housekeeping.

Varvara tried to please the Head-Master's wife, but her red hands and chapped lips still trembled with fear. This embarrassed Madame Khripatch. She tried to be even more gracious, but an involuntary fastidiousness overcame her. By her whole attitude she showed Varvara that there could never be a close acquaintance between them. But she did this so graciously that Varvara did not understand, and imagined that she and Madame Khripatch would become great friends.

Khripatch had the look of a man out of his element, but he concealed the fact skilfully and manfully. He refused the Madeira on the ground that he was not used to drinking wine at that hour of the day. He talked about the local news, about the approaching changes in the composition of the district court. But it was very noticeable that he and Peredonov moved in different circles of local society.

They did not make a long visit. Varvara was glad when they left; they just came and went. She said with relief as she took off her clothes:

"Well, thank God they've gone. I didn't know what to talk to them about. When you don't know people you can't tell how to get at them."

Suddenly she remembered that when the Khripatches left they had not invited her to their house. This distressed her at first, but afterwards she thought:

"They'll send a card with a note when to come. Gentry like them have a time for everything. I suppose I ought to have a go at French. I can't even say 'Pa' and 'Ma' in French."

When they got home the Head-Master's wife said to her husband:

"She's simply pitiful, and hopelessly vulgar; it's utterly impossible to be on equal terms with her. There's nothing in her to correspond with her position."

Khripatch replied:

"She fully corresponds with her husband. I'm impatiently waiting for them to take him away from us."

After the wedding Varvara began to drink now and then—most frequently with Grushina. Once when she was a little tipsy Prepolovensskaya was at her house and Varvara blabbed about the letter. She didn't tell everything but she hinted sufficiently clearly. This was enough for the cunning Sofya—it was a sudden revelation to her.

"But why didn't I guess it at once," she mentally reproached herself. She told Vershina in confidence about the forged letters—and from her it spread all over the town.

Prepolovensskaya could not help laughing at Peredonov's credulousness whenever she met him.

She said to him:

"You're very simple, Ardalyon Borisitch."

"I'm not simple at all," he replied, "I'm a graduate of a University."

"You may be a graduate, but anyone who wants to can take you in."

"I can take in everyone myself," argued Peredonov.

Prepolovensskaya smiled slyly and left him. Peredonov was dully perplexed.

"What does she mean? It's out of spite," he thought. "Everyone's my enemy."

And he made a Koukish after her.

"You'll get nothing out of me," he thought, consoling himself, but he was tormented by dread.

Her hints did not seem very satisfactory to Prepolovensskaya. But she did not want to tell him everything in plain words. Why should she quarrel with Varvara? From time to time she sent Peredonov anonymous letters in which the hints were clearer. But Peredonov misunderstood them.

Sofya once wrote him:

"You had better see whether that Princess, who wrote you the letter, doesn't live here."

Peredonov thought that perhaps the Princess had really come to the town to watch his movements.

"It's obvious," he thought, "that she's in love with me and wants to get me away from Varvara."

And these letters both frightened and angered him. He kept asking Varvara:

"Where is the Princess? I hear that she has come to the town."

Varvara, to get even with him for what had happened before the marriage, tormented him with vague hints, taunts and half-timid, malignant insinuations. She smiled insolently, and said to him in that strained voice which is usually heard from a person who lies knowingly without the hope of being believed:

"How should I know where the Princess lives now?"

"You're lying—you do know!" said Peredonov in terror.

He did not know what to believe—the meaning of her words, or the lie betrayed in the sound of her voice—and this, like everything he did not understand, terrified him. Varvara retorted:

"What an idea! Perhaps she left Peter for somewhere else. She doesn't have to ask me when she goes away."

"But perhaps she really has come here?" asked Peredonov timidly.

"Perhaps she really has come here!" Varvara mimicked him. "She's smitten with you and she's come here to see you."

"You're a liar! Is it likely that she'd fall in love with me?"

Varvara laughed spitefully.

From that time Peredonov began to look about attentively for the Princess. Sometimes it seemed to him that she was looking in at the window, through the door, eavesdropping, and whispering with Varvara.

Time passed by and the paper, announcing his appointment as inspector, so eagerly expected day after day, still did not come. He had no private information of the situation. Peredonov did not dare to find out from the Princess herself—Varvara constantly frightened him by saying that the Princess was a very great lady, and he thought that if he wrote to her it might cause him extreme unpleasantness. He did not know precisely what they could do to him if the Princess complained of him, but this made him think of dreadful possibilities. Varvara said to him:

"Don't you know aristocrats? You must wait until they act of themselves. But once you remind them, they get offended, and it'll be the worse for you. They're so touchy. They're proud, and they like to be taken at their word."

And Peredonov was still credulous. But he got angry with the Princess. Sometimes he even thought that the Princess would inform against him in order to rid herself of her obligations to him. Or else she would inform against him because he had married Varvara when perhaps she herself was in love with him. That was why she had surrounded him with spies, he thought, who kept an eye on him everywhere. They had so hemmed him in that he had no air to breathe, no light. She was not an eminent lady for nothing. She could do whatever she liked. From spite he invented most unlikely stories about the Princess. He told Routilov and Volodin that he had formerly been her lover and that she had given him large sums of money.

"But I've drunk it all away," he said. "Why the devil should I save it! She also promised me a pension for life, but she took me in over that."

"And would you have accepted it?" asked Routilov with a snigger.

Peredonov was silent. He did not understand the question. But Volodin answered for him gravely and judiciously:

"Why not accept it, if she's rich? She's gratified herself with pleasures and she ought to pay for them."

"If she were at least a beauty," said Peredonov mournfully. "She's freckled and pugnosed. She paid very well, otherwise I wouldn't even want to spit at the hag! She must attend to my request."

"You're a liar, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Routilov.

"A liar! What an idea! Do you suppose she paid me for nothing? She's jealous of Varvara, and that's why she doesn't give me the job at once."

Peredonov did not feel any shame when he said that the Princess paid him. Volodin was a credulous listener, and did not notice the absurdities and contradictions in his stories. Routilov protested, but thought that without fire there can be no smoke. He thought there must have been something between Peredonov and the Princess.

"She's older than the priest's dog,"³⁸ said Peredonov convincingly, as if it were to the point; "but see that you don't blab about it, because it might come to her ears and do no good. She paints herself, and she tries to make herself as young as a sucking-pig by injecting things in her veins. And you know that she's old. She's really a hundred."

Volodin nodded his head and clicked his tongue affirmatively. He believed it all.

It so happened that on the day after this conversation Peredonov read Krilov's fable, "The Liar." And for several days afterwards he was afraid to go over the bridge, but crossed the river in a boat, for fear that the bridge should tumble down.³⁹

He explained to Volodin:

"What I said about the Princess was the truth, only the bridge might take a sudden notion not to believe my story, and tumble down to the devil."

³⁸ There is a popular Russian tale about a priest who had a very old dog. It begins, "The priest had a dog ..."

³⁹ Krilov's fable is of a returned traveller who tells his friend at home about a cucumber he saw at Rome as large as a mountain. The incredulous friend tells him about one of the home wonders—a bridge which tumbles every liar who attempts to cross it into the river. The traveller gradually reduces the size of the cucumber, but even then he finally suggests that they find a place where they might ford the stream.

CHAPTER 25

Rumours of the forged letters spread about the town. Conversations about them preoccupied the townsmen and gave them great pleasure. Nearly everyone took Varvara's part and was glad that Peredonov had been made a fool of. And all those who had seen the letters asserted as with one voice that they had guessed it at once. Especially great was the rejoicing in Vershina's house: Marta, though she was going to marry Mourin, had nevertheless been rejected by Peredonov; Vershina wanted Mourin for herself but she had to yield him to Marta; Vladya had his obvious reasons for hating Peredonov and for rejoicing at his discomfiture. Though he felt vexed to think that Peredonov would remain at the *gymnasia*, still this vexation was outweighed by his pleasure at the fact that Peredonov had been let down badly. And besides this, during the last few days there was a persistent rumour that the Head-Master had informed the Director of the National Schools that Peredonov was out of his mind. And someone was going to be sent to examine him, after which he would be taken away.

Whenever her acquaintances met Varvara they would refer more or less openly to her stratagem, accompanying their words with coarse jokes and impudent winks. She would smile insolently and would not admit it, but she did not deny it.

Others hinted to Grushina that they knew of her share in the forgery. She was frightened and came to Varvara, reproaching her for gossiping too much. Varvara said to, her with a smile:

"Now, don't make such a fuss. I never had the least intention of telling anyone."

"How did they find it out then?" asked Grushina hotly. "Of course I shouldn't tell anyone, I'm not such a fool."

"And I haven't told anyone," asserted Varvara.

"I want the letter back," demanded Grushina, "or else he'll begin to look at it closely and he'll recognise from the handwriting that it's a forgery."

"Well, let him find out!" said Varvara. "Why should I stop to consider a fool?"

Grushina's eyes gleamed and she shouted:

"It's all very well for you who've got all you wanted, but I might be jailed on your account! No, I must have that letter, whatever you do. Because they can unmarry you as well, you know."

"That's all nonsense," replied Varvara with her arms insolently akimbo. "You might announce it in the market-place, but you couldn't undo the marriage."

"Not nonsense at all," shouted Grushina. "There is no law that permits you to marry through deception. If Ardalyon Borisitch should let the authorities know about this affair and the affair went up to the Higher Court they'd settle your hash for you."

Varvara got frightened and said:

"Now don't be angry—I'll get you the letter. There's nothing to be afraid of—I'll not give you away. I'm not such a beast as all that. I've got a soul too."

"What's a soul got to do with it?" said Grushina harshly. "A dog and a man have the same breath, but there is no soul. You live while you live."

Varvara decided to steal the letter, though this was difficult. Grushina urged her to hurry. There was one hope—to take the letter from Peredonov when he was drunk. And he drank a great deal now. He had even not infrequently appeared at the *gymnasia* in a rather tipsy state and had made unpleasant remarks which had aroused repugnance in even the worst of the boys.

Once Peredonov returned from the billiard saloon more drunk than usual: they had baptised the new billiard balls. But he never let go of his wallet. As he managed to undress somehow, he stuck it under his pillow. He slept restlessly but profoundly, and during his sleep his mind wandered and he babbled about something terrible and monstrous. And these words inspired Varvara with a painful apprehension.

"Well, it's nothing," she encouraged herself. "So long as he doesn't wake up."

She had tried to waken him. She nudged him—he only muttered something and cursed violently, but did not awaken. Varvara lit a candle and placed it so that the light should not fall into Peredonov's eyes. Numb with terror, she rose in the bed and slipped her hand under Peredonov's pillow. The wallet was quite close but for a long time it seemed to elude her fingers. The candle burned dimly. Its light wavered. Timorous shadows ran on the walls and on the bed—evil little devils flashed by. The air was close and motionless. There was a smell of badly-distilled vodka. Peredonov's snores and drunken ravings filled the bedroom. The whole place was like the incarnation of a nightmare.

Varvara took the letter with trembling hands and replaced the wallet. In the morning Peredonov looked for his letter, failed to find it, and shouted in a fright:

"Where's the letter, Varya?"

Varvara felt very much afraid but concealed it and said:

"How should I know, Ardalyon Borisitch? You keep showing it to everyone, you must have dropped it. Or else someone has stolen it from you. You have a lot of friends and acquaintances that you get drunk with at night."

Peredonov thought that the letter had been stolen by his enemies, most likely by Volodin. The letter was now in Volodin's hands and later he would get the other papers and the appointment into his clutches, and he would go away to his inspectorship while Peredonov remained a disappointed beggar.

Peredonov decided that he must defend himself. Every day he wrote denunciations of his enemies: Vershina, the Routilovs, Volodin, his colleagues, who, it seemed to him, had their eye on the same position. In the evening he would take these denunciations to Roubovsky.

The Officer of the gendarmerie lived in a prominent place on the square near the *gymnasia*. Many people observed from their windows how often Peredonov entered the gates of the Officer of the gendarmerie.

But Peredonov thought that he was unobserved. He had good reason to take these denunciations at night, by the back way through the kitchen.

He kept the papers under his coat. It was noticeable at once that he was holding something. When it happened that he had to take his hand out to shake hands with someone, he clutched the papers under his coat with his left hand, and imagined that no one would guess that anything was there. When his acquaintances asked him where he was going he lied to them very clumsily, but was very satisfied himself with his awkward inventions.

He explained to Roubovsky:

"They're all traitors. They pretend to be your friends so as to be more certain of deceiving you. But none of them stop to think that I know things about them that would send them all to Siberia."

Roubovsky listened to him in silence. The first denunciation, which was patently absurd, he sent to the Head-Master, and he did the same thing with several others. He kept certain others in case he should need them. The Head-Master wrote to the Director of National Schools that Peredonov was showing clear symptoms of mental disease.

At home Peredonov constantly heard ceaseless, exasperating and mocking rustlings. He said to Varvara dejectedly:

"Someone's walking about on tip-toe. There are so many spies in the house, jostling each other. Varya, you're not taking care of me."

Varvara did not understand the meaning of Peredonov's ravings. At one time she taunted him, at another she felt afraid. She said to him malignantly and yet with fear:

"You see all sorts of things when you're drunk."

The door to the hall seemed especially suspicious to Peredonov. It did not close tightly. The crevice between the two halves hinted at something that was hiding outside. Wasn't it the knave who was peeping through it? Someone's evil, penetrating eye gleamed behind it.

The cat followed Peredonov everywhere with its wide, green eyes. Sometimes it blinked its eyes, sometimes it mewed fearfully. It was obvious that the animal wanted to catch Peredonov at something, but it could not and was therefore angry. Peredonov exorcised the cat by spitting, but the cat remained unmoved.

The nedotikomka ran under the chair and in the corners, and squealed. It was dirty, evil-smelling, repulsive and terrifying. It was already quite clear that it was hostile to Peredonov, and rolled in entirely on his account, and that it had not existed anywhere before. It had been created—and it had been bewitched. And this evil, many-eyed beast lived here to his dread and to his perdition—followed him, deceived him, laughed at him—now rolled upon the floor, now turned into a rag, a ribbon, a twig, a flag, a small cloud, a little dog, a pillar of dust in the street, and everywhere it crawled and ran after Peredonov. It harassed him, it wearied him with its vacillating dance. If only someone would deliver him from it, with a word or with a downright blow. But he had no friends here, there was no one to come to save him. He must use his own cunning or the malicious beast would ruin him.

Peredonov thought of a device. He smeared the entire floor with glue so that the nedotikomka should get stuck. What did stick to the floor was the soles of Varvara's shoes and the hems of her dress, but the nedotikomka rolled on freely and laughed shrilly. Varvara abused him loudly.

Persistent suspicions of being under constant persecution frightened him. More and more he became immersed in a world of wild illusions. This reflected itself in his face, which became a motionless mask of terror.

In the evenings Peredonov no longer went to play billiards. After dinner he shut himself in his bedroom, barricaded the room with various objects—a chair upon a table—and very carefully surrounded himself with crosses and exorcisms and sat down to write denunciations against everyone he could think of. He wrote denunciations not only against people but against playing-card queens. As soon as he had written one he would take it immediately to the Officer of the gendarmerie. And in this way he spent every evening.

Everywhere card-figures walked before Peredonov's eyes, as if they were alive—kings, queens and knaves. Even the other cards walked about. These consisted of people with silver buttons: schoolboys and policemen. There was the ace of spades—stout, with a protruding stomach, almost entirely stomach. Sometimes the

cards became transformed into his acquaintances. Living people were mixed up with these strange phantasms.

Peredonov was convinced that a knave was standing behind the door and that he had strength and power—something like a policeman's—and that he could take you away somewhere to some terrible jail. Under the table sat the nedotikomka. And Peredonov was afraid to glance either under the table or behind the door.

The nimble eights of the pack, like little boys, mocked at Peredonov—these were the phantasms of schoolboys. They lifted their legs with strange, stiff movements, like the legs of a compass, but their legs were shaggy and with hoofs. Instead of tails they had whipping rods, which they swung with a swish, and at each flourish they gave a squeak. The nedotikomka grunted from under the table, and laughed at the play of these eights. Peredonov thought with rage that the nedotikomka would not have dared to come to an official.

"They surely wouldn't let it in," he thought enviously. "The lackeys would drive it out with their mops." At last Peredonov could no longer stand its evil, insolently shrill laughter. He brought an axe from the kitchen and he split the table under which the nedotikomka was hiding. The nedotikomka squeaked piteously and furiously. It dashed out from under the table and rolled away. Peredonov trembled. "It might bite," he thought, and screamed with terror and sat down, but the nedotikomka hid itself peacefully. Not for long....

Sometimes Peredonov took the cards and with a ferocious expression on his face cut the heads off the court cards. Especially those of the queens. In cutting the kings, he glanced around him so as not to be detected and not to be accused of a political crime. But even these executions did not help for long. Visitors came, cards were brought and evil spies again took possession of the cards.

Peredonov already began to consider himself a secret criminal. He imagined that even from his student days he had been under the surveillance of the police. For some reason he thought that they were watching him. This terrified and yet flattered him.

The wind stirred the wall-paper. It shook with a quiet, evil rustling. And soft half-shadows glided over their vividly coloured patterns. "There's a spy hiding behind the wall-paper," thought Peredonov sadly. "Evil people! No wonder they put the paper on the wall so unevenly and so poorly, for a skilful, patient, flat villain to creep in and hide behind. Such things have happened even before."

Confused recollections stirred in his mind. Someone had hidden behind the wall-paper; someone had been stabbed either with a poignard or an awl. Peredonov bought an awl. And when he returned home the wall-paper stirred unevenly and restlessly—a spy felt his danger and was perhaps trying to creep in farther. A shadow jumped to the ceiling and there threatened and grimaced.

Peredonov was infuriated. He struck the wall-paper impetuously with the awl. A shiver ran over the wall. Peredonov began to sing triumphantly and to dance, brandishing the awl. Varvara came in.

"Why are you dancing by yourself, Ardalyon Borisitch?" she asked, smiling stupidly and insolently as always.

"I've killed a beetle," explained Peredonov morosely.

His eyes gleamed in wild triumph. Only one thing annoyed him; the disagreeable odour. The murdered spy stank putridly behind the wall-paper. Horror and triumph shook Peredonov—he had killed an enemy! He had hardened his heart to the very end of the deed. It was not a real murder—but for Peredonov it was quite real. A mad horror had forged in him a readiness to commit the crime—and the deep, unconscious image of future murder, dormant in the lower strata of spiritual life, the tormenting itch to murder, a condition of primitive wrath, oppressed his diseased will. The ancient Cain—overlaid by many generations—found gratification in his breaking and damaging property, in his chopping with the axe, in his cutting with the knife, in his cutting down trees in the garden to prevent the spies from looking out behind them. And the ancient demon, the spirit of prehistoric confusion, of hoary chaos, rejoiced in the destruction of things, while the wild eyes of the madman reflected horror, like the horror of the death agonies of some monster.

And the same illusions tormented him again and again. Varvara, amusing herself at Peredonov's expense, sometimes hid herself behind the door of the room where he was sitting, and talked in assumed voices. He would get frightened, walk up quietly to catch the enemy—and find Varvara.

"Whom were you whispering to?" he asked sadly.

Varvara smiled and replied:

"It only seemed to you, Ardalyon Borisitch."

"Surely everything doesn't merely seem to me," muttered Peredonov sadly. "There must be also truth upon the earth."

Even Peredonov, in common with all conscious life, strove towards the truth, and this striving tortured him. He was not conscious that he, like all people, was striving towards the truth, and that was why he suffered this confused restlessness. He could not find the truth he sought, and he was caught in the toils and was perishing.

His acquaintances began to taunt him with being a dupe. With the usual cruelty of our town towards the weak, they talked of this deception in his presence.

Prepolovensky asked with a derisive smile:

"How is it, Ardalyon Borisitch, that you haven't gone away to your inspector's job yet?"

Varvara answered for him with suppressed anger:

"We shall get the paper soon, and we shall leave at once."

But these questions depressed him.

"How can I live, if the place isn't given to me?" he thought.

He kept devising new plans of defence against his enemies. He stole the axe from the kitchen and hid it under the bed. He bought a Swedish knife and always carried it about in his pocket. He frequently locked himself in his room. At night he put traps around the house and in the rooms and later he would examine them. These traps were, of course, so constructed that they could not catch anyone. They gripped but could not hold anyone, and it was easy to walk away with them. But Peredonov had no technical knowledge and no common sense. When he saw each morning that no one was caught Peredonov imagined that his enemies had tampered with the traps. This again frightened him.

Peredonov watched Volodin with special attention. He frequently went to Volodin when he knew that Volodin would not be at home and rummaged among the papers to see if there were any stolen from himself.

Peredonov began to suspect what the Princess wanted—it was that he should love her again. She was repugnant to him, a decrepit old woman.

"She's a hundred and fifty years old," he thought with vexation. "Yes, she's old, but then how powerful she is!" And his repulsion became mingled with an allurements. "She's an almost cold little old woman, she smells slightly of a corpse," he imagined, and he felt faint with a savage voluptuousness.

"Perhaps it would be possible to arrange a meeting, and her heart would be touched. Oughtn't I to send her a letter?"

This time Peredonov, with slight hesitation, composed a letter to the Princess. He wrote:

"I love you, because you are cold and remote. Varvara perspires, it is hot to sleep with her, it is like the breath of an oven. I would like to have a cold and remote love. Come here and respond to me."

He wrote it and posted it—and then repented.

"What will come of it?" he thought. "Perhaps I ought not to have written. I should have waited until the Princess came here."

This letter was an accidental occurrence, like so much that Peredonov did—he was like a corpse moved by external powers, and moved as if these powers had no desire to busy themselves with him for long: one would play with him and then cast him to another.

Soon the nedotikomka reappeared—for a long time it rolled around Peredonov as if it were on the end of a lasso, and kept mocking him. And it was now noiseless, and laughed only with a shaking of its body. The evil, shameless beast flared up with dimly golden sparks—it threatened and burned with an intolerable triumph. And the cat threatened Peredonov; its eyes gleamed and it mewed arrogantly and fiercely.

"Why are they so glad?" thought Peredonov dejectedly, and suddenly understood that the end was approaching, that the Princess was already here, close, quite close. Perhaps she was in this very pack of cards.

Yes, undoubtedly she was the queen of spades or the queen of hearts. Perhaps she was hiding in another pack, or in other cards, but he did not know what she looked like. The difficulty was that Peredonov had never seen her. It would be useless to ask Varvara—she would tell lies.

At last Peredonov thought he would burn the whole pack. Let them all burn! If they creep into the cards to his ruin, then it's their own fault.

Peredonov chose a time when Varvara was not at home. The stove in the parlour was alight—and he threw all the cards into the stove. With a crackling the marvellous pale red flowers opened out—they burned but were black at the edges. Peredonov looked in horror at these flaming blossoms.

The cards contracted, bent over and moved as if they were trying to escape from the stove.

Peredonov caught hold of the poker and began to beat the lighted cards with it. There was a shower of tiny bright sparks on all sides—and suddenly in a bright, wild riot of sparks the Princess rose out of the fire, a little ash-grey woman, bestrewn with small dying sparks; she wailed piercingly in her shrill voice and hissed and spit on the flames.

Peredonov fell backward. He cried out in horror. The darkness embraced him, tickled him, and laughed with a thousand jarring little noises.

CHAPTER 26

Sasha was fascinated by Liudmilla, but something prevented him from talking about her to Kokovkina. He felt somehow ashamed, and sometimes he came to be afraid of her visits. His heart would feel faint and his eyebrows contract involuntarily when he saw her rose-yellow hat pass quickly under his window. Nevertheless he awaited her with anxiety and impatience—he was sad when she did not come for a long time. Contradictory feelings were mingled in his soul, feelings dark and vague—morbid because premature, and sweet because morbid.

Liudmilla had called neither yesterday nor to-day. Sasha exhausted himself with waiting and had already ceased to expect her. Suddenly she came. He grew radiant and rushed forward to kiss her hand.

"Well, have you forgotten me?" he reproached her. "I haven't seen you for two days."

She laughed happily and a sweet, languid and piquant odour of Japanese *funkia* emanated from her, as if it came from her light hair. Liudmilla and Sasha went out for a walk in the town. They invited Kokovkina but she would not go.

"How could an old woman like me go out with you? I'd only get in your way. You'd better go out by yourselves."

"But we'll get into mischief," laughed Liudmilla.

The warm, languid air caressed them and called to remembrance the irrevocable. The sun, as if diseased, burned dimly and lividly in the pale, tired sky. The dry leaves lay humbly on the dark earth, dead.

Liudmilla and Sasha went into a hollow. It was cool, refreshing, almost damp there—a tender autumn weariness reigned there within its shady slopes.

Liudmilla walked in front. She lifted her skirt. She showed her small shoes and flesh-coloured stockings. Sasha looked on the ground, so as not to stumble over roots, and saw the stockings. It seemed to him that she had put on shoes without stockings. He flushed. He felt giddy.

"If only I could fall suddenly before her," he thought, "snatch off her shoes, and kiss her delicate feet!"

Liudmilla instinctively felt Sasha's passionate glance, his impatient desire. She laughed and turned to him with a question:

"Are you looking at my stockings?"

"No, I—er——" mumbled Sasha in confusion.

"What dreadful stockings I've got on," said Liudmilla laughing and not listening to him. "It almost looks as if I had put my shoes on my bare feet—they're absolutely flesh-coloured. Don't you think they're dreadfully ridiculous stockings?"

She turned her face to Sasha and lifted the hem of her dress.

"Aren't they ridiculous?" she asked.

"No, they're beautiful," said Sasha, red with embarrassment.

Liudmilla pretended to be surprised, raised her eyebrows and exclaimed:

"And what do you know about beauty?"

Liudmilla laughed and walked on. Sasha, burning with confusion, walked uneasily after her, stumbling frequently.

They managed to get through the hollow. They sat down on a birch trunk thrown down by the wind. Liudmilla said:

"My shoes are full of sand. I can't go on any further." She took off her shoes, shook out the sand and looked archly at Sasha.

"Do you think it's a pretty foot?" she asked.

Sasha flushed even more and did not know what to say. Liudmilla pulled off her stockings.

"Don't you think they're very white feet?" she asked and smiled strangely and coquettishly. "Down on your knees! Kiss them!" she said severely, and a commanding severity showed on her face.

Sasha went down on his knees quickly and kissed Liudmilla's feet.

"It's much nicer without stockings," said Liudmilla as she placed her stockings in her pocket and stuck her feet into her shoes. And her face again became gay and calm as if Sasha had not just been on his knees before her, kissing her naked feet.

Sasha asked:

"Won't you catch cold, dear?"

His voice sounded tender and tremulous. Liudmilla laughed.

"What a notion! I'm used to it. I'm not so delicate as that."

Liudmilla once came to Kokovkina's just before dusk and called Sasha:

"Come and help me put up a new shelf."

Sasha loved to knock nails in, and somehow he had promised to help Liudmilla in arranging her room. And now he eagerly consented, glad that there was an innocent pretext to go to Liudmilla's house. And now the innocent, pungent odour of essence of *muguet* blew from Liudmilla's greenish dress and gently soothed him.

For the work Liudmilla redressed herself behind a screen, and came out to Sasha in a short, spruce skirt, and short sleeves, perfumed with the pleasant, languid, pungent Japanese *funkia*.

"Oh, but how spruced up you are!" said Sasha.

"Yes, I am," said Liudmilla laughing. "Look, my feet are bare," she said, drawling out her words in a half-ashamed, half-provoking way.

Sasha shrugged his shoulders and said:

"You're always spruce. Well, let's begin to work. Have you got any nails?"

"Wait a bit," replied Liudmilla. "Sit still a moment with me. You seem as if you had come on business and found it a bore to talk to me."

Sasha flushed and said tenderly:

"Dear Liudmillotchka, I would like to sit with you as long as you want, until you drove me out, but I've got my lessons to do."

Liudmilla sighed and said slowly:

"You're getting handsomer, Sasha."

Sasha reddened, laughed and protruded the end of his curled-up tongue.

"What a thing to say! You might think I was a girl from the way you talk."

"A beautiful face, but what kind of body? You might show it, at least to the waist," entreated Liudmilla caressingly, and put her arm round his shoulder.

"What an idea!" said Sasha, ashamed and vexed at the same time.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Liudmilla in a different voice. "What have you got to hide?"

"Someone might come," said Sasha.

"Who'll come in?" said Liudmilla as gaily and carelessly as before.

"We can lock the door and then no one will come in."

Liudmilla walked quickly up to the door and bolted it. Sasha felt that Liudmilla was serious. He flushed so deeply that little drops of perspiration came out on his forehead and he said:

"We oughtn't to do it, Liudmillotchka."

"Stupid! Why not?" asked Liudmilla in a persuasive voice.

She pulled Sasha to her and began to undo his blouse. Sasha resisted and caught her wrists. His face looked frightened—and an equal shame possessed him, and these emotions made him feel suddenly weak. Liudmilla contracted her eyebrows and began to undress him determinedly. She took off his belt and somehow pulled off his blouse. Sasha resisted more and more desperately. They tussled with each other about the room, stumbling against tables and chairs. A pungent scent came from Liudmilla, intoxicated Sasha and weakened him.

With a quick thrust against his chest Liudmilla pushed Sasha on to the sofa. A button flew off from the shirt she was pulling at. Liudmilla bared Sasha's shoulder, and began to pull his arm out of the sleeve. Sasha resisted and accidentally struck Liudmilla's cheek with his hand. He did not want to strike her, but the blow fell hard on Liudmilla's cheek. Liudmilla shook, staggered, her cheeks went a violent red, but she did not let go of Sasha.

"You wicked boy to fight!" she exclaimed in a choking voice.

Sasha felt distressed, dropped his arms and looked guiltily at the white marks of his fingers on Liudmilla's left cheek. Liudmilla took advantage of his confusion. She quickly pulled the shirt from both shoulders to his elbows. Sasha recovered himself, tried to get away from her but only made things worse—Liudmilla pulled the sleeves off his arms and his shirt fell down to his waist. Sasha felt cold, and a new flood of shame, hard and pitiless, made his head whirl. He was now naked to the waist. Liudmilla held his arms tightly and patted his back with her trembling hand, looking at the same time into his downcast, strangely gleaming eyes under their blue-black eyebrows.

Suddenly these eyelashes trembled, his face was wrinkled by a pitiful, childish grimace, and he began to sob.

"You wicked girl!" he exclaimed in a sobbing voice. "Let me go!"

"Cry-baby!" said Liudmilla angrily, and pushed him away.

Sasha turned away, drying his tears on the palms of his hands. He felt ashamed because he was crying. He tried to hold back his tears. Liudmilla looked eagerly at his naked back.

"How much beauty there is in the world!" she thought. "People hide so much beauty from themselves. Why?"

Sasha, shrinking ashamedly with his naked shoulders, tried to put on his shirt, but it only became entangled in his trembling hands and he could not get his arms into the sleeves. Sasha caught hold of his blouse—let the shirt remain as it was for the present.

"Oh, you're afraid for your property. No, I shan't steal it!" said Liudmilla in a loud, angry voice, ringing with tears.

She threw him the belt impetuously, and turned towards the window. Much she wanted him, wrapped up in his grey blouse, the horrid boy!

Sasha quickly put on his blouse, somehow arranged his shirt and looked at Liudmilla cautiously, indecisively and shamefacedly. He saw that she was wiping her cheeks with her fingers; he walked up to her timidly and looked into her face—and the tears which were trickling down her cheeks weakened him into pity—and he felt no longer ashamed and angry.

"Why are you crying, dear Liudmillotchka?" he asked quietly.

And suddenly he flushed—he remembered that he had struck her.

"I hit you—forgive me! I didn't do it on purpose," he said timidly.

"Are you afraid you'll melt away, you silly boy, that you won't sit with your shoulders naked?" said Liudmilla reproachfully. "Or are you afraid that you'll get sunburnt, or your beauty and innocence be lost?"

"But why do you want me to do it, Liudmillotchka?" said Sasha with a grimace of embarrassment.

"Why?" said Liudmilla passionately, "because I love beauty. Because I am a pagan, a sinner. I ought to have been born in ancient Athens. I love flowers, perfumes, brightly coloured clothes, the naked body. They say there is a soul. I don't know, I've never seen it. And what is it to me? Let me die altogether like an Undine, let me melt away like a cloud under the sun. I love the body, the strong, agile, naked body, which is capable of enjoyment."

"Yes, but it can suffer also," said Sasha quietly.

"And to suffer is also good," whispered Liudmilla. "There is sweetness in pain—if only to feel the body, to see its nakedness and bodily beauty."

"But it is shameful to be without clothes," said Sasha timidly.

Liudmilla impetuously threw herself on her knees before him. She kissed his hands and whispered breathlessly:

"My dear, my idol, divine boy, just for a moment, only for a moment, let me see your beautiful shoulders."

Sasha sighed, looked down, flushed and took off his blouse awkwardly. Liudmilla caught him with her warm hands and covered his shoulders, which trembled with shame, with kisses.

"Do you see how obedient I am?" said Sasha with a forced smile, trying to get rid of his embarrassment with a jest.

Liudmilla quickly kissed his arms from the shoulders to the fingers, and Sasha, immersed in passionate, grave thoughts, did not take them away. Liudmilla's kisses were warm with adoration—and it was as if her lips were kissing not a boy but a boy-god in a mysterious worship of the blossoming Body.

Darya and Valeria were standing behind the door, looking through the keyhole in turns, jostling each other with impatience, and their hearts were sick with a passionate, burning agitation.

"It's time to dress," said Sasha at last.

Liudmilla sighed, and with the same reverent expression helped him on with his clothes.

"So you're a pagan?" asked Sasha.

Liudmilla laughed.

"And you?" she asked.

"What a question?" said Sasha with assurance. "I've learned the whole catechism."

Liudmilla laughed loudly. Sasha looked at her smiling and asked:

"If you're a pagan, why do you go to church?"

Liudmilla ceased laughing and reflected.

"Well," she said, "one has to pray. One has to pray, to weep, to burn a candle, and do something for the dead. And I love it all, the candles, the image-lamps, the incense, the vestments, the singing—if the singers are good—the ikons, with their trimmings and ribbons. Yes, all that is beautiful. And I also love Him ... you know ... the Crucified One...."

Liudmilla pronounced the last words very quietly, almost in a whisper, blushed like a guilty person and cast down her eyes.

"Do you know I sometimes dream of Him on the cross, and there are drops of blood on His body."

From that time on Liudmilla more than once took Sasha to her room and began to unbutton his blouse. At first he was ashamed to tears, but he soon got used to it. And already he looked clearly and calmly when Liudmilla bared his shoulders and caressed his back. In the end he would take off his clothes himself.

And Liudmilla found it very pleasant to hold him half-naked on her knees, kissing him.

Sasha was alone at home. He thought of Liudmilla and of his naked shoulders under her passionate glances.

"And what does she want?" he thought. And suddenly he grew livid and his heart beat rapidly. A tumultuous happiness seized him. He turned several somersaults, threw himself on the floor, jumped on the furniture—a thousand absurd movements threw him from one corner to another and his gay, clear laughter resounded through the house. Kokovkina, who had returned home, heard this extraordinary din and went into Sasha's room. She stood on the threshold in perplexity, shaking her head.

"Why are you making such a row, Sashenka?" she said. "You might have an excuse to do it with other boys, but you're alone. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man—you're not a child any longer."

Sasha stood still and in his embarrassment seemed to lose the use of his hands—his whole body trembled with excitement.

Once Kokovkina came home and found Liudmilla there. She was giving Sasha sweets.

"You're spoiling him," said Kokovkina affectionately. "He loves sweets."

"Yes, and yet he calls me a wicked girl," complained Liudmilla.

"Oh, Sashenka, how could you!" said Kokovkina reproachfully. "Why did you say that?"

"She's teasing me," said Sasha falteringly.

He looked at Liudmilla with vexation and flushed. Liudmilla laughed.

"Story-teller!" Sasha whispered to her.

"Don't be rude, Sashenka," said Kokovkina, "it isn't nice!"

Sasha glanced at Liudmilla with a smile and said quietly:

"Well, I won't do it again."

Each time that Sasha came now Liudmilla locked the door and dressed him up in various costumes. Their sweet shame was dressed up in laughter and jokes. Sometimes Liudmilla pulled Sasha into corsets and dressed him in one of her gowns. In the low-cut dress Sasha's full, gently-rounded arms and round shoulders looked very beautiful. His skin was yellowish, but of an even, soft complexion—a rare occurrence. Liudmilla's skirt, sleeves and stockings were all becoming to Sasha. Dressed entirely in woman's clothes Sasha sat down obediently and waved a fan. In this costume he really resembled a girl, and he tried to behave like one. There was only one flaw—Sasha's short hair. Liudmilla thought it would be ugly to put a wig on Sasha's hair or to tie on a plait of hair.

Liudmilla taught Sasha to curtsy. He did this awkwardly and shyly at first. But he was graceful in spite of his boyish angularity. Blushing and laughing, he learned diligently to curtsy and he coquetted furiously.

Sometimes Liudmilla seized his bare, graceful arms and kissed them. Sasha did not resist, and looked laughingly at Liudmilla. Sometimes he held out his hands to her lips and said:

"Kiss them!"

But he liked most of all other costumes, which Liudmilla herself made, particularly the dress of a fisher-boy with bare legs, the tunic of a bare-foot Athenian boy.

Liudmilla would dress him up and admire him. But she herself would go pale and look melancholy.

Sasha was sitting on Liudmilla's bed, playing with the folds of his tunic and dangling his naked legs. Liudmilla stood in front of him and looked at him with an expression of happiness and surprise.

"How stupid you are!" said Sasha.

"There's so much happiness in my stupidity," said Liudmilla, pale and crying, and kissing Sasha's hands.

"Why are you crying?" asked Sasha, smiling unconcernedly.

"My heart is stung with happiness. My breast is pierced with seven swords of happiness—how can I help crying?"

"You are a little fool, really you're a little fool," said Sasha with a laugh.

"And you're wise!" replied Liudmilla in sudden vexation and sighed, wiping her tears away. "Understand, little stupid," she said in a quiet, persuasive voice, "that happiness and wisdom are only to be found in madness."

"Yes, yes?" said Sasha incredulously.

"You must forget and forget yourself and then you'll understand everything," whispered Liudmilla. "In your opinion, do wise men think?"

"And what else should they do?"

"They simply know. It's given to them at once; they only have to look and everything's opened to them."

The autumn evening dragged along quietly. A barely audible rustle came now and then through the window when the wind moved the tree branches. Sasha and Liudmilla were alone. Liudmilla had dressed him up as a bare-legged fisher-boy—in a costume of thin blue canvas. He was lying on a low couch and she sat on the floor by his bare feet, herself bare-foot and in a chemise. She sprinkled Sasha's clothes and body with perfume—a dense, grassy smell like the motionless odour of a strangely blossoming valley locked in hills.

Large, bright Roman pearls sparkled on Liudmilla's neck, and golden, figured bracelets rang on her arms. Her body was scented with orris—it was an overpowering, fleshly, provoking perfume, bringing drowsiness and langour, created from the distillations of slow waters. She languished and sighed, looking at his smooth face, at his bluish-black eyelashes and at his night-dark eyes. She laid her head on his bare knees, and her bright hair caressed his smooth skin. She kissed his body, and her head whirled from the strange aroma, mingling with the scent of young flesh.

Sasha lay there and smiled a quiet, indefinite smile. A vague desire awoke in him, and sweetly tormented him. And when Liudmilla kissed his knees and feet the kisses aroused languorous, half-dreaming musings in him. He wanted to do something, something pleasant or painful, gentle or shameful—but what? To kiss her feet? Or to beat her long, hard, with long flexible twigs, so that she would laugh with joy or cry with pain? Perhaps she desired one or the other. But that was not enough. What then did she want? Here they were both half-naked, and with their freed flesh was bound desire and a restraining shame—but what then was the mystery of the flesh? And how then could he bring his blood and his body as an exquisite sacrifice to her desires, and to his shame?

And Liudmilla languished and stirred at his feet, going pale from impossible desires, now growing cold. She whispered passionately:

"Am I not beautiful? Haven't I burning eyes? Haven't I wonderful hair? Then caress me! Take me close to you! Tear off my bracelets, pull off my necklace!"

Sasha felt terrified, and impossible desires tormented him agonisingly.

CHAPTER 27

Peredonov awoke in the morning. Someone was looking at him with huge, cloudy, four-cornered eyes. Wasn't it Pilnikov? Peredonov walked up to the window and spat on the evil apparition. Everything seemed bewitched. The wild nedotikomka squealed and the people and the beasts looked malignantly and craftily at Peredonov. Everything was hostile to him, he was one against all. During lessons at the *gymnasia* Peredonov slandered his colleagues, the Head-Master, the parents and the pupils. The students listened to him in astonishment. Some, vulgarians by nature, truckled to Peredonov and showed their sympathy with him. Others remained gravely silent or defended their parents hotly, when Peredonov assailed them. Peredonov looked morosely and timorously on these boys, and avoided them, muttering something to himself.

At some of the lessons Peredonov amused his pupils by absurd comments.

They were reading the lines from Pushkin:

"The sun rises in a cold mist;
The harvest-fields are silent;
The wolf goes out on the road
With his hungry mate."

"Let us stop here," said Peredonov. "This needs to be thoroughly understood. There's an allegory concealed here. Wolves go in pairs, that is, the wolf with his hungry mate. The wolf is fed, but she is hungry. The wife should always eat after the husband. The wife should be subject to the husband in everything."

Pilnikov was in a cheerful mood, he smiled and looked at Peredonov with his elusively fine, dark eyes. Sasha's face annoyed and yet attracted Peredonov. The cursed boy bewitched him with his artful smile.

Was it really a boy? Or perhaps there were two of them: a brother and a sister. But it was difficult to tell who was there. Or perhaps it was even possible for him to change himself from a boy into a girl. There must be some reason for his being so clean—when he changed his form he splashed in magical waters—otherwise how could he transform himself? And he always smelt of scents.

"What have you scented yourself with, Pilnikov?" asked Peredonov. "Was it patchkouli?"⁴⁰

The boys laughed. Sasha grew red at the insult, but said nothing.

⁴⁰ A double meaning is implied in Peredonov's use of the word, as the word "patchkatsya" means to soil oneself.

Peredonov could not understand the disinterested desire to please, not to be repulsive to others. Every such manifestation, even on the part of a boy, he considered a design against himself. He who was neatly dressed evidently was trying to gain Peredonov's favour. Otherwise, why should he go to so much trouble? Neatness and cleanliness were repulsive to Peredonov. Perfumes seemed to him to be bad smells. He preferred the stink of a manured field—which he considered good for the health—to all the perfumes of the world. To be neatly dressed, washed, clean, all this required time and labour; and the thought of labour depressed and dejected Peredonov. How good it would be to do nothing, and only eat, drink and sleep!

Sasha's companions teased him about his scenting himself with "patchkouli" and about Liudmillotchka's being in love with him. This angered him, and he replied hotly that it was not true, she was not in love with him—that it was all an invention of Peredonov, who had paid court to Liudmilla and had been snubbed; this was why he was angry with her and was spreading all sorts of evil rumours about her. His companions believed him—they knew Peredonov—but they did not stop teasing Sasha; it was such a pleasure to tease someone.

Peredonov persisted in telling everyone about Pilnikov's viciousness.

"He's got himself mixed up badly with Liudmillka," he said.

The townspeople gossiped of Liudmilla's affection for the schoolboy in a greatly exaggerated way, and with stupid, unseemly details. But there were only a few who believed this: Peredonov had overdone it. Ill-natured people—of whom there are not a few in our town—asked Liudmilla:

"What made you fall in love with a small boy? It's an insult to the cavaliers of our town."

Liudmilla laughed and said:

"Nonsense!"

The townspeople regarded Sasha with ugly curiosity. Sasha sometimes reproached Liudmilla because he was teased about her. It even happened that he slapped her, because she laughed so loudly.

To put an end to this stupid gossip, and to save Liudmilla from unpleasant scandal, all the Routilovs and their numerous friends and relatives acted against Peredonov and persuaded people that all his tales were the inventions of a madman. Peredonov's wild actions compelled many people to believe this explanation.

At the same time many denunciations of Peredonov were sent to the Director of the School District. From the District headquarters they sent an enquiry to the Head-Master. Khripatch referred them to his previous reports, and added that the further

presence of Peredonov in the *gymnasia* was a positive danger, as his mental disease was visibly increasing.

Peredonov was now entirely governed by wild illusions. The world was screened off from him by apparitions. His vacant, dull eyes wandered, and were unable to rest on objects as if he wanted to look beyond them on the other side of the objective world, and as if he sought for chinks of light between them.

When he was alone he talked to himself and shouted senseless threats at some unknown person:

"I will kill you! I will cut your throat! I'll caulk you up!"

Varvara listened with a smile.

"Make all the row you want," she thought malignantly.

It seemed to her that it was only his rage; he must have guessed that they had fooled him and was angry. He wouldn't go out of his mind—a fool has no mind to go out of. And even if he did—well, madness cheers the stupid!

"Do you know, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Khripatch, "you look very unwell?"

"I have a headache," said Peredonov morosely.

"Do you know, my friend," continued the Head-Master in a cautious voice, "I would advise you not to come to the *gymnasia* at present. You ought to attend to yourself—to give a little attention to your nerves, which are obviously a little unstrung."

"Not come to the *gymnasia*! Of course," thought Peredonov, "that's the best thing to do. Why didn't I think of it before! I'll look ill, and stay at home and see what will come of it."

"Yes, yes, I'd better not come. I am rather unwell," he said eagerly to Khripatch.

At the same time Khripatch wrote again to the Head Office of the District and awaited from day to day the appointment of the physicians for an examination of Peredonov. But the officials were very leisurely. That was because they were officials.

Peredonov did not go to the *gymnasia* and awaited something. During the last few days he had clung more and more to Volodin. Directly he opened his eyes in the morning Peredonov thought gloomily of Volodin: where was he now? Was he up to something? Sometimes he had visions of Volodin: clouds floated in the sky like a flock of sheep, and Volodin ran among them, bleating with laughter, with a bowler hat on his head; sometimes he floated by in the smoke issuing from the chimneys, making monstrous grimaces and leaping in the air.

Volodin thought and told everyone with pride that Peredonov had recently taken a great fancy to him—that Peredonov simply could not live without him.

"Varvara has fooled him," explained Volodin, "and he sees that I alone am his faithful friend—that's why he sticks to me."

When Peredonov went out of his house to look for Volodin, the other met him on the way in his bowler hat, with his stick, jumping along gaily and laughing his bleating laugh.

"Why do you always wear a bowler?" Peredonov once asked him.

"Well, why shouldn't I wear a bowler, Ardalyon Borisitch?" replied Volodin gaily and shrewdly. "It's modest and becoming. I'm not allowed to wear a cap with a badge, and as for a top-hat, let the aristocrats stick to it, it doesn't become us."

"You'll roast in your bowler," said Peredonov morosely.

Volodin sniggered.

They went to Peredonov's house.

"One has to do so much walking," complained Peredonov.

"It's good to take exercise, Ardalyon Borisitch," said Volodin persuasively. "You work, you take a walk, you eat your meals, and you're healthy."

"Well, yes," said Peredonov, "do you think that in two or three hundred years from now people will have to work?"

"What else is there to do? If you don't work, you have no bread to eat. You buy bread with money and you have to earn the money."

"But I don't want bread."

"But there wouldn't be any rolls or tarts either," said Volodin with a snigger. "No one would have any money to buy vodka, and there wouldn't be anything to make liqueurs of."

"No, the people themselves won't work," said Peredonov. "There'll be machines for everything—all you'll have to do is to turn a handle like an *ariston*⁴¹ and it's ready.... But it would be a bore to turn it long."

Volodin lapsed into thought, lowered his head, stuck out his lips and said, reflectively:

"Yes, that would be very good. Only none of us will live to see it."

⁴¹ A musical instrument.

Peredonov looked at him malignantly and grumbled:

"You mean you won't live to see it, but I shall."

"May God grant you," said Volodin gaily, "to live two hundred years, and then to crawl on all fours for three hundred."

Peredonov no longer pronounced exorcisms—let the worst come. He would triumph over everything; he had only to be on his guard and not yield.

Once at home, sitting in the dining-room and drinking with Volodin, Peredonov told him about the Princess.

The Princess, according to Peredonov, grew more decrepit and terrible from day to day; yellow, wrinkled, bent, tusked, evil, she incessantly haunted Peredonov.

"She's two hundred years old," said Peredonov, looking strangely and gloomily before him, "and she wants me to make it up with her again. Until then she won't give me a job."

"She certainly wants a good deal," said Volodin shaking his head. "The old hag!"

Peredonov brooded over murder. He said to Volodin, frowning savagely:

"I've got one hidden behind the wall-paper. And I'm going to kill another under the floor."

But Volodin was not afraid, and kept on sniggering.

"Do you smell the stench from behind the wall-paper?" asked Peredonov.

"No, I don't smell it," said Volodin, still sniggering and grimacing.

"Your nose is blocked up," said Peredonov. "No wonder it's gone red. It's rotting there behind the wall-paper."

"A beetle!" exclaimed Varvara with a boisterous laugh. Peredonov looked dull and grave.

Peredonov became more and more engulfed in his madness, and began to write denunciations against the court cards, the nedotikomka, the Ram—that he, the Ram, was an imposter who, representing Volodin, was aiming for a high position, but was in reality only a Ram; against the forest destroyers who cut down the birches, so that there were no twigs for Turkish baths, and that it was impossible to bring up children, because they left only the aspens, and what use were they?

When he met the schoolboys in the street, Peredonov frightened the youngest and amused the older ones with his shameless and ridiculous words. The older ones

walked after him in a crowd, scattering, however, when they saw one of the other masters; the younger ones ran away from him of their own accord.

Peredonov saw enchantments and sorceries in everything. His hallucinations terrified him and forced from him senseless moans and squeals. The nedotikomka appeared to him now blood-like, now flaming; it groaned and it bellowed, and its bellowing split his head with an unendurable pain. The cat grew to terrible dimensions, stamped with high boots and turned into a huge red bewhiskered person.

CHAPTER 28

Sasha left home after lunch and did not return at the appointed time, at seven; Kokovkina was worried:

"May God preserve him from meeting one of his masters in the street at a forbidden time! He'll be punished and I shall feel uncomfortable," she thought. Quiet boys always lived at her house and did not wander about at night. Kokovkina went to look for Sasha. Where else could he be except at the Routilovs'.

As ill luck would have it, Liudmilla that evening had forgotten to lock the door. Kokovkina entered, and what did she see? Sasha stood before the mirror in a woman's dress, waving a fan. Liudmilla was laughing and arranging ribbons at his brightly-coloured belt.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Kokovkina in horror. "What's this? I was worried and came to look for him, and here he is acting a comedy. What a disgrace for him to dress himself in a skirt. And aren't you ashamed, Liudmilla Platonovna?"

Liudmilla was for a moment very embarrassed because of the suddenness of the thing, but soon recovered herself. She embraced Kokovkina with a laugh, sat her in a chair and invented an explanation:

"We are going to have a play at home—I shall be a boy and he'll be a girl and it'll be very amusing."

Sasha stood flushed and terrified, with tears in his eyes.

"What nonsense!" said Kokovkina angrily, "he ought to be studying his lessons and not waste his time play-acting. What will you think of next! Dress yourself at once, Aleksandr, and march home with me."

Liudmilla laughed loudly and gaily and kissed Kokovkina—and the old woman thought that the happy girl was very child-like, and that Sasha obediently carried out all her whims. Liudmilla's laughter, at this moment, showed this to be only a simple childish prank, for which they would only have to be lectured a little. And Kokovkina grumbled, assuming an angry face, but her feelings were already calmed down.

Sasha quickly redressed himself behind the screen, where Liudmilla's bed stood. Kokovkina took him off, and scolded him all the way home. Sasha felt ashamed and frightened and did not attempt to justify himself.

"And what will happen at home?" he thought timidly. At home, Kokovkina treated him sternly for the first time: she ordered him to get down on his knees. But Sasha had

barely been in that position for a few moments when Kokovkina, softened by his repentant face and silent tears, released him. She said grumblingly:

"What a little lady-killer, you are! Your perfumes can be smelt a mile off!"

Sasha gracefully bent over and kissed her hand—and the courtesy of the punished boy touched her even more.

In the meantime a storm was gathering over Sasha. Varvara and Grushina composed and sent to Khripatch an anonymous letter to the effect that the schoolboy, Pilnikov, had been fascinated by the Routilov girl, that he spent whole evenings with her rather questionably. Khripatch collected a recent conversation. One evening at the house of the Marshal of the Nobility someone had thrown out an insinuation—which no one had taken up—about a girl who was in love with a schoolboy. The conversation had immediately passed to other subjects: in Khripatch's presence, everyone, acting on the unwritten law of people accustomed to good society, considered this an extremely awkward theme for discussion, and they assumed that this topic was not to be mentioned in the presence of women and that the rumour itself was trivial and very unlikely. Khripatch, of course, had noticed this but he was not so naive as to ask anyone. He was fully confident that he would know all about it soon, that all information came of itself in one way or another, but always in good season. Well, here was a letter which contained the expected information.

Khripatch did not for a moment believe that Pilnikov was guilty, and that his relations with Liudmilla were improper.

"This," he thought, "is one of Peredonov's stupid inventions and is nourished by Grushina's envy and spitefulness. But this letter shows that certain undesirable rumours are current, which might cast a reflection on the good name of the *gymnasia* entrusted to me. And therefore measures must be taken."

First of all Khripatch invited Kokovkina to discuss with him the circumstances which had helped to give rise to these rumours.

Kokovkina already knew what was the trouble. She had been informed even more bluntly than the Head-Master. Grushina had waited for her in the street, entered into conversation, and told her that Liudmilla had already managed to corrupt Sasha. Kokovkina was dumbfounded. When she got home she showered reproaches upon Sasha. She was all the more vexed because this had happened almost before her eyes, and because Sasha had gone to the Routilovs' with her knowledge. Sasha pretended not to understand anything and he asked:

"What have I done wrong?"

Kokovkina was at a loss for a moment.

"What wrong? Don't you know yourself? Didn't I find you in a skirt not long ago? Have you forgotten, you shameless boy?"

"Yes, but what was especially wrong with that? And didn't you punish me for it? It wasn't as if I'd stolen the skirt!"

"Hark how he talks!" said Kokovkina in a distraught way. "I punished you, but not enough apparently."

"Well, punish me again," said Sasha defiantly, with the look of a person unjustly treated. "You forgave me yourself, and now it wasn't enough. I didn't ask you to forgive me—I would have knelt all the evening. And what's the good of scolding me all the time?"

"Yes, and everyone in town is talking about you and your Liudmillotchka."

"And what are they saying?" asked Sasha in an innocently inquisitive tone of voice.

Kokovkina was again at a loss.

"It's clear enough what they're saying! You know perfectly well what might be said of you. Very little that's good, you may be sure. You're up to mischief with your Liudmillotchka—that's what they're saying."

"Well, I won't get up to mischief again," Sasha promised as calmly as if the conversation concerned a game of "touch."

He assumed an expression of innocence, but his heart was heavy. He asked Kokovkina what they were saying and was afraid that he would hear it was something unpleasant. What could they be saying? Liudmillotchka's room faced the garden; it could not be seen from the street. Besides, Liudmillotchka always lowered the blinds. And if anyone had looked in, what could they say? Perhaps something annoying and insulting. Or perhaps they were only saying that he often went there.

And here on the next day Kokovkina received an invitation to go and see the Head-Master. The old woman was distraught. She did not even mention it to Sasha, but at the appointed time went quickly on her errand. Khripatch kindly and gently informed her of the anonymous letter he had received. She began to cry.

"Be calm, we're not accusing you of anything," said Khripatch. "We know you too well. Of course, you'll have to look after him a little more rigorously. But I want you to tell me now what actually has taken place."

Kokovkina came home with more reproaches for Sasha.

"I shall write to your aunt," she said, crying.

"I haven't done anything. Let Aunt come, I'm not afraid," said Sasha, and he began to cry also.

The next day Khripatch asked Sasha to come and see him and asked him dryly and sternly:

"I would like to know what sort of an acquaintance you have been cultivating in the town."

Sasha looked at the Head-Master with deceptive innocence and tranquil eyes.

"What sort of an acquaintance?" he said. "Olga Vassilyevna knows that I only go to my companions and to the Routilovs."

"Yes, precisely," continued Khripatch. "What do you do at the Routilovs?"

"Nothing in particular," replied Sasha with the same innocent look, "we mostly read. The Routilov sisters are fond of poetry. And I'm always home at seven o'clock."

"Perhaps not always?" asked Khripatch, fixing on Sasha a glance which he tried to make piercing.

"Yes, I was late once," said Sasha with the calm frankness of an innocent boy. "And Olga Vassilyevna gave it to me. But after that I wasn't late again."

Khripatch was silent. Sasha's calm answers left him rather nonplussed. In any case it would be necessary to give him a reprimand, but how and for what? He was afraid that he might suggest to the boy unwholesome thoughts which—so Khripatch believed—he had not had before; or that he might offend the boy; but he wanted to remove any unpleasantness which might in the future come from this acquaintance. Khripatch thought that an educator's business was a very difficult and responsible matter, especially if you have the honour of being the head of an educational establishment. This difficult, responsible business of an educator! This banal definition gave wings to Khripatch's almost drooping thoughts. He began to talk quickly, precisely and uninterestingly. Sasha caught only a phrase here and there:

"Your first duty as a pupil is to learn ... you should not be attracted by society however pleasant and irreproachable ... in any case I should say that the society of boys of your own age would be preferable ... you must keep high your own reputation and that of your educational institution.... Finally, I may say candidly that I have reasons to suppose that your relations with young ladies have a character of great freedom unpermissible at your age, and altogether not in accordance with generally accepted rules of propriety."

Sasha began to cry. He felt distressed that anyone could think and talk of dear Liudmillotchka as of a person with whom you could take improper liberties.

"Upon my word, there was nothing wrong," he assured the Head-Master. "We only read, went for walks and played—well, we ran sometimes—we did nothing else."

Khripatch slapped him on the back and said in a dry voice which he tried to make hearty:

"Listen, Pilnikov...."

(Why shouldn't he sometimes call this boy Sasha! Was it because it was not official and there was, as yet, no ministerial circular?)

"I believe you when you say that nothing wrong has happened, but all the same you had better put an end to your frequent visits. Believe me, it would be better. I speak to you not only as your schoolmaster and official head, but also as your friend."

Nothing remained for Sasha to do but to make his bow, to thank the Head-Master, and to obey. And Sasha from this time on went to Liudmilla's only for five or ten minutes at a time—but still he tried to go every day. It vexed him to be able to make only such short visits and he vented his annoyance on Liudmilla herself. He often called her now "Liudmillka," "silly fool," "Balaam's ass," and he even struck her. But Liudmilla only laughed at it all.

The report spread about town that the actors of the local theatre were going to organise a masked ball at the Club House, with prizes for the best man's and the best woman's costumes. There were exaggerated rumours about the prize. It was said that the best-dressed lady would receive a cow and the best-dressed man a bicycle. These rumours excited the town people. Each one was eager to win—the prizes were so considerable. The costumes were prepared in haste. No expense was spared. People hid their costumes even from their nearest friends so that their brilliant idea might not be stolen. When the printed announcement of the masked ball appeared—huge bills, pasted on fences and sent out to important tradesmen—it turned out that they were not giving a cow and a bicycle but only a fan to the lady and an album to the man. This vexed and disenchanted those who had been preparing for the ball. They began to grumble. They said:

"It's a waste of money."

"It's simply ridiculous—such prizes."

"They ought to have let us know at once."

"It's only in our town that the public can be treated like this."

Nevertheless all the preparations went on: it wasn't much of a prize, but still it would be flattering to win it.

The amount of the prize did not interest either Darya or Liudmilla. Much they wanted a cow! What a rarity a fan was! And who was going to award the prizes? We know what taste these judges have! But both sisters were captivated by the idea of

sending Sasha to the masked ball in a woman's dress, to fool the whole town and to arrange so that the lady's prize should go to him. Valeria tried to look as if she agreed to it. It was Liudmillotchka's little friend, he was not coming to see her, but she could not decide to quarrel with her two elder sisters. She only said with a contemptuous smile:

"He won't dare."

"Well," said Darya, "we shall dress him up so that no one will recognise him."

And when the sisters told Sasha about their project and Liudmillotchka said to him: "We will dress you up as a girl," Sasha jumped up and down and shouted with joy. He was delighted with the idea, especially as no one would know—it would be fine to fool everyone.

They decided at once that they would dress Sasha as a Geisha. The sisters kept their idea in the strictest secrecy and did not even tell Larissa or their brother. Liudmilla herself made the costume from the design on the label of Korilopsis: it was a long full dress of yellow silk on red velvet; she sewed a bright pattern on the dress, consisting of large flowers of fantastic shape. The girls made a fan out of thin Japanese paper, with figures, on bamboo sticks, and a parasol out of thin rose silk with a bamboo handle. They bought rose coloured stockings and wooden slippers with little ridges underneath. The artist Liudmilla painted a Geisha mask: it was a yellowish but agreeable thin face, with a slight motionless smile, oblique eyes and a small, narrow mouth. They had only to get the wig from Peterburg—black, with smooth, arranged hair.

Time was needed to fit the costume and Sasha could only come in snatches and not every day. But they managed it. Sasha ran off at night by way of the window, when Kokovkina was asleep. It went off successfully.

Varvara also was preparing for the masked ball. She brought a stupid looking mask, and she didn't worry about costume—she dressed herself as a cook. She hung a skimmer at her waist and put a white cap on her head, her arms were bare to the elbow and very heavily rouged—a cook straight from the hearth—and the costume was ready. If she got the prize, so much the better; if she didn't, she could get on without it.

Grushina dressed herself as Diana. Varvara laughed and asked:

"Are you going to put on a collar?"

"Why a collar?" asked Grushina in astonishment.

"I thought you were going to dress up as the dog, Dianka," explained Varvara.

"What a notion!" replied Grushina with a laugh, "not Dianka, but the Goddess, Diana."

Varvara and Grushina dressed for the ball at Grushina's house. Grushina's costume was excessively scanty: bare arms and shoulders, bare neck, bare chest, her legs bare to the knee, light slippers, and a light dress of linen with a red border against the white flesh—it was quite a short dress, but broad with many folds. Varvara said with a smile:

"You aren't over-dressed!"

Grushina replied with a vulgar wink:

"It'll attract the boys!"

"But why so many folds?" asked Varvara.

"I can fill them with sweets for my devilkins," explained Grushina.

All of Grushina that was so boldly displayed was handsome—but what contradictions. On her skin were flea-bites, her manners were coarse and her talk was insufferably banal. Once more abused bodily beauty!

Peredonov thought that the masked ball was planned on purpose to trap him. But he went, not in costume but in a frock coat, to see for himself how plots are devised.

The thought of the masked ball delighted Sasha for many days. But later, doubts began to assail him. How could he get away from home, especially now after these recent annoyances. It would be a calamity if it were found out at the *gymnasia* and he would be expelled.

One of the form masters, a young man so liberal that he could not call the cat "Vaska," but called it "the cat Vassily," had recently made a significant observation to Sasha when he gave out the marks.

"Look here, Pilnikov, you'll have to pay more attention to your work."

"But I haven't any twos," said Sasha indifferently.

His heart fell—what would he say next? No, nothing. He was silent and only looked sternly at Sasha.

On the day of the masked ball Sasha felt that he would not have the courage to go. It was terrible. There was only one thing, the costume was ready at the Routilovs'—should it all be for nothing? And should all the plans and dreams be in vain? And Liudmillotchka would cry. No, he must go.

His recently acquired habit of dissembling aided Sasha from betraying his agitation before Kokovkina. Luckily, the old woman went to bed early. And Sasha also went to

bed early—to keep away suspicion he put his upper clothes on a chair near the door and placed his boots just outside the door.

There was nothing for him to do now but to go—which was the most difficult part of the matter. He had only to follow the same path as when he went to have his costume fitted. Sasha put on a light summer blouse—it hung in the wardrobe in his room—and light house shoes and he carefully crept out of the window into the street, choosing a moment when there were no footsteps or voices in hearing. A small drizzle was falling. It was muddy, cold and dark. Every moment Sasha was afraid he would be recognised. He took off his cap and shoes, threw them back into his room, turned up his trousers, and ran, jumping over the pavements, slippery with rain. It was difficult to see a face in the dark, especially of someone running, and whoever met him would think he was an ordinary boy sent on an errand.

Valeria and Liudmilla had made for themselves unoriginal but artistic costumes; Liudmilla dressed herself as a gipsy, Valeria as a Spanish woman. Liudmilla wore bright red rags of silk and velvet, while the thin, frail Valeria wore black silk and lace, and had a black lace fan in her hand. Darya did not make herself a new costume, she kept last year's, that of a Turkish woman. She said:

"It isn't worth while making a new one!"

When Sasha arrived all three girls began to dress him. The wig worried Sasha most of all.

"Suppose it should come off?" he kept repeating timorously.

At last they strengthened the wig with ribbons tied under the chin.

•—————•

CHAPTER 29

The masked ball took place at the Club House in the Market Square—a two-storied building of stone, painted bright red, resembling a barracks. It was arranged by Gromov-Chistopolsky, the actor-manager of the local theatre. The entrance, which was covered in by a calico canopy, was lighted by lamps. The crowd standing in the street criticised the arrivals, for the most part unfavourably, the more so since in the streets the costumes were almost hidden under outside wraps; the crowd judged chiefly by guesswork. The policemen zealously kept order in the street, while in the hall itself the Commissioner of Police and a police-inspector were present as guests.

Every guest received on entering two cards, one pink, for the best woman's costume; one green, for the man's, which were to be handed to the chosen persons. Some asked:

"And can we keep them for ourselves?"

At the beginning the attendant at the ticket-office asked in astonishment:

"Why for yourselves?"

"But suppose we think our own costumes the best?" was the reply.

Later the attendant ceased to be astonished at these questions, and being a young man with a sense of humour, said ironically:

"Help yourself! Keep both if you like."

It was dirtyish in the hall, and from the very beginning a number of the crowd were tipsy. In the close rooms, with their smoke-begrimed walls and ceilings, burned crooked lustres; they seemed huge, heavy and stifling. The faded curtains at the doors looked such that one hesitated to brush against them. Here and there knots of people gathered, exclamations and laughter were heard—this was caused by certain costumes which attracted general attention.

The notary Goudayevsky went as an American Indian. He had cock's feathers in his hair, a copper-red mask with absurd green designs on it, a leather jacket, a check plaid over his shoulder, and high leather boots with green tassels. He waved his arms, jumped about, and walked like an athlete, jerking up his naked knees exaggeratedly. His wife was dressed as an ear of corn. She had on a costume of brightly coloured green and yellow patches; ears of corn stuck out from her on every side. They caught everyone she passed and pricked them. She was jostled and pinched as she went along. She said angrily:

"I'll scratch you!"

Everyone near laughed. Some one asked:

"Where did she get so many corn stalks?"

"She laid in a store last summer," was the answer. "She stole some every day from the fields!"

Several moustacheless officials, who were in love with Goudayevskaya, and who had therefore been told by her how she would be dressed, accompanied her. They collected cards for her—rudely and almost by force. They simply took them away from some who were not very bold. There were other masked women who were zealously collecting cards through their cavaliers. Others looked greedily at the cards which had not yet been given up, and asked for them. These received impertinent answers. One dejected woman, dressed as Night—in a blue costume with a glass star and a paper moon on her forehead—said timidly to Mourin:

"Do give me your card."

Mourin replied rudely:

"What d'you mean? Give you my card? I don't like your mug!"

Night muttered something angrily and walked away. She only wanted two or three cards to show at home, to prove that she had received some. Modest desires often go unsatisfied.

The schoolmistress, Skobotchkina, dressed herself as a she-bear, that is, she simply threw a bearskin cross her shoulders and put on a bear's head as a helmet over the usual half-mask. This was generally speaking shapeless, but it suited her stout figure and stentorian voice. The bear walked with heavy footsteps, and bellowed so loudly that the lights in the lustres trembled. Many people liked the bear, and she received quite a number of tickets. She was unable to keep the cards herself, and had not found a clever cavalier like others of the ladies; more than half of her tickets were stolen when she was being given vodka by some of the small tradesmen—they had a fellow-feeling for her sudden ability to display bearish manners. People in the crowd shouted out:

"Look how the bear swigs vodka!"

Skobotchkina could not decide to refuse vodka. It seemed to her that a she-bear should drink vodka when it was brought to her.

A man dressed as an ancient German was conspicuous by his stature and fine build. He pleased many because of his robustness and because his powerful arms with their well-developed muscles were visible. Women particularly walked after him, and all around him rose a whisper of admiration and of flattery. The ancient German was recognised as the actor, Bengalsky, who is a favourite in our town. That was why he received a large number of tickets. Many people argued thus:

"If I can't get the prize, then at least let an actor (or an actress) get it. If any of us get it they will tire us out with boasting."

Grushina's costume was also a success—a scandalous success. The men followed her in a thick crowd, with laughter and indelicate observations. The women turned away in embarrassment. At last the Commissioner of Police walked up to Grushina and said suavely:

"Madame, I'm afraid you must cover yourself."

"Why? There's nothing indecent to be seen about me," replied Grushina vigorously.

"Madame, the ladies are offended," said Minchukov.

"What do I care for your ladies?" shouted Grushina.

"Now, Madame," insisted Minchukov, "you must put at least a handkerchief on your chest and back."

"Suppose my handkerchief's dirty?" said Grushina with a vulgar laugh.

But Minchukov insisted:

"As you please, Madame; but if you don't cover yourself a little, you'll have to go."

Grumbling violently, Grushina went into the dressing-room and with the help of the attendant rearranged the folds of her dress across her chest and back. When she returned to the hall, though she looked more modest, she just as zealously sought for admirers. She flirted vulgarly with any man. Then when people's attention was elsewhere she went into the refreshment-room to steal sweets. Soon she returned to the hall, and showing Volodin a couple of peaches, smiled impudently and said:

"I got them myself!"

And immediately the peaches were hidden in the folds of her costume. Volodin's face lit up with joy.

"Well," he said, "if so, I'll go too."

Soon Grushina got tipsy and began to behave boisterously—she shouted, waved her arms and spat.

"Dianka's getting very happy!" everyone said about her.

Such was the masked ball to which the foolish girls had enticed the scatter-brained schoolboy. The three sisters and Sasha took two cabs and arrived rather late, on his account. Their arrival in the hall was noticed. The Geisha particularly pleased many people. The rumour went round that the Geisha was Kashtanova, the actress, very popular with the male portion of local society. And that was why Sasha received a

large number of cards. But in fact Kashtanova was not there, for her little boy had fallen dangerously ill.

Sasha, intoxicated by his new situation, coquetted furiously. The more they stuck their cards into the Geisha's little hand, the more gaily and provokingly gleamed the eyes of the coquettish Geisha through the narrow slits of the mask. The Geisha curtsied, lifted her small fingers, laughed in an intimate tone, waved her fan, struck first one man and then another on the shoulder, then hid her face behind her fan and frequently opened out her rose parasol. However, these not over-graceful actions attracted many who admired the actress Kashtanova.

"I will give my card to the most beautiful of ladies," said Tishkov, and handed his card to the Geisha with a gallant bow.

He had taken a good deal to drink and his face was flushed; his motionlessly smiling face and awkward figure made him look like a doll. And he kept continually rhyming.

Valeria looked on at Sasha's success, and felt envious and annoyed; she now wanted to be recognised and to have her costume and slender, graceful figure please the crowd, and be awarded the prize. And now she sadly thought that this was not possible, as all the three sisters had agreed to get cards only for the Geisha, and even to give their own to her.

They were dancing in the hall. Volodin got tipsy very soon and began to dance the "squat" dance. The police stopped him.

He said cheerfully and obediently:

"Well, if I mustn't, then I mustn't."

But two other men who had followed his example and were dancing the "squat" dance refused to obey the order.

"What right have you to stop us? Haven't we paid our half-rouble?" they exclaimed and were escorted out. Volodin went with them to the door, cutting capers, smiling and dancing.

The Routilov girls made haste to find Peredonov to make a fool of him. He sat alone at the window and looked at the crowd with wandering eyes. All people and objects seemed to him senseless, inharmonious, and equally hostile. Liudmilla, in her gipsy dress, went up to him and said in a guttural voice:

"Shall I tell your fortune, pretty gentleman?"

"Go to the devil!" shouted Peredonov.

The gipsy's sudden appearance frightened him.

"Give me your hand, dear gentleman, pretty gentleman. I can see from your face that you'll be rich. You'll be an important official," Liudmilla importuned him, and took his hand.

"Well, see that you give me a good fortune," growled Peredonov.

"My sweet gentleman," began the gipsy, "you have many enemies, they'll inform against you, you will weep, you will die under a fence."

"Carrion!" shouted Peredonov, and snatched his hand away.

Liudmilla quickly disappeared in the crowd. Then Valeria took her place. She sat down beside Peredonov and whispered to him very tenderly:

"I am a lovely Spanish maid,
And I love such men as you,
But that your wife's a wretched jade,
Handsome gentleman, is true."

"It's a lie, you fool," growled Peredonov.

Valeria went on:

"Hotter than day, sweeter than night,
Is my keen Seville kiss;
Spit in her dull eyes, my light,
And see that you don't miss.
Varvara is your wife,
You are handsome, Ardalyon;
She's a plague upon your life,
You're as wise as Solomon."

"That's true enough," said Peredonov, "but how can I spit in her eyes? She'll complain to the Princess and I shan't get the place."

"And why do you want the place? You're good enough without the place," said Valeria.

"Yes, but how can I live if I don't get it?" said Peredonov dejectedly.

Darya stuck into Volodin's hand a letter with a red seal on it. Volodin unsealed the letter, bleating happily, read it and lapsed into thought—he looked proud and a little flurried. It was written briefly and clearly:

"Come, my darling, and meet me to-morrow night at eleven o'clock at the Soldiers' Baths. Your unknown J."

Volodin believed in the letter, but the question was—was it worth going? And who was this "J"? Was it some sort of Jenny? Or was it the surname which began with "J"?

Volodin showed the letter to Routilov.

"Go, of course go," Routilov urged him, "and see what happens. Perhaps it's some rich catch, who's fallen in love with you and the parents are against it, so she's taken this way of speaking to you."

But Volodin thought and thought and decided that it was not worth while going. He said with an important air:

"They're always running after me, but I don't want girls so loose that they run away from home."

He was afraid that he would get a beating, for the Soldiers' Baths were situated in a lonely place on the outskirts of the town.

When the dense, noisy, uproariously gay crowd was pushing its way into every part of the Club House, from the door of the dancing hall came a noise, laughter and exclamations of approval. Everyone crowded in that direction. It was announced from one to another that a fearfully original mask had come in. A thin, tall man, in a greasy, patched dressing-gown, with a besom under his arm, with a hat in his hand, made his way through the crowd. He had a cardboard mask on,—a stupid face, with a small, narrow beard and side whiskers, and on his head was a cap with a round official badge. He kept repeating in an astonished voice:

"They told me there was a masquerade⁴² here, but no one seems to be bathing."

And he languidly swung a pail. The crowd followed him, exclaiming, and genuinely admiring his original idea.

"He'll get the prize," said Volodin enviously.

Like many others, he envied unthinkingly—he himself wore no costume, so why should he be envious? Machigin was enthusiastic over this costume, the badge especially aroused his delight. He laughed uproariously, clapped his hands, and observed to acquaintances and to strangers:

"A fine criticism! These officials always make a great deal of themselves—they wear badges and uniforms. Well, here's a fine criticism for them—very clever indeed."

⁴² Masquerade. This word is used in Russia to mean either a ball or a bath, owing to the fact that clothes are taken off on both occasions.

When it got hot, the official in the dressing-gown began to fan himself with the besom, exclaiming:

"Well, here's a bath for you."⁴³

Those near laughed gleefully. There was a shower of cards into the pail.

Peredonov looked at the besom wavering above the crowd. He thought it was the nedotikomka.

"She's gone green, the beast!" he thought in horror.

⁴³ Referring to the fact that a besom is used in Russian and Turkish baths.

CHAPTER 30

At last the counting of the cards began. The stewards of the Club composed the committee. A tensely expectant crowd gathered at the door of the judges' room. For a short time in the dancing-hall everything became quiet and dull. The music ceased. The company grew silent. Peredonov felt sad. But soon an impatient hum of conversation began in the crowd. Someone said in an assured tone that both prizes would go to actors.

"You'll see," someone's irritated, hissing voice could be heard saying. The crowd was restless. Those who had received only a few cards were vexed at this. Those who had a larger number of cards were disturbed by the expectation of a possible injustice.

Suddenly a bell tingled lightly and nervously. The judges came out; they were Veriga, Avinovitsky, Kirillov and other stewards of the Club.

The crowd's excitement passed through the hall—suddenly everyone was silent. Avinovitsky shouted in a stentorian voice which was heard through the whole hall:

"The album, the prize for the best man's costume, has been awarded, according to the majority of cards received, to the gentleman in the costume of an ancient German."

Avinovitsky lifted the album on high and looked savagely at the crowding guests. The huge German began to make his way through the crowd. The others looked hostilely at him and obstructed his passage.

"Don't jostle, please," shouted in a tearful voice the dejected woman in the blue costume, with the glass star and the paper moon—Night.

"He's got the prize and he thinks the women must fall at his feet!" shouted a viciously angry voice.

"You won't let me pass yourself," said the German with suppressed annoyance.

At last he managed somehow to get to the judges, and Veriga presented him with the album. The band played a flourish. But the sound of the music was lost in the disorderly noise. People shouted abusive exclamations. They surrounded the German, jostled him and shouted:

"Take off your mask!"

The German said nothing. It would not have been difficult for him to get through the crowd, but he obviously hesitated to use his full strength. Goudayevsky caught hold

of the album and at the same time someone quickly tore the mask from the German's face. The crowd cried out:

"It is an actor!"

Their suppositions were justified: it was the actor, Bengalsky. He shouted angrily:

"Yes, it is an actor! And what of it? You gave me the cards yourselves!"

In answer came the virulent exclamation:

"It's easy to slip in a few extra!"

"You printed the cards."

"There have been more cards given in than there are people here."

"He brought fifty cards in his pocket."

Bengalsky flushed and shouted:

"It's disgusting to talk like that. You can prove it if you like. You can count the cards and the number of people."

Veriga interposed, saying to those near him:

"Gentlemen, calm yourselves. There's been no cheating—you can take my word for it. The number of tickets has been carefully checked with the number of entries."

The stewards, with the help of a few of the more sensible guests, somehow pacified the crowd. Besides, everyone was anxious to know who would get the fan.

Veriga announced:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the largest number of cards for the best lady's costume has been received by the lady in the Geisha's costume, who has therefore been awarded the prize—a fan. Geisha, please come this way. The fan is yours. Ladies and gentlemen, I humbly request you to make way for the Geisha."

The band again gave a flourish. The frightened Geisha longed to run away. But she was jostled along and led forward. Veriga, with an amiable smile, handed her the fan. The colours of the variegated costumes glimmered before Sasha's eyes, which were half dimmed by fear and confusion. He would have to return thanks, he thought. The habitual politeness of a well-bred boy showed itself. The Geisha made a curtsy, said something indistinctly, laughed slightly and lifted her fingers—and again in the room rose a furious uproar of whistling and abuse. Everyone made a rush for the Geisha. The savage and dishevelled Ear of Corn cried:

"Make a curtsy, you little beast!"

The Geisha threw herself towards the door, but her way was barred. From the crowd which seethed around the Geisha came malignant outcries:

"Make her unmask!"

"Mask off!"

"Catch her! Hold her!"

"Tear it off!"

"Take her fan away!"

The Ear of Corn shouted:

"Do you know who got the prize? Kashtanova, the actress! She stole someone else's husband, and yet she gets the prize! They don't give it to honest women, they give it to that creature!"

And she threw herself towards the Geisha, with piercing screams, clenching her bony fists. Others came after her, mostly her cavaliers. The Geisha fought them off desperately. A wild tussle began. The fan was broken, torn out of her hands, thrown on the floor and trodden upon. The crowd, with the Geisha in the middle, swayed furiously across the room, sweeping onlookers from their feet. Neither the Routilovs nor the Club stewards could reach the Geisha. The Geisha, strong and alert, screamed piercingly, scratched and bit her assailants. She held her mask on tightly now with one hand, now with the other.

"They ought all to be beaten," screeched some spiteful little woman.

The tipsy Grushina, hiding behind the others, urged on Volodin and other acquaintances.

"Pinch her! Pinch the creature!" she shouted.

Machigin, holding his bleeding nose, jumped out from the crowd and complained:

"She hit me straight in the nose with her fist!"

A vicious young man caught the Geisha's sleeve in his teeth and tore it in half. The Geisha cried out:

"Help! Save me!"

And others began to tear her costume. Here and there her body showed slightly. Darya and Liudmilla struggled desperately, trying to squeeze through to the Geisha, but in vain. Volodin plucked at the Geisha so zealously, screamed and cut such capers that he hindered other people less drunk than himself and more spiteful: he did not attack her from spite but from drunken joy, imagining that some very amusing

farce was going on. He tore one sleeve clean off the Geisha's dress and he tied it round his head.

"It'll come in useful," he shouted, laughing and grimacing.

Getting out of the thick of the crowd, he went on making a fool of himself in the open space, and danced over the pieces of the fan with wild squeals. There was no one to restrain him. Peredonov looked at him in dread and thought:

"He's dancing. He's glad for something. That's how he'll dance on my grave."

At last the Geisha tore herself away—the crowd about her could not withstand her quick fists and sharp teeth. The Geisha dashed from the room. In the corridor the Ear of Corn rushed at the Geisha again and caught hold of her dress. The Geisha almost succeeded in tearing herself away, but she was again surrounded. The scuffle was renewed.

"They're pulling her by the ears!" someone exclaimed.

A little woman caught the Geisha's ear and pulled it with loud triumphant cries. The Geisha screamed and somehow tore herself away, after having hit the malicious little woman with her fist. At last, Bengalsky, who had managed in the meantime to put on his ordinary dress, fought his way towards the Geisha. He took the trembling Geisha in his arms, covered her with his huge body and arms as far as he could and quickly carried her away, thrusting the crowd aside with his elbows and feet. The crowd shouted:

"Rotter! Scoundrel!"

They tugged at Bengalsky and punched him in the back. He exclaimed:

"I won't allow the mask to be torn from a woman. Do what you like, I won't allow it."

In this way he carried the Geisha the entire length of the corridor, which culminated in a narrow door opening into the Club dining-room. Here Veriga managed to hold back the crowd for a short time. With the resolution of a soldier he stood there and refused to allow anyone to pass. He said:

"Gentlemen, you can't go any farther."

Goudayevskaya, rustling with the remaining ears of corn of her costume, dashed at Veriga, clenching her fists and screamed piercingly:

"Go away! Let us pass!"

But the General's imposingly cold face and his determined grey eyes kept her from doing anything more. She cried in helpless rage to her husband:

"You might have boxed her ears—you gaping block-head!"

"It was hard to get at her," the Indian justified himself, gesticulating wildly—"Pavloushka was in the way."

"You ought to have hit Pavloushka in the teeth and her in the ear—why did you stand on ceremony!" screamed Goudayevskaya.

The crowd pressed against Veriga. They abused him fully. Veriga stood calmly before the door and tried to persuade those nearest him to preserve order. The kitchen-boy opened the door behind Veriga and whispered:

"They've gone, your Excellency."

Veriga walked away.

The crowd broke into the dining-room, then into the kitchen—they looked for the Geisha but did not find her.

Bengalsky, carrying the Geisha, ran through the dining-room into the kitchen. She lay tranquilly in his arms and said nothing. Bengalsky thought he could hear the strong beating of the Geisha's heart. On her tightly-clutching bare arms he noticed several scratches and near the elbow the blue-yellow stain of a bruise. In a hurried voice Bengalsky said to the crowding servants in the kitchen:

"Quick, an overcoat, a dressing-gown, a sheet—anything! I must save this lady."

An overcoat was thrown on Sasha's shoulders, Bengalsky somehow wrapped it round the Geisha, and traversing the dark stairs, lighted by dim, smoky paraffin lamps, carried her into the yard and through a gate into the street.

"Take off the mask. You'll be more likely to be recognised with it on—and anyway it's quite dark here. I'll tell no one," said he rather inconsistently.

He was curious. He knew for certain that it was not Kashtanova, but who was it then? The Geisha obeyed. Bengalsky saw an unfamiliar, smooth face, on which fright was giving place to an expression of joy at an escaped danger. A pair of cheerful eyes gazed at the actor's face.

"How can I thank you?" said the Geisha in a clear voice. "What would have become of me, if you hadn't saved me?"

"She's no coward. An interesting little woman!" thought the actor. "But who is she?"

It was obvious that she was a new arrival; Bengalsky knew the women of the district. He said quietly to Sasha:

"I must take you home at once. Give me your address and I'll call a cabby."

The Geisha's face again became dark with fear.

"You mustn't, you simply mustn't," she whispered. "I will go home alone. Let me down here."

"But how can you go home in such mud and with those wooden shoes. You'd better let me call a cab," said the actor persuasively.

"No, I'll go by myself. For God's sake let me down," entreated the Geisha.

"I give you my word of honour I won't tell anyone," said Bengalsky reassuringly. "I mustn't let you go, you'll catch cold. I'm responsible for you now, and I can't let you go. But tell me quickly—they might get after you even here. You saw what savages they are. They're capable of anything."

The Geisha trembled, quick tears suddenly trickled from her eyes. She said, sobbing:

"Terribly cruel people! Take me to the Routilovs for the present and I'll spend the night there."

Bengalsky called a cab. They got in and drove off. The actor looked intently at the Geisha's face. There seemed to him to be something strange about it. The Geisha turned her face away. The town-talk about Liudmilla and a schoolboy suddenly occurred to Bengalsky's mind.

"Ah-ha! You're a boy!" he said in a whisper, so that the cabby should not hear.

"For God's sake!" said Sasha growing pale with fear.

And his smooth hands under the overcoat stretched themselves towards Bengalsky with a movement of entreaty. Bengalsky laughed quietly and whispered:

"I won't tell anyone. Don't be afraid. My business is to get you home safe, and beyond that I know nothing. But you're a daring kid. Won't they find out at home?"

"If you don't say anything no one will know," said Sasha in a voice of gentle entreaty.

"You can depend on me. I shall be silent as the grave," replied the actor. "I was a boy myself once; I was up to all sorts of pranks."

The clamour in the Club had already begun to calm down, but the evening terminated in a new calamity. While they were tussling with the Geisha in the corridor, the flaming nedotikomka, jumping on the lustres, laughed and insistently whispered to Peredonov that he should strike a match and let loose her, the flaming but confined nedotikomka on these dingy, dirty walls, and, when she had gorged herself with the destruction of this building where such terrible and incomprehensible deeds were happening, then she would leave Peredonov unmolested. And Peredonov could not resist her importunate whisper. He entered the little dining-

room which was next to the dancing-hall. It was empty. Peredonov looked around, struck a match, put it to the window curtain at the floor and waited till the hangings caught fire. The flaming nedotikomka, like an active little snake, crept up the curtain, squealing softly and happily. Peredonov walked out of the dining-room, closing the door behind him. No one noticed the incendiary.

The fire was only seen from the street when the whole room was in flames. The fire spread quickly. The people escaped—but the Club House was burnt down.

On the next day the town talked of nothing but the Geisha affair and the fire. Bengalsky kept his word and told no one that the Geisha was a disguised boy.

As for Sasha he had redressed himself that night at Routilovs and, turning once more into a simple barefoot boy, ran home, crept through the window and went quietly to sleep. In the town, seething with slanders, in the town where everyone knew everything about everyone, Sasha's nocturnal adventure remained a secret. For long, but, of course, not for always.

CHAPTER 31

Ekaterina Ivanovna Pilnikova, Sasha's aunt and guardian, received simultaneously two letters about Sasha—one from the Head-Master and the other from Kokovkina. These letters greatly alarmed her. She put all her affairs aside and drove at once from her village through the muddy autumn roads to our town. Sasha, who loved his aunt, met her with great joy. His aunt came with the intention of rating him soundly. But he threw himself on her neck with such gladness and kissed her hands so affectionately that she could not at first speak severely to him.

"Dear Auntie, how good of you to come!" said Sasha, and looked happily at her full, rosy face with its kind dimples on the cheeks and its grave, hazel eyes.

"You'd better postpone your pleasure, I must scold you first," said his aunt in an irresolute voice.

"I don't mind that," said Sasha indifferently, "scold me, if you have anything to scold me for, but still I'm terribly glad to see you!"

"Terribly?" she repeated in a displeased voice. "I've been hearing terrible things about you."

Sasha lifted his eyebrows and looked at his aunt with innocent, uncomprehending eyes.

"There's one master, Peredonov, here," he complained, "who has invented the tale that I'm a girl. He's been annoying me, and then the Head-Master scolded me because I had got to know the Routilov girls. As if I went there to steal things! And what business is it of theirs?"

"He's quite the same child that he was before," thought his aunt in perplexity, "or has he become spoilt and corrupted so that he can deceive one even with his face?"

She shut herself in with Kokovkina and talked to her for a long time. She came out looking quite grave. Then she went to the Head-Master. She returned quite upset. She showered reproaches on Sasha. Sasha cried but firmly assured her that it was all an invention, that he did not permit himself any liberties with the Routilov girls. His aunt did not believe him. She scolded him, wept and threatened to give him a good whipping at once—that is to-day, as soon as she had seen these girls. Sasha kept crying and assuring her that nothing wrong had happened, and that it was all very exaggerated.

His aunt, angry and bloated with tears, went to the Routilovs.

As she waited in the Routilovs' drawing-room, Ekaterina Ivanovna felt very agitated. She wanted to throw herself on the sisters at once with the severest reproaches which she had prepared beforehand. But their peaceful, pretty drawing-room aroused peaceful thoughts in her against her will, and softened her vexation. The unfinished embroidery left lying about, the keepsakes, the engravings on the walls, the carefully trained plants at the windows, the absence of dust and the home-like appearance of the room were not at all what one would expect in an unrespectable house; there was everything that is valued by housewives the world over—surely with such surroundings the young owners of such a drawing-room could not have corrupted her innocent young Sasha. All the conjectures she had made about Sasha seemed to her ridiculously absurd. On the other hand, Sasha's explanations about his doings at the Routilovs seemed reasonable; they read, chatted, joked, laughed and played—they wanted to get up an amateur play, but Olga Vassilyevna would not allow him to take part.

The three sisters felt apprehensive. They did not yet know whether Sasha's masquerading had remained a secret. But there were three of them and they all felt solicitous for one another. This gave them courage. All three of them gathered in Liudmilla's room and deliberated in whispers.

"We must go down to her," said Valeria. "It's rude to keep her waiting."

"Let her cool off a little," replied Darya indifferently, "or she'll go for us."

The sisters scented themselves with clematis. They came in tranquil, cheerful, attractive, pretty as always; they filled the drawing-room with their charming chatter and gaiety. Ekaterina Ivanovna was immediately fascinated by them.

"So these are the corrupters!" she thought, with vexation at the school pedagogues. But then she thought that perhaps they were assuming this modesty. She decided not to yield to their fascination.

"You must forgive me, young ladies, but I have something serious to discuss with you," she said, trying to make her voice dry and business-like.

The sisters made her sit down and kept up a gay chatter.

"Which of you——" Ekaterina Ivanovna began irresolutely.

Liudmilla, as if she were a graceful hostess trying to get a visitor out of a difficulty, said cheerfully:

"It was I who spent most of the time with your nephew. We have similar views and tastes in many things."

"Your nephew is a very charming boy," said Darya, as if she were confident that her praise would please the visitor.

"Really most charming, and so entertaining," said Liudmilla.

Ekaterina Ivanovna felt more and more awkward. She suddenly realised that she had no reasonable cause for complaint and this made her angry—Liudmilla's last words gave her an opportunity to express her vexation—she said angrily:

"He may be an entertainment to you but to him——"

But Darya interrupted her and said in a sympathetic voice:

"Oh, I can see that those silly Peredonovian tales have reached you. Of course, you know that he's quite mad? The Head-Master does not even allow him to go to the *gymnasia* now. They're only waiting for an alienist to examine him and then he will be dismissed from the school."

"But, allow me," Ekaterina Ivanovna interrupted her with increasing irritation. "I am not interested in this schoolmaster but in my nephew. I have heard that you—pardon me—are corrupting him."

And having thrown out this decisive word in her anger with the sisters, Ekaterina Ivanovna at once saw that she had gone too far. The sisters exchanged glances of such well-simulated perplexity and indignation that cleverer people than Ekaterina Ivanovna would have been taken in—they flushed and exclaimed altogether:

"That's pleasant!"

"How terrible!"

"That's something new!"

"Madam," said Darya coldly, "you are not over choice in your expressions. Before you make use of such words you should find out whether they are fitting!"

"Of course, one can understand that," said Liudmilla, with the look of a charming girl forgiving an injury, "he's not a stranger to you. Naturally, you can't help being disturbed by this stupid gossip. Even strangers like ourselves were sorry for him and had to be kind to him. But everything in our town is made a crime at once. You have no idea what terrible, terrible people live here!"

"Terrible people," repeated Valeria quietly, in a clear, fragile voice and shivered from head to foot as if she had come in contact with something unclean.

"You ask him yourself," said Darya. "Just look at him; he's still a mere child. Perhaps you have got used to his naïveté, but one can see better from the outside that he's quite an unspoiled boy."

The sisters lied with such assurance and tranquillity that it was impossible not to believe them. Why not? Lies have often more verisimilitude than the truth. Nearly always. As for truth of course it has no verisimilitude.

"Of course it is true that he was often here," said Darya, "but we shan't let him cross our threshold again, if you object."

"And I shall go and see Khripatch to-day," said Liudmilla. "How did he get hold of that notion? Surely he doesn't believe such a stupid tale?"

"No, I don't think he believes it himself," admitted Ekaterina Ivanovna. "But he says that various unpleasant rumours are going about."

"There! You see!" exclaimed Liudmilla happily. "Of course he doesn't believe it himself. What's the reason of all this fuss then?"

Liudmilla's cheerful voice deceived Ekaterina Ivanovna. She thought:

"I wonder what exactly has happened? The Head-Master does say that he doesn't believe it."

The sisters for a long time supported each other in persuading Ekaterina Ivanovna of the complete innocence of their relations with Sasha. To set her mind more completely at rest they were on the point of telling her in detail precisely what they did with Sasha; but they stopped short because they were all such innocent, simple things that it was difficult to remember them. And Ekaterina Ivanovna at last came to believe that her Sasha and the charming Routilovs were the innocent victims of stupid slander.

As she bade them good-bye she kissed them kindly and said:

"You're charming, simple girls. I thought at first that you were—forgive the rude word—wantons."

The sisters laughed gaily. Liudmilla said:

"No, we're just happy girls with sharp little tongues and that's why we're not liked by some of the local geese."

When she returned from the Routilovs Sasha's aunt said nothing to him. He met her, feeling rather frightened and embarrassed and he looked at her cautiously and attentively. After a long deliberation with Kokovkina the aunt decided:

"I must see the Head-Master again."

That same day Liudmilla went to see Khripatch. She sat for some time in the drawing-room with the Head-Master's wife and then announced that she had come to see Nikolai Vassilyevitch on business.

An animated conversation took place in Khripatch's study—not because they had much to say to one another but because they liked to chatter. And they talked rapidly

to each other, Khripatch with his dry, crackling volubility, Liudmilla with her gentle, resonant prattle. With the irresistible persuasiveness of falsehood, she poured out to Khripatch her half-false story of her relations with Sasha Pilnikov. Her chief motives were, of course, her sympathy with the boy who was suffering from this coarse suspicion, her desire to take the place of Sasha's absent family. And finally he was such a charming, unspoiled boy. Liudmilla even cried a little and her swift tears rolled down her cheeks to her half-smiling lips, giving her an extraordinary attractiveness.

"I have grown to love him like a brother," she said. "He is a fine, lovable boy. He appreciated affection and he kissed my hands."

"That was very good of you," said Khripatch somewhat flustered, "and does honour to your kind feelings. But you have needlessly taken to heart the simple fact that I considered it my duty to inform the boy's relatives of the rumours that reached me."

Liudmilla prattled on, without listening to him, and her voice passed into a tone of gentle rebuke.

"Tell me what was wrong in our taking an interest in the boy? Why should he suffer from that coarse, mad Peredonov? When shall we be rid of him? Can't you see yourself that Pilnikov is quite a child, really a mere child?"

She clasped her small, pretty hands together, rattled her gold bracelets, laughed softly, took her handkerchief out to dry her tears and wafted a delicate perfume towards Khripatch. And Khripatch suddenly wanted to tell her that she was "lovely as a heavenly angel," and that this unfortunate episode "was not worth a single instant of her dear sorrow." But he refrained.

And Liudmilla chattered on and on and dissolved into smoke the chimerical structure of the Peredonovian lie. Think of comparing the charming Liudmillotchka with the crude, dirty, insane Peredonov! Whether Liudmilla was telling the whole truth or romancing was all the same to Khripatch; but he felt that if he did not believe Liudmilla and should argue with her and take steps to punish Pilnikov it might lead to an inquiry and disgrace the whole School District. All the more since this business was bound up with Peredonov who would be found to be insane. And Khripatch smiled, saying to Liudmilla:

"I'm very sorry that this should upset you so much. I didn't for a moment permit myself any disagreeable suspicions of your acquaintance with Pilnikov. I esteem most highly those good and kindly motives which have inspired your actions, and not for a single instant have I considered the rumours that passed in the town and those that reached me as anything but unreasonable slanders which gave me deep concern. I was obliged to inform Madame Pilnikov, especially since even more distorted rumours might have reached her, but I had no intention of distressing you and had no idea that Madame Pilnikov would come and complain to you."

"We've had a satisfactory explanation with Madame Pilnikov," said Liudmilla. "But don't punish Sasha on our account. If our house is so dangerous for schoolboys we won't let him come again."

"You're very good to him," said Khripatch irresolutely. "We can have nothing against his visiting his acquaintances in his leisure hours, if his aunt permits it. We are very far from wishing to turn students' lodgings into places of confinement. In any case, until the Peredonov affair is decided, it would be better for Pilnikov to remain at home."

The accepted explanation given by the Routilov girls and by Sasha received confirmation from a terrible event which happened in the Peredonovs' house. This finally convinced the townspeople that all the rumours about Sasha and the Routilov girls were the ravings of a madman.

CHAPTER 32

It was a cold, bleak day. Peredonov had just left Volodin. He felt depressed. Vershina lured him into the garden. He yielded again to her witching call. The two of them walked towards the summer-house, over the moist footpaths which were covered by the dark, rotting fallen leaves. The summer-house felt unpleasantly damp. The house with its windows closed was visible through the bare trees.

"I want you to know the truth," mumbled Vershina, as she looked quickly at Peredonov, and then turned away her black eyes.

She was wrapped in a black jacket, her head was tied round with a black kerchief, and her lips, grown blue with the cold, were clenched on a black cigarette holder, and sent out thick clouds of black smoke.

"I want to spit on your truth," replied Peredonov. "Nothing would please me better."

Vershina smiled wryly and said:

"Don't say that! I am terribly sorry for you—you have been fooled."

There was a malicious joy in her voice. Malevolent words flowed from her tongue. She said:

"You were hoping to get patronage, but you were too trustful. You have been fooled, and you believed so easily. Anyone can write a letter. You should have known with whom you were dealing. Your wife is not a very particular person."

Peredonov understood Vershina's mumbling speech with some difficulty; her meaning peered out through all her circumlocutions. Vershina was afraid to speak loudly and clearly. Someone might hear if she spoke loudly, and tell Varvara, who would not hesitate to make a scene. And Peredonov himself might get into a rage if she spoke clearly, and even beat her. It was better to hint, so that he might guess the truth. But Peredonov did not rise to the occasion. It had happened before that he had been told to his face of the deception practised on him; yet he never grasped the fact that the letters had been forged, and kept on thinking that it was the Princess who was fooling him, leading him by the nose.

At last Vershina said bluntly:

"You think the Princess wrote those letters? Why, all the town knows that they were fabricated by Grushina at your wife's request; the Princess knows nothing about it. Ask anyone you like; everyone knows—they gave the thing away themselves. And then Varvara Dmitrievna stole the letters from you and burnt them so as to leave no traces."

Dark, oppressive thoughts stirred in Peredonov's brain. He understood only one thing—that he had been fooled. But that the Princess knew nothing of it could not enter his head—yes, she knew. No wonder she had come out of the fire alive.

"It's a lie about the Princess," he said. "I tried to burn the Princess, but did not succeed in burning her up; she spat out an exorcism."

Suddenly a furious rage seized Peredonov. Fooled! He struck the table savagely with his fist, tore himself from his place, and without saying good-bye to Vershina walked home quickly. Vershina looked after him with malignant joy, and the black clouds of smoke flew quickly from her dark mouth, and swirled away in the wind.

Rage consumed Peredonov. But when he saw Varvara, he was seized with a painful dread, which prevented him from uttering a word.

On the next morning Peredonov got ready a small garden knife, which he carefully kept in a leather sheath in his pocket. He spent the whole morning until luncheon at Volodin's. He looked at Volodin working, and made absurd remarks. Volodin was glad, as usual, that Peredonov fussed about him, and he accepted Peredonov's silly talk as wit.

That whole day the nedotikomka wheeled around Peredonov. It would not let him go to sleep after lunch. It completely tired him out. When, towards evening, he had almost fallen asleep, he was awakened by a mischievous woman who appeared from some place unknown to him. She was pug-nosed, amorphous, and as she walked up to his bed she muttered:

"The *Kvass* must be crushed out, the tarts must be taken out of the oven, the meat must be roasted."

Her cheeks were dark, but her teeth gleamed.

"Go to the devil!" shouted Peredonov.

The pug-nosed woman disappeared as if she had not been there at all.

The evening came. A melancholy wind blew in the chimney. A slow rain tapped on the window quietly and persistently. It was quite black outside. Volodin was at the Peredonovs'—Peredonov had invited him early that morning to the supper.

"Don't let anyone in. Do you hear, Klavdiushka?" shouted Peredonov.

Varvara smiled. Peredonov muttered:

"All sorts of women are prowling around here. A watch should be kept. One got into my bedroom; she asked to be taken on as cook. But why should I have a pug-nosed cook?"

Volodin laughed bleatingly and said:

"There are women walking about in the street, but they have nothing to do with us, and we shan't let them join us at our table."

The three of them sat down at the table. They began to drink vodka, and to eat tarts. They drank more than they ate. Peredonov was gloomy. Everything had already become a senseless and incoherent delirium for him. He had a painful headache. One picture repeated itself persistently—that of Volodin as an enemy. One idea importuned and assailed him ceaselessly: it was that he must kill Pavloushka before it was too late. And then all the inimical cunning would become revealed. As for Volodin, he was rapidly becoming drunk, and he kept up an incoherent jabber, much to Varvara's amusement.

Peredonov seemed restless. He mumbled:

"Someone is coming. Don't let anyone in. Tell them that I have gone away to pray at the *Tarakani*⁴⁴ monastery."

He was afraid that visitors might hinder him. Volodin and Varvara were amused—they thought that he was only drunk. They exchanged winks, and walked out separately and knocked on the door, and said in different voices:

"Is General Peredonov at home?"

"I've brought General Peredonov a diamond star."

But the star did not tempt Peredonov that evening. He shouted:

"Don't let them in! Chuck them out! Let them bring it in the morning. Now is not the time."

"No," he thought, "I need all my strength to-night. Everything will be revealed to-night—but until then my enemies are ready to send anything and everything against me to destroy me."

"Well, we've chased them away. They'll bring it to-morrow morning," said Volodin, as he seated himself once more at the table.

Peredonov fixed his troubled eyes upon him, and asked:

"Are you a friend to me or an enemy?"

"A friend, a friend, Ardasha!" replied Volodin.

"A friend with true love is like a beetle behind the stove," said Varvara.

⁴⁴ Tarakan is Russian for blackbeetle.

"Not a beetle but a ram," corrected Peredonov. "Well, you and I will drink together, Pavloushka, only we two. And you, Varvara, drink also—we'll drink together, we two."

Volodin said with a snigger:

"If Varvara Dmitrievna drinks with us, it won't be two but three."

"Two, I say," repeated Peredonov morosely.

"Husband and wife are one Satan," said Varvara, and began to laugh.

Volodin did not suspect to the last minute that Peredonov wanted to kill him. He kept on bleating, making a fool of himself, and uttering nonsense, which made Varvara laugh. But Peredonov did not forget his knife the whole evening. When Volodin or Varvara walked up to that side where the knife was hidden, Peredonov savagely warned them off. Sometimes he pointed at his pocket and said:

"I have a trick here, Pavloushka, that will make you quack."

Varvara and Volodin laughed.

"I can always quack, Ardasha," said Volodin. "Kra, Kra. It's quite easy."

Red, and drunken with vodka, Volodin protruded his lips and quacked. He became more and more arrogant towards Peredonov.

"You've been taken in, Ardasha," he said with contemptuous pity.

"I'll take you in," bellowed Peredonov in fury.

Volodin appeared terrible to him and menacing. He must defend himself. Peredonov quickly pulled out his knife, threw himself on Volodin, and slashed him across his throat. The blood gushed out in a stream.

Peredonov was frightened. The knife fell out of his hands. Volodin kept up his bleat, and tried to catch hold of his throat with his hands. It was evident that he was deadly frightened, that he was growing weaker, and that his hands would never reach his throat. Suddenly he grew deathly pale, and fell on Peredonov. There was a broken squeal—as if he choked—then he was silent. Peredonov cried out in horror, and Varvara after him.

Peredonov pushed Volodin away. Volodin fell heavily to the floor. He groaned, moved his feet, and was soon dead. His open eyes grew glassy, and their fixed stare was directed upwards. The cat walked out of the next room, smelt the blood, and mewed malignantly. Varvara stood as if in a trance. Klavdia upon hearing the noise, came running in.

"Oh, Lord, they've cut his throat," she wailed.

Varvara roused herself, and with a scream rushed from the dining-room together with Klavdia.

The news of the event spread quickly. The neighbours collected in the street, and in the garden. The bolder ones went into the house. They did not venture to enter the dining-room for some time. They peeped in and whispered. Peredonov was looking at the corpse with his vacant eyes, and listened to the whispers behind the door.... A dull sadness tormented him. He had no thoughts.

At last they grew bolder, and entered. Peredonov was sitting with downcast eyes, and mumbling incoherent, meaningless words.

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