

The Steppe

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I

Early one morning in July a shabby covered chaise, one of those antediluvian chaises without springs in which no one travels in Russia nowadays, except merchant's clerks, dealers and the less well- to-do among priests, drove out of N., the principal town of the province of Z., and rumbled noisily along the posting-track. It rattled and creaked at every movement; the pail, hanging on behind, chimed in gruffly, and from these sounds alone and from the wretched rags of leather hanging loose about its peeling body one could judge of its decrepit age and readiness to drop to pieces.

Two of the inhabitants of N. were sitting in the chaise; they were a merchant of N. called Ivan Ivanitch Kuzmitchov, a man with a shaven face wearing glasses and a straw hat, more like a government clerk than a merchant, and Father Christopher Sireysky, the priest of the Church of St. Nikolay at N., a little old man with long hair, in a grey canvas cassock, a wide-brimmed top-hat and a coloured embroidered girdle. The former was absorbed in thought, and kept tossing his head to shake off drowsiness; in his countenance an habitual business-like reserve was struggling with the genial expression of a man who has just said good-bye to his relatives and has had a good drink at parting. The latter gazed with moist eyes wonderingly at God's world, and his smile was so broad that it seemed to embrace even the brim of his hat; his face was red and looked frozen. Both of them, Father Christopher as well as Kuzmitchov, were going to sell wool. At parting with their families they had just eaten heartily of pastry puffs and cream, and although it was so early in the morning had had a glass or two.... Both were in the best of humours.

Apart from the two persons described above and the coachman Deniska, who lashed the pair of frisky bay horses, there was another figure in the chaise -- a boy of nine with a sunburnt face, wet with tears. This was Yegorushka, Kuzmitchov's nephew. With the sanction of his uncle and the blessing of Father Christopher, he was now on his way to go to school. His mother, Olga Ivanovna, the widow of a collegiate secretary, and Kuzmitchov's sister, who was fond of educated people and refined society, had entreated her brother to take Yegorushka with him when he went to sell wool and to put him to school; and now the boy was sitting on the box beside the coachman Deniska, holding on to his elbow to keep from falling off, and dancing up and down like a kettle on the hob, with no notion where he was going or what he was going for. The rapid motion through the air blew out his red shirt like a balloon on his back and made his new hat with a peacock's feather in it, like a coachman's, keep slipping on to the back of his head. He felt himself an intensely unfortunate person, and had an inclination to cry.

When the chaise drove past the prison, Yegorushka glanced at the sentinels pacing slowly by the high white walls, at the little barred windows, at the cross shining on the roof, and remembered how the week before, on the day of the Holy Mother of Kazan, he had been with his mother to the prison church for the Dedication Feast, and how before that, at Easter, he had gone to the prison with Deniska and Ludmila the cook, and had taken the prisoners Easter bread, eggs, cakes and roast beef. The prisoners had thanked them and made the sign of the cross, and one of them had given Yegorushka a pewter buckle of his own making.

The boy gazed at the familiar places, while the hateful chaise flew by and left them all behind. After the prison he caught glimpses of black grimy foundries, followed by the snug green cemetery surrounded by a wall of cobblestones; white crosses and tombstones, nestling among green cherry-trees and looking in the distance like patches of white, peeped out gaily from behind the wall. Yegorushka remembered that when the cherries were in blossom those white patches melted with the flowers into a sea of white; and that when the cherries were ripe the white tombstones and crosses were dotted with splashes of red like bloodstains. Under the cherry trees in the cemetery Yegorushka's father and granny, Zinaida Danilovna, lay sleeping day and night. When Granny had died she had been put in a long narrow coffin and two pennies had been put upon her eyes, which would not keep shut. Up to the time of her death she had been brisk, and used to bring soft rolls covered with poppy seeds from the market. Now she did nothing but sleep and sleep....

Beyond the cemetery came the smoking brickyards. From under the long roofs of reeds that looked as though pressed flat to the ground, a thick black smoke rose in great clouds and floated lazily upwards. The sky was murky above the brickyards and the cemetery, and great shadows from the clouds of smoke crept over the fields and across the roads. Men and horses covered with red dust were moving about in the smoke near the roofs.

The town ended with the brickyards and the open country began. Yegorushka looked at the town for the last time, pressed his face against Deniska's elbow, and wept bitterly.

"Come, not done howling yet, cry-baby!" cried Kuzmitchov. "You are blubbering again, little milksop! If you don't want to go, stay behind; no one is taking you by force!"

"Never mind, never mind, Yegor boy, never mind," Father Christopher muttered rapidly -- "never mind, my boy.... Call upon God.... You are not going for your harm, but for your good. Learning is light, as the saying is, and ignorance is darkness.... That is so, truly."

"Do you want to go back?" asked Kuzmitchov.

"Yes, ... yes, ..." answered Yegorushka, sobbing.

"Well, you'd better go back then. Anyway, you are going for nothing; it's a day's journey for a spoonful of porridge."

"Never mind, never mind, my boy," Father Christopher went on. "Call upon God.... Lomonosov set off with the fishermen in the same way, and he became a man famous all over Europe. Learning in conjunction with faith brings forth fruit pleasing to God. What are the words of the prayer? For the glory of our Maker, for the comfort of our parents, for the benefit of our Church and our country.... Yes, indeed!"

"The benefit is not the same in all cases," said Kuzmitchov, lighting a cheap cigar; "some will study twenty years and get no sense from it."

"That does happen."

"Learning is a benefit to some, but others only muddle their brains. My sister is a woman who does not understand; she is set upon refinement, and wants to turn Yegorka into a learned man, and she does not understand that with my business I could settle Yegorka happily for the rest of his life. I tell you this, that if everyone were to go in for being learned and refined there would be no one to sow the corn and do the trading; they would all die of hunger."

"And if all go in for trading and sowing corn there will be no one to acquire learning."

And considering that each of them had said something weighty and convincing, Kuzmitchov and Father Christopher both looked serious and cleared their throats simultaneously.

Deniska, who had been listening to their conversation without understanding a word of it, shook his head and, rising in his seat, lashed at both the bays. A silence followed.

Meanwhile a wide boundless plain encircled by a chain of low hills lay stretched before the travellers' eyes. Huddling together and peeping out from behind one another, these hills melted together into rising ground, which stretched right to the very horizon and disappeared into the lilac distance; one drives on and on and cannot discern where it begins or where it ends.... The sun had already peeped out from beyond the town behind them, and quietly, without fuss, set to its accustomed task. At first in the distance before them a broad, bright, yellow streak of light crept over the ground where the earth met the sky, near the little barrows and the windmills, which in the distance looked like tiny men waving their arms. A minute later a similar streak gleamed a little nearer, crept to the right and embraced the hills. Something warm touched Yegorushka's spine; the streak of light, stealing up from behind, darted between the chaise and the horses, moved to meet the other streak, and soon the whole wide steppe flung off the twilight of early morning, and was smiling and sparkling with dew.

The cut rye, the coarse steppe grass, the milkwort, the wild hemp, all withered from the sultry heat, turned brown and half dead, now washed by the dew and caressed by the sun, revived, to fade again. Arctic petrels flew across the road with joyful cries; marmots called to one another in the grass. Somewhere, far away to the left, lapwings

uttered their plaintive notes. A covey of partridges, scared by the chaise, fluttered up and with their soft "trrrr!" flew off to the hills. In the grass crickets, locusts and grasshoppers kept up their churring, monotonous music.

But a little time passed, the dew evaporated, the air grew stagnant, and the disillusioned steppe began to wear its jaded July aspect. The grass drooped, everything living was hushed. The sun-baked hills, brownish-green and lilac in the distance, with their quiet shadowy tones, the plain with the misty distance and, arched above them, the sky, which seems terribly deep and transparent in the steppes, where there are no woods or high hills, seemed now endless, petrified with dreariness....

How stifling and oppressive it was! The chaise raced along, while Yegorushka saw always the same -- the sky, the plain, the low hills.... The music in the grass was hushed, the petrels had flown away, the partridges were out of sight, rooks hovered idly over the withered grass; they were all alike and made the steppe even more monotonous.

A hawk flew just above the ground, with an even sweep of its wings, suddenly halted in the air as though pondering on the dreariness of life, then fluttered its wings and flew like an arrow over the steppe, and there was no telling why it flew off and what it wanted. In the distance a windmill waved its sails....

Now and then a glimpse of a white potsherd or a heap of stones broke the monotony; a grey stone stood out for an instant or a parched willow with a blue crow on its top branch; a marmot would run across the road and -- again there flitted before the eyes only the high grass, the low hills, the rooks....

But at last, thank God, a waggon loaded with sheaves came to meet them; a peasant wench was lying on the very top. Sleepy, exhausted by the heat, she lifted her head and looked at the travellers. Deniska gaped, looking at her; the horses stretched out their noses towards the sheaves; the chaise, squeaking, kissed the waggon, and the pointed ears passed over Father Christopher's hat like a brush.

"You are driving over folks, fatty!" cried Deniska. "What a swollen lump of a face, as though a bumble- bee had stung it!"

The girl smiled drowsily, and moving her lips lay down again; then a solitary poplar came into sight on the low hill. Someone had planted it, and God only knows why it was there. It was hard to tear the eyes away from its graceful figure and green drapery. Was that lovely creature happy? Sultry heat in summer, in winter frost and snowstorms, terrible nights in autumn when nothing is to be seen but darkness and nothing is to be heard but the senseless angry howling wind, and, worst of all, alone, alone for the whole of life.... Beyond the poplar stretches of wheat extended like a bright yellow carpet from the road to the top of the hills. On the hills the corn was already cut and laid up in sheaves, while at the bottom they were still cutting.... Six mowers were standing in a row swinging their scythes, and the scythes gleamed gaily and uttered in unison together "Vzhee, vzhee!" From the movements of the peasant women binding the sheaves, from the faces of the mowers, from the glitter of the scythes, it could be seen that the sultry heat was baking and stifling. A black dog with its tongue hanging out ran from the mowers to meet the chaise, probably with the intention of barking, but stopped halfway and stared indifferently at Deniska, who shook his whip at him; it was too hot to bark! One peasant woman got up and, putting both hands to her aching back, followed Yegorushka's red shirt with her eyes. Whether it was that the colour pleased her or that he reminded her of her children, she stood a long time motionless staring after him.

But now the wheat, too, had flashed by; again the parched plain, the sunburnt hills, the sultry sky stretched before them; again a hawk hovered over the earth. In the distance, as before, a windmill whirled its sails, and still it looked like a little man waving his arms. It was wearisome to watch, and it seemed as though one would never reach it, as though it were running away from the chaise.

Father Christopher and Kuzmitchov were silent. Deniska lashed the horses and kept shouting to them, while Yegorushka had left off crying, and gazed about him listlessly. The heat and the tedium of the steppes overpowered him. He felt as though he had been travelling and jolting up and down for a very long time, that the sun had been baking his back a long time. Before they had gone eight miles he began to feel "It must be time to rest." The geniality gradually faded out of his uncle's face and nothing else was left but the air of business reserve; and to a gaunt shaven face, especially when it is adorned with spectacles and the nose and temples are covered with dust, this reserve gives a relentless, inquisitorial appearance. Father Christopher never left off gazing with wonder at God's world, and smiling. Without speaking, he brooded over something pleasant and nice, and a kindly, genial smile remained imprinted on his face. It seemed as though some nice and pleasant thought were imprinted on his brain by the heat.

"Well, Deniska, shall we overtake the waggons to-day?" asked Kuzmitchov.

Deniska looked at the sky, rose in his seat, lashed at his horses and then answered:

"By nightfall, please God, we shall overtake them."

There was a sound of dogs barking. Half a dozen steppe sheep-dogs, suddenly leaping out as though from ambush, with ferocious howling barks, flew to meet the chaise. All of them, extraordinarily furious, surrounded the chaise, with their shaggy spider-like muzzles and their eyes red with anger, and jostling against one another in their anger, raised a hoarse howl. They were filled with passionate hatred of the horses, of the chaise, and of the human beings, and seemed ready to tear them into pieces. Deniska, who was fond of teasing and beating, was delighted at the chance of it, and with a malignant expression bent over and lashed at the sheep-dogs with his whip. The brutes growled more than ever, the horses flew on; and Yegorushka, who had difficulty in keeping his seat on the box, realized, looking at the dogs' eyes and teeth, that if he fell down they would instantly tear him to bits; but he felt no fear and looked at them as malignantly as Deniska, and regretted that he had no whip in his hand.

The chaise came upon a flock of sheep.

"Stop!" cried Kuzmitchov. "Pull up! Woa!"

Deniska threw his whole body backwards and pulled up the horses.

"Come here!" Kuzmitchov shouted to the shepherd. "Call off the dogs, curse them!"

The old shepherd, tattered and barefoot, wearing a fur cap, with a dirty sack round his loins and a long crook in his hand -- a regular figure from the Old Testament -- called off the dogs, and taking off his cap, went up to the chaise. Another similar Old Testament figure was standing motionless at the other end of the flock, staring without interest at the travellers.

"Whose sheep are these?" asked Kuzmitchov.

"Varlamov's," the old man answered in a loud voice.

"Varlamov's," repeated the shepherd standing at the other end of the flock. "Did Varlamov come this way yesterday or not?"

"He did not; his clerk came...."

"Drive on!"

The chaise rolled on and the shepherds, with their angry dogs, were left behind. Yegorushka gazed listlessly at the lilac distance in front, and it began to seem as though the windmill, waving its sails, were getting nearer. It became bigger and bigger, grew quite large, and now he could distinguish clearly its two sails. One sail was old and patched, the other had only lately been made of new wood and glistened in the sun. The chaise drove straight on, while the windmill, for some reason, began retreating to the left. They drove on and on, and the windmill kept moving away to the left, and still did not disappear.

"A fine windmill Boltva has put up for his son," observed Deniska.

"And how is it we don't see his farm?"

"It is that way, beyond the creek."

Boltva's farm, too, soon came into sight, but yet the windmill did not retreat, did not drop behind; it still watched Yegorushka with its shining sail and waved. What a sorcerer!



Towards midday the chaise turned off the road to the right; it went on a little way at walking pace and then stopped. Yegorushka heard a soft, very caressing gurgle, and felt a different air breathe on his face with a cool velvety touch. Through a little pipe of hemlock stuck there by some unknown benefactor, water was running in a thin trickle from a low hill, put together by nature of huge monstrous stones. It fell to the ground, and limpid, sparkling gaily in the sun, and softly murmuring as though fancying itself a great tempestuous torrent, flowed swiftly away to the left. Not far from its source the little stream spread itself out into a pool; the burning sunbeams and the parched soil greedily drank it up and sucked away its strength; but a little further on it must have mingled with another rivulet, for a hundred paces away thick reeds showed green and luxuriant along its course, and three snipe flew up from them with a loud cry as the chaise drove by.

The travellers got out to rest by the stream and feed the horses. Kuzmitchov, Father Christopher and Yegorushka sat down on a mat in the narrow strip of shade cast by the chaise and the unharnessed horses. The nice pleasant thought that the heat had imprinted in Father Christopher's brain craved expression after he had had a drink of water and eaten a hard-boiled egg. He bent a friendly look upon Yegorushka, munched, and began:

"I studied too, my boy; from the earliest age God instilled into me good sense and understanding, so that while I was just such a lad as you I was beyond others, a comfort to my parents and preceptors by my good sense. Before I was fifteen I could speak and make verses in Latin, just as in Russian. I was the crosier-bearer to his Holiness Bishop Christopher. After mass one day, as I remember it was the patron saint's day of His Majesty Tsar Alexandr Pavlovitch of blessed memory, he unrobed at the altar, looked kindly at me and asked, 'Puer bone, quam appellaris?' And I answered, 'Christopherus sum;' and he said, 'Ergo connominati sumus' -- that is, that we were namesakes... Then he asked in Latin, 'Whose son are you?' To which I answered, also in Latin, that I was the son of deacon Sireysky of the village of Lebedinskoe. Seeing my readiness and the clearness of my answers, his Holiness blessed me and said, 'Write to your father that I will not forget him, and that I will keep you in view.' The holy priests and fathers who were standing round the altar, hearing our discussion in Latin, were not a little surprised, and everyone expressed his pleasure in praise of me. Before I had moustaches, my boy, I could read Latin, Greek, and French; I knew philosophy, mathematics, secular history, and all the sciences. The Lord gave me a marvellous memory. Sometimes, if I read a thing once or twice, I knew it by heart. My preceptors and patrons were amazed, and so they expected I should make a learned man, a luminary of the Church. I did think of going to Kiev to continue my studies, but my parents did not approve. 'You'll be studying all your life,' said my father; 'when shall we see you finished?' Hearing such words, I gave up study and took a post.... Of course, I did not become a learned man, but then I did not disobey my parents; I was a comfort to them in their old age and gave them a creditable funeral. Obedience is more than fasting and prayer.

"I suppose you have forgotten all your learning?" observed Kuzmitchov.

"I should think so! Thank God, I have reached my eightieth year! Something of philosophy and rhetoric I do remember, but languages and mathematics I have quite forgotten."

Father Christopher screwed up his eyes, thought a minute and said in an undertone:

"What is a substance? A creature is a self-existing object, not requiring anything else for its completion."

He shook his head and laughed with feeling.

"Spiritual nourishment!" he said. "Of a truth matter nourishes the flesh and spiritual nourishment the soul!"

"Learning is all very well," sighed Kuzmitchov, "but if we don't overtake Varlamov, learning won't do much for us."

"A man isn't a needle -- we shall find him. He must be going his rounds in these parts."

Among the sedge were flying the three snipe they had seen before, and in their plaintive cries there was a note of alarm and vexation at having been driven away from the stream. The horses were steadily munching and snorting. Deniska walked about by them and, trying to appear indifferent to the cucumbers, pies, and eggs that the gentry were eating, he concentrated himself on the gadflies and horseflies that were fastening upon the horses' backs and bellies; he squashed his victims apathetically, emitting a peculiar, fiendishly triumphant, guttural sound, and when he missed them cleared his throat with an air of vexation and looked after every lucky one that escaped death.

"Deniska, where are you? Come and eat," said Kuzmitchov, heaving a deep sigh, a sign that he had had enough.

Deniska diffidently approached the mat and picked out five thick and yellow cucumbers (he did not venture to take the smaller and fresher ones), took two hard-boiled eggs that looked dark and were cracked, then irresolutely, as though afraid he might get a blow on his outstretched hand, touched a pie with his finger.

"Take them, take them," Kuzmitchov urged him on.

Deniska took the pies resolutely, and, moving some distance away, sat down on the grass with his back to the chaise. At once there was such a sound of loud munching that even the horses turned round to look suspiciously at Deniska.

After his meal Kuzmitchov took a sack containing something out of the chaise and said to Yegorushka:

"I am going to sleep, and you mind that no one takes the sack from under my head."

Father Christopher took off his cassock, his girdle, and his full coat, and Yegorushka, looking at him, was dumb with astonishment. He had never imagined that priests wore trousers, and Father Christopher had on real canvas trousers thrust into high boots, and a short striped jacket. Looking at him, Yegorushka thought that in this costume, so unsuitable to his dignified position, he looked with his long hair and beard very much like Robinson Crusoe. After taking off their outer garments Kuzmitchov and Father Christopher lay down in the shade under the chaise, facing one another, and closed their eyes. Deniska, who had finished munching, stretched himself out on his back and also closed his eyes.

"You look out that no one takes away the horses!" he said to Yegorushka, and at once fell asleep.

Stillness reigned. There was no sound except the munching and snorting of the horses and the snoring of the sleepers; somewhere far away a lapwing wailed, and from time to time there sounded the shrill cries of the three snipe who had flown up to see whether their uninvited visitors had gone away; the rivulet babbled, lisping softly, but all these sounds did not break the stillness, did not stir the stagnation, but, on the contrary, lulled all nature to slumber.

Yegorushka, gasping with the heat, which was particularly oppressive after a meal, ran to the sedge and from there surveyed the country. He saw exactly the same as he had in the morning: the plain, the low hills, the sky, the lilac distance; only the hills stood nearer; and he could not see the windmill, which had been left far behind. From behind the rocky hill from which the stream flowed rose another, smoother and broader; a little hamlet of five or six homesteads clung to it. No people, no trees, no shade were to be seen about the huts; it looked as though the hamlet had expired in the burning air and was dried up. To while away the time Yegorushka caught a grasshopper in the grass, held it in his closed hand to his ear, and spent a long time listening to the creature playing on its instrument. When he was weary of its music he ran after a flock of yellow butterflies who were flying towards the sedge on the watercourse, and found himself again beside the chaise, without noticing how he came there. His uncle and Father Christopher were sound asleep; their sleep would be sure to last two or three hours till the horses had rested.... How was he to get through that long time, and where was he to get away from the heat? A hard problem.....Mechanically Yegorushka put his lips to the trickle that ran from the waterpipe; there was a chilliness in his mouth and there was the smell of hemlock. He drank at first eagerly, then went on with effort till the sharp cold had run from his mouth all over his body and the water was spilt on his shirt. Then he went up to the chaise and began looking at the sleeping figures. His uncle's face wore, as before, an expression of business-like reserve. Fanatically devoted to his work, Kuzmitchov always, even in his sleep and at church when they were singing, "Like the cherubim," thought about his business and could never forget it for a moment; and now he was probably dreaming about bales of wool, waggons, prices, Varlamov.... Father Christopher, now, a soft, frivolous and absurd person, had never all his life been conscious of anything which could, like a boa-constrictor, coil about his soul and hold it tight. In all the numerous enterprises he had undertaken in his day what attracted him was not so much the business itself, but the bustle and the contact with other people involved in every undertaking. Thus, in the present expedition, he was not so much interested in wool, in Varlamov, and in prices, as in the long journey, the conversations on the way, the sleeping under a chaise, and the meals at odd times.... And now, judging from his face, he must have been dreaming of Bishop Christopher, of the Latin discussion, of his wife, of puffs and cream and all sorts of things that Kuzmitchov could not possibly dream of.

While Yegorushka was watching their sleeping faces he suddenly heard a soft singing; somewhere at a distance a woman was singing, and it was difficult to tell where and in what direction. The song was subdued, dreary and melancholy, like a dirge, and hardly audible, and seemed to come first from the right, then from the left, then from above, and then from underground, as though an unseen spirit were hovering over the steppe and singing. Yegorushka looked about him, and could not make out where the strange song came from. Then as he listened he began to fancy that the grass was singing; in its song, withered and half-dead, it was without words, but plaintively and passionately, urging that it was not to blame, that the sun was burning it for no fault of its own; it urged that it ardently longed to live, that it was young and might have been beautiful but for the heat and the drought; it was guiltless, but yet it prayed forgiveness and protested that it was in anguish, sad and sorry for itself....

Yegorushka listened for a little, and it began to seem as though this dreary, mournful song made the air hotter, more suffocating and more stagnant.... To drown the singing he ran to the sedge, humming to himself and trying to make a noise with his feet. From there he looked about in all directions and found out who was singing. Near the furthest hut in the hamlet stood a peasant woman in a short petticoat, with long thin legs like a heron. She was sowing something. A white dust floated languidly from her sieve down the hillock. Now it was evident that she was singing. A couple of yards from her a little bare-headed boy in nothing but a smock was standing motionless. As though fascinated by the song, he stood stock-still, staring away into the distance, probably at Yegorushka's crimson shirt.

The song ceased. Yegorushka sauntered back to the chaise, and to while away the time went again to the trickle of water.

And again there was the sound of the dreary song. It was the same long-legged peasant woman in the hamlet over the hill. Yegorushka's boredom came back again. He left the pipe and looked upwards. What he saw was so unexpected that he was a little frightened. Just above his head on one of the big clumsy stones stood a chubby little boy, wearing nothing but a shirt, with a prominent stomach and thin legs, the same boy who had been standing before by the peasant woman. He was gazing with open mouth and unblinking eyes at Yegorushka's crimson shirt and at the chaise, with a look of blank astonishment and even fear, as though he saw before him creatures of another world. The red colour of the shirt charmed and allured him. But the chaise and the men sleeping under it excited his curiosity; perhaps he had not noticed how the agreeable red colour and curiosity had attracted him down from the hamlet, and now probably he was surprised at his own boldness. For a long while Yegorushka stared at him, and he at Yegorushka. Both were silent and conscious of some awkwardness. After a long silence Yegorushka asked:

"What's your name?"

The stranger's cheeks puffed out more than ever; he pressed his back against the rock, opened his eyes wide, moved his lips, and answered in a husky bass: "Tit!"

The boys said not another word to each other; after a brief silence, still keeping his eyes fixed on Yegorushka, the mysterious Tit kicked up one leg, felt with his heel for a niche and clambered up the rock; from that point he ascended to the next rock, staggering backwards and looking intently at Yegorushka, as though afraid he might hit him from behind, and so made his way upwards till he disappeared altogether behind the crest of the hill.

After watching him out of sight, Yegorushka put his arms round his knees and leaned his head on them.... The burning sun scorched the back of his head, his neck, and his spine. The melancholy song died away, then floated again on the stagnant stifling air. The rivulet gurgled monotonously, the horses munched, and time dragged on endlessly, as though it, too, were stagnant and had come to a standstill. It seemed as though a hundred years had passed since the morning. Could it be that God's world, the chaise and the horses would come to a standstill in that air, and, like the hills, turn to stone and remain for ever in one spot? Yegorushka raised his head, and with smarting eyes looked before him; the lilac distance, which till then had been motionless, began heaving, and with the sky floated away into the distance.... It drew after it the brown grass, the sedge, and with extraordinary swiftness Yegorushka floated after the flying distance. Some force noiselessly drew him onwards, and the heat and the wearisome song flew after in pursuit. Yegorushka bent his head and shut his eyes....

Deniska was the first to wake up. Something must have bitten him, for he jumped up, quickly scratched his shoulder and said:

"Plague take you, cursed idolater!"

Then he went to the brook, had a drink and slowly washed. His splashing and puffing roused Yegorushka from his lethargy. The boy looked at his wet face with drops of water and big freckles which made it look like marble, and asked:

"Shall we soon be going?"

Deniska looked at the height of the sun and answered:

"I expect so."

He dried himself with the tail of his shirt and, making a very serious face, hopped on one leg.

"I say, which of us will get to the sedge first?" he said.

Yegorushka was exhausted by the heat and drowsiness, but he raced off after him all the same. Deniska was in his twentieth year, was a coachman and going to be married, but he had not left off being a boy. He was very fond of flying kites, chasing pigeons, playing knuckle-bones, running races, and always took part in children's games and disputes. No sooner had his master turned his back or gone to sleep than Deniska would begin doing something such as hopping on one leg or throwing stones. It was hard for any grown-up person, seeing the genuine enthusiasm with which he frolicked about in the society of children, to resist saying, "What a baby!" Children, on the other hand, saw nothing strange in the invasion of their domain by the big coachman. "Let him play," they thought, "as long as he doesn't fight!" In the same way little dogs see nothing strange in it when a simple-hearted big dog joins their company uninvited and begins playing with them.

Deniska outstripped Yegorushka, and was evidently very much pleased at having done so. He winked at him, and to show that he could hop on one leg any distance, suggested to Yegorushka that he should hop with him along the road and from there, without resting, back to the chaise. Yegorushka declined this suggestion, for he was very much out of breath and exhausted.

All at once Deniska looked very grave, as he did not look even when Kuzmitchov gave him a scolding or threatened him with a stick; listening intently, he dropped quietly on one knee and an expression of sternness and alarm came into his face, such as one sees in people who hear heretical talk. He fixed his eyes on one spot, raised his hand curved into a hollow, and suddenly fell on his stomach on the ground and slapped the hollow of his hand down upon the grass.

"Caught!" he wheezed triumphantly, and, getting up, lifted a big grasshopper to Yegorushka's eyes.

The two boys stroked the grasshopper's broad green back with their fingers and touched his antenna, supposing that this would please the creature. Then Deniska caught a fat fly that had been sucking blood and offered it to the grasshopper. The latter moved his huge jaws, that were like the visor of a helmet, with the utmost unconcern, as though he had been long acquainted with Deniska, and bit off the fly's stomach. They let him go. With a flash of the pink lining of his wings, he flew down into the grass and at once began his churring notes again. They let the fly go, too. It preened its wings, and without its stomach flew off to the horses.

A loud sigh was heard from under the chaise. It was Kuzmitchov waking up. He quickly raised his head, looked uneasily into the distance, and from that look, which passed by Yegorushka and Deniska without sympathy or interest, it could be seen that his thought on awaking was of the wool and of Varlamov.

"Father Christopher, get up; it is time to start," he said anxiously. "Wake up; we've slept too long as it is! Deniska, put the horses in."

Father Christopher woke up with the same smile with which he had fallen asleep; his face looked creased and wrinkled from sleep, and seemed only half the size. After washing and dressing, he proceeded without haste to take out of his pocket a little greasy psalter; and standing with his face towards the east, began in a whisper repeating the psalms of the day and crossing himself.

"Father Christopher," said Kuzmitchov reproachfully, "it's time to start; the horses are ready, and here are you, ... upon my word."

"In a minute, in a minute," muttered Father Christopher. "I must read the psalms.... I haven't read them to-day."

"The psalms can wait."

"Ivan Ivanitch, that is my rule every day.... I can't ..."

"God will overlook it."

For a full quarter of an hour Father Christopher stood facing the east and moving his lips, while Kuzmitchov looked at him almost with hatred and impatiently shrugged his shoulders. He was particularly irritated when, after every "Hallelujah," Father Christopher drew a long breath, rapidly crossed himself and repeated three times, intentionally raising his voice so that the others might cross themselves, "Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah! Glory be to Thee, O Lord!" At last he smiled, looked upwards at the sky, and, putting the psalter in his pocket, said:

"Finis!"

A minute later the chaise had started on the road. As though it were going backwards and not forwards, the travellers saw the same scene as they had before midday.

The low hills were still plunged in the lilac distance, and no end could be seen to them. There were glimpses of high grass and heaps of stones; strips of stubble land passed by them and still the same rooks, the same hawk, moving its wings with slow dignity, moved over the steppe. The air was more sultry than ever; from the sultry heat and the stillness submissive nature was spellbound into silence.... No wind, no fresh cheering sound, no cloud.

But at last, when the sun was beginning to sink into the west, the steppe, the hills and the air could bear the oppression no longer, and, driven out of all patience, exhausted, tried to fling off the yoke. A fleecy ashen-grey cloud unexpectedly appeared behind the hills. It exchanged glances with the steppe, as though to say, "Here I am," and frowned. Suddenly something burst in the stagnant air; there was a violent squall of wind which whirled round and round, roaring and whistling over the steppe. At once a murmur rose from the grass and last year's dry herbage, the dust curled in spiral eddies over the road, raced over the steppe, and carrying with it straws, dragon flies and feathers, rose up in a whirling black column towards the sky and darkened the sun. Prickly uprooted plants ran stumbling and leaping in all directions over the steppe, and one of them got caught in the whirlwind, turned round and round like a bird, flew towards the sky, and turning into a little black speck, vanished from sight. After it flew another, and then a third, and Yegorushka saw two of them meet in the blue height and clutch at one another as though they were wrestling.

A bustard flew up by the very road. Fluttering his wings and his tail, he looked, bathed in the sunshine, like an angler's glittering tin fish or a waterfly flashing so swiftly over the water that its wings cannot be told from its antenna, which seem to be growing before, behind and on all sides.... Quivering in the air like an insect with a shimmer of bright colours, the bustard flew high up in a straight line, then, probably frightened by a cloud of dust, swerved to one side, and for a long time the gleam of his wings could be seen....

Then a corncrake flew up from the grass, alarmed by the hurricane and not knowing what was the matter. It flew with the wind and not against it, like all the other birds, so that all its feathers were ruffled up and it was puffed out to the size of a hen and looked very angry and impressive. Only the rooks who had grown old on the steppe and were accustomed to its vagaries hovered calmly over the grass, or taking no notice of anything, went on unconcernedly pecking with their stout beaks at the hard earth.

There was a dull roll of thunder beyond the hills; there came a whiff of fresh air. Deniska gave a cheerful whistle and lashed his horses. Father Christopher and Kuzmitchov held their hats and looked intently towards the hills.... How pleasant a shower of rain would have been!

One effort, one struggle more, and it seemed the steppe would have got the upper hand. But the unseen oppressive force gradually riveted its fetters on the wind and the air, laid the dust, and the stillness came back again as though nothing had happened, the cloud hid, the sun-baked hills frowned submissively, the air grew calm, and only somewhere the troubled lapwings wailed and lamented their destiny....

Soon after that the evening came on.

In the dusk of evening a big house of one storey, with a rusty iron roof and with dark windows, came into sight. This house was called a posting-inn, though it had nothing like a stableyard, and it stood in the middle of the steppe, with no kind of enclosure round it. A little to one side of it a wretched little cherry orchard shut in by a hurdle fence made a dark patch, and under the windows stood sleepy sunflowers drooping their heavy heads. From the orchard came the clatter of a little toy windmill, set there to frighten away hares by the rattle. Nothing more could be seen near the house, and nothing could be heard but the steppe. The chaise had scarcely stopped at the porch with an awning over it, when from the house there came the sound of cheerful voices, one a man's, another a woman's; there was the creak of a swing-door, and in a flash a tall gaunt figure, swinging its arms and fluttering its coat, was standing by the chaise. This was the innkeeper, Moisey Moisevitch, a man no longer young, with a very pale face and a handsome beard as black as charcoal. He was wearing a threadbare black coat, which hung flapping on his narrow shoulders as though on a hatstand, and fluttered its skirts like wings every time Moisey Moisevitch flung up his hands in delight or horror. Besides his coat the innkeeper was wearing full white trousers, not stuck into his boots, and a velvet waistcoat with brown flowers on it that looked like gigantic bugs.

Moisey Moisevitch was at first dumb with excess of feeling on recognizing the travellers, then he clasped his hands and uttered a moan. His coat swung its skirts, his back bent into a bow, and his pale face twisted into a smile that suggested that to see the chaise was not merely a pleasure to him, but actually a joy so sweet as to be painful.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" he began in a thin sing-song voice, breathless, fussing about and preventing the travellers from getting out of the chaise by his antics. "What a happy day for me! Oh, what am I to do now? Ivan Ivanitch! Father Christopher! What a pretty little gentleman sitting on the box, God strike me dead! Oh, my goodness! why am I standing here instead of asking the visitors indoors? Please walk in, I humbly beg you.... You are kindly welcome! Give me all your things.... Oh, my goodness me!"

Moisey Moisevitch, who was rummaging in the chaise and assisting the travellers to alight, suddenly turned back and shouted in a voice as frantic and choking as though he were drowning and calling for help:

"Solomon! Solomon!"

"Solomon! Solomon!" a woman's voice repeated indoors.

The swing-door creaked, and in the doorway appeared a rather short young Jew with a big beak-like nose, with a bald patch surrounded by rough red curly hair; he was dressed in a short and very shabby reefer jacket, with rounded lappets and short sleeves, and in short serge trousers, so that he looked skimpy and short-tailed like an unfledged bird. This was Solomon, the brother of Moisey Moisevitch. He went up to the chaise, smiling rather queerly, and did not speak or greet the travellers.

"Ivan Ivanitch and Father Christopher have come," said Moisey Moisevitch in a tone as though he were afraid his brother would not believe him. "Dear, dear! What a surprise! Such honoured guests to have come us so suddenly! Come, take their things, Solomon. Walk in, honoured guests."

A little later Kuzmitchov, Father Christopher, and Yegorushka were sitting in a big gloomy empty room at an old oak table. The table was almost in solitude, for, except a wide sofa covered with torn American leather and three chairs, there was no other furniture in the room. And, indeed, not everybody would have given the chairs that name. They were a pitiful semblance of furniture, covered with American leather that had seen its best days, and with backs bent backwards at an unnaturally acute angle, so that they looked like children's sledges. It was hard to imagine what had been the unknown carpenter's object in bending the chairbacks so mercilessly, and one was tempted to imagine that it was not the carpenter's fault, but that some athletic visitor had bent the chairs like this as a feat, then had tried to bend them back again and had made them worse. The room looked gloomy, the walls were grey, the ceilings and the cornices were grimy; on the floor were chinks and yawning holes that were hard to account for (one might have fancied they were made by the heel of the same athlete), and it seemed as though the room would still have been dark if a dozen lamps had hung in it. There was nothing approaching an ornament on the walls or the windows. On one wall, however, there hung a list of regulations of some sort under a two-headed eagle in a grey wooden frame, and on another wall in the same sort of frame an engraving with the inscription,

"The Indifference of Man." What it was to which men were indifferent it was impossible to make out, as the engraving was very dingy with age and was extensively flyblown. There was a smell of something decayed and sour in the room.

As he led the visitors into the room, Moisey Moisevitch went on wriggling, gesticulating, shrugging and uttering joyful exclamations; he considered these antics necessary in order to seem polite and agreeable.

"When did our waggons go by?" Kuzmitchov asked.

"One party went by early this morning, and the other, Ivan Ivanitch, put up here for dinner and went on towards evening."

"Ah!... Has Varlamov been by or not?"

"No, Ivan Ivanitch. His clerk, Grigory Yegoritch, went by yesterday morning and said that he had to be to-day at the Molokans' farm."

"Good! so we will go after the waggons directly and then on to the Molokans'."

"Mercy on us, Ivan Ivanitch!" Moisey Moisevitch cried in horror, flinging up his hands. "Where are you going for the night? You will have a nice little supper and stay the night, and to-morrow morning, please God, you can go on and overtake anyone you like."

"There is no time for that.... Excuse me, Moisey Moisevitch, another time; but now I must make haste. We'll stay a quarter of an hour and then go on; we can stay the night at the Molokans'."

"A quarter of an hour!" squealed Moisey Moisevitch. "Have you no fear of God, Ivan Ivanitch? You will compel me to hide your caps and lock the door! You must have a cup of tea and a snack of something, anyway."

"We have no time for tea," said Kuzmitchov.

Moisey Moisevitch bent his head on one side, crooked his knees, and put his open hands before him as though warding off a blow, while with a smile of agonized sweetness he began imploring:

"Ivan Ivanitch! Father Christopher! Do be so good as to take a cup of tea with me. Surely I am not such a bad man that you can't even drink tea in my house? Ivan Ivanitch!"

"Well, we may just as well have a cup of tea," said Father Christopher, with a sympathetic smile; "that won't keep us long."

"Very well," Kuzmitchov assented.

Moisey Moisevitch, in a fluster uttered an exclamation of joy, and shrugging as though he had just stepped out of cold weather into warm, ran to the door and cried in the same frantic voice in which he had called Solomon:

"Rosa! Rosa! Bring the samovar!"

A minute later the door opened, and Solomon came into the room carrying a large tray in his hands. Setting the tray on the table, he looked away sarcastically with the same queer smile as before. Now, by the light of the lamp, it was possible to see his smile distinctly; it was very complex, and expressed a variety of emotions, but the predominant element in it was undisguised contempt. He seemed to be thinking of something ludicrous and silly, to be feeling contempt and dislike, to be pleased at something and waiting for the favourable moment to turn something into ridicule and to burst into laughter. His long nose, his thick lips, and his sly prominent eyes seemed tense with the desire to laugh. Looking at his face, Kuzmitchov smiled ironically and asked:

"Solomon, why did you not come to our fair at N. this summer, and act some Jewish scenes?"

Two years before, as Yegorushka remembered very well, at one of the booths at the fair at N., Solomon had performed some scenes of Jewish life, and his acting had been a great success. The allusion to this made no impression whatever upon Solomon. Making no answer, he went out and returned a little later with the samovar.

When he had done what he had to do at the table he moved a little aside, and, folding his arms over his chest and thrusting out one leg, fixed his sarcastic eyes on Father Christopher. There was something defiant, haughty, and contemptuous in his attitude, and at the same time it was comic and pitiful in the extreme, because the more impressive his attitude the more vividly it showed up his short trousers, his bobtail coat, his caricature of a nose, and his bird-like plucked-looking little figure.

Moisey Moisevitch brought a footstool from the other room and sat down a little way from the table.

"I wish you a good appetite! Tea and sugar!" he began, trying to entertain his visitors. "I hope you will enjoy it. Such rare guests, such rare ones; it is years since I last saw Father Christopher. And will no one tell me who is this nice little gentleman?" he asked, looking tenderly at Yegorushka.

"He is the son of my sister, Olga Ivanovna," answered Kuzmitchov.

"And where is he going?"

"To school. We are taking him to a high school."

In his politeness, Moisey Moisevitch put on a look of wonder and wagged his head expressively.

"Ah, that is a fine thing," he said, shaking his finger at the samovar. "That's a fine thing. You will come back from the high school such a gentleman that we shall all take off our hats to you. You will be wealthy and wise and so grand that your mamma will be delighted. Oh, that's a fine thing!"

He paused a little, stroked his knees, and began again in a jocose and deferential tone.

"You must excuse me, Father Christopher, but I am thinking of writing to the bishop to tell him you are robbing the merchants of their living. I shall take a sheet of stamped paper and write that I suppose Father Christopher is short of pence, as he has taken up with trade and begun selling wool."

"H'm, yes ... it's a queer notion in my old age," said Father Christopher, and he laughed. "I have turned from priest to merchant, brother. I ought to be at home now saying my prayers, instead of galloping about the country like a Pharaoh in his chariot.... Vanity!"

"But it will mean a lot of pence!"

"Oh, I dare say! More kicks than halfpence, and serve me right. The wool's not mine, but my son-in-law Mikhail's!"

"Why doesn't he go himself?"

"Why, because... His mother's milk is scarcely dry upon his lips. He can buy wool all right, but when it comes to selling, he has no sense; he is young yet. He has wasted all his money; he wanted to grow rich and cut a dash, but he tried here and there, and no one would give him his price. And so the lad went on like that for a year, and then he came to me and said, 'Daddy, you sell the wool for me; be kind and do it! I am no good at the business!' And that is true enough. As soon as there is anything wrong then it's 'Daddy,' but till then they could get on without their dad. When he was buying he did not consult me, but now when he is in difficulties it's Daddy's turn. And what does his dad know about it? If it were not for Ivan Ivanitch, his dad could do nothing. I have a lot of worry with them."

"Yes; one has a lot of worry with one's children, I can tell you that," sighed Moisey Moisevitch. "I have six of my own. One needs schooling, another needs doctoring, and a third needs nursing, and when they grow up they are more trouble still. It is not only nowadays, it was the same in Holy Scripture. When Jacob had little children he wept, and when they grew up he wept still more bitterly."

"H'm, yes ..." Father Christopher assented pensively, looking at his glass. "I have no cause myself to rail against the Lord. I have lived to the end of my days as any man might be thankful to live.... I have married my daughters to good men, my sons I have set up in life, and now I am free; I have done my work and can go where I like. I live in peace with my wife. I eat and drink and sleep and rejoice in my grandchildren, and say my prayers and want nothing more. I live on the fat of the land, and don't need to curry favour with anyone. I have never had any

trouble from childhood, and now suppose the Tsar were to ask me, 'What do you need? What would you like?' why, I don't need anything. I have everything I want and everything to be thankful for. In the whole town there is no happier man than I am. My only trouble is I have so many sins, but there -- only God is without sin. That's right, isn't it?"

"No doubt it is."

"I have no teeth, of course; my poor old back aches; there is one thing and another, ... asthma and that sort of thing.... I ache.... The flesh is weak, but then think of my age! I am in the eighties! One can't go on for ever; one mustn't outstay one's welcome."

Father Christopher suddenly thought of something, spluttered into his glass and choked with laughter. Moisey Moisevitch laughed, too, from politeness, and he, too, cleared his throat.

"So funny!" said Father Christopher, and he waved his hand. "My eldest son Gavril came to pay me a visit. He is in the medical line, and is a district doctor in the province of Tchernigov.... 'Very well ...' I said to him, 'here I have asthma and one thing and another.... You are a doctor; cure your father!' He undressed me on the spot, tapped me, listened, and all sorts of tricks, ... kneaded my stomach, and then he said, 'Dad, you ought to be treated with compressed air.' " Father Christopher laughed convulsively, till the tears came into his eyes, and got up.

"And I said to him, 'God bless your compressed air!' " he brought out through his laughter, waving both hands. "God bless your compressed air!"

Moisey Moisevitch got up, too, and with his hands on his stomach, went off into shrill laughter like the yap of a lap-dog.

"God bless the compressed air!" repeated Father Christopher, laughing.

Moisey Moisevitch laughed two notes higher and so violently that he could hardly stand on his feet.

"Oh dear!" he moaned through his laughter. "Let me get my breath.... You'll be the death of me."

He laughed and talked, though at the same time he was casting timorous and suspicious looks at Solomon. The latter was standing in the same attitude and still smiling. To judge from his eyes and his smile, his contempt and hatred were genuine, but that was so out of keeping with his plucked-looking figure that it seemed to Yegorushka as though he were putting on his defiant attitude and biting sarcastic smile to play the fool for the entertainment of their honoured guests.

After drinking six glasses of tea in silence, Kuzmitchov cleared a space before him on the table, took his bag, the one which he kept under his head when he slept under the chaise, untied the string and shook it. Rolls of paper notes were scattered out of the bag on the table.

"While we have the time, Father Christopher, let us reckon up," said Kuzmitchov.

Moisey Moisevitch was embarrassed at the sight of the money. He got up, and, as a man of delicate feeling unwilling to pry into other people's secrets, he went out of the room on tiptoe, swaying his arms. Solomon remained where he was.

"How many are there in the rolls of roubles?" Father Christopher began.

"The rouble notes are done up in fifties, ... the three-rouble notes in nineties, the twenty-five and hundred roubles in thousands. You count out seven thousand eight hundred for Varlamov, and I will count out for Gusevitch. And mind you don't make a mistake..."

Yegorushka had never in his life seen so much money as was lying on the table before him. There must have been a great deal of money, for the roll of seven thousand eight hundred, which Father Christopher put aside for Varlamov, seemed very small compared with the whole heap. At any other time such a mass of money would have impressed Yegorushka, and would have moved him to reflect how many cracknels, buns and poppy-cakes could be bought for that money. Now he looked at it listlessly, only conscious of the disgusting smell of kerosene and rotten apples that came from the heap of notes. He was exhausted by the jolting ride in the chaise, tired out and

sleepy. His head was heavy, his eyes would hardly keep open and his thoughts were tangled like threads. If it had been possible he would have been relieved to lay his head on the table, so as not to see the lamp and the fingers moving over the heaps of notes, and to have let his tired sleepy thoughts go still more at random. When he tried to keep awake, the light of the lamp, the cups and the fingers grew double, the samovar heaved and the smell of rotten apples seemed even more acrid and disgusting.

"Ah, money, money!" sighed Father Christopher, smiling. "You bring trouble! Now I expect my Mihailo is asleep and dreaming that I am going to bring him a heap of money like this."

"Your Mihailo Timofevitch is a man who doesn't understand business," said Kuzmitchov in an undertone; "he undertakes what isn't his work, but you understand and can judge. You had better hand over your wool to me, as I have said already, and I would give you half a rouble above my own price -- yes, I would, simply out of regard for you...."

"No, Ivan Ivanitch." Father Christopher sighed. "I thank you for your kindness.... Of course, if it were for me to decide, I shouldn't think twice about it; but as it is, the wool is not mine, as you know...."

Moisey Moisevitch came in on tiptoe. Trying from delicacy not to look at the heaps of money, he stole up to Yegorushka and pulled at his shirt from behind.

"Come along, little gentleman," he said in an undertone, "come and see the little bear I can show you! Such a queer, cross little bear. Oo-oo!"

The sleepy boy got up and listlessly dragged himself after Moisey Moisevitch to see the bear. He went into a little room, where, before he saw anything, he felt he could not breathe from the smell of something sour and decaying, which was much stronger here than in the big room and probably spread from this room all over the house. One part of the room was occupied by a big bed, covered with a greasy quilt and another by a chest of drawers and heaps of rags of all kinds from a woman's stiff petticoat to children's little breeches and braces. A tallow candle stood on the chest of drawers.

Instead of the promised bear, Yegorushka saw a big fat Jewess with her hair hanging loose, in a red flannel skirt with black sprigs on it; she turned with difficulty in the narrow space between the bed and the chest of drawers and uttered drawn-out moaning as though she had toothache. On seeing Yegorushka, she made a doleful, woe-begone face, heaved a long drawn-out sigh, and before he had time to look round, put to his lips a slice of bread smeared with honey.

"Eat it, dearie, eat it!" she said. "You are here without your mamma, and no one to look after you. Eat it up."

Yegorushka did eat it, though after the goodies and poppy-cakes he had every day at home, he did not think very much of the honey, which was mixed with wax and bees' wings. He ate while Moisey Moisevitch and the Jewess looked at him and sighed.

"Where are you going, dearie?" asked the Jewess. "To school," answered Yegorushka.

"And how many brothers and sisters have you got?" "I am the only one; there are no others."

"O-oh!" sighed the Jewess, and turned her eyes upward. "Poor mamma, poor mamma! How she will weep and miss you! We are going to send our Nahum to school in a year. O-oh!"

"Ah, Nahum, Nahum!" sighed Moisey Moisevitch, and the skin of his pale face twitched nervously. "And he is so delicate."

The greasy quilt quivered, and from beneath it appeared a child's curly head on a very thin neck; two black eyes gleamed and stared with curiosity at Yegorushka. Still sighing, Moisey Moisevitch and the Jewess went to the chest of drawers and began talking in Yiddish. Moisey Moisevitch spoke in a low bass undertone, and altogether his talk in Yiddish was like a continual "ghaal-ghaal-ghaal-ghaal, ..." while his wife answered him in a shrill voice like a turkeycock's, and the whole effect of her talk was something like "Too-too-too-too!" While they were consulting, another little curly head on a thin neck peeped out of the greasy quilt, then a third, then a fourth.... If Yegorushka had had a fertile imagination he might have imagined that the hundred-headed hydra was hiding under the quilt.

"Ghaal-ghaal-ghaal-ghaal!" said Moisey Moisevitch.

"Too-too-too-too!" answered the Jewess.

The consultation ended in the Jewess's diving with a deep sigh into the chest of drawers, and, unwrapping some sort of green rag there, she took out a big rye cake made in the shape of a heart.

"Take it, dearie," she said, giving Yegorushka the cake; "you have no mamma now -- no one to give you nice things."

Yegorushka stuck the cake in his pocket and staggered to the door, as he could not go on breathing the foul, sour air in which the innkeeper and his wife lived. Going back to the big room, he settled himself more comfortably on the sofa and gave up trying to check his straying thoughts.

As soon as Kuzmitchov had finished counting out the notes he put them back into the bag. He did not treat them very respectfully and stuffed them into the dirty sack without ceremony, as indifferently as though they had not been money but waste paper.

Father Christopher was talking to Solomon.

"Well, Solomon the Wise!" he said, yawning and making the sign of the cross over his mouth. "How is business?"

"What sort of business are you talking about?" asked Solomon, and he looked as fiendish, as though it were a hint of some crime on his part.

"Oh, things in general. What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" Solomon repeated, and he shrugged his shoulders. "The same as everyone else.... You see, I am a menial, I am my brother's servant; my brother's the servant of the visitors; the visitors are Varlamov's servants; and if I had ten millions, Varlamov would be my servant."

"Why would he be your servant?"

"Why, because there isn't a gentleman or millionaire who isn't ready to lick the hand of a scabby Jew for the sake of making a kopeck. Now, I am a scabby Jew and a beggar. Everybody looks at me as though I were a dog, but if I had money Varlamov would play the fool before me just as Moisey does before you."

Father Christopher and Kuzmitchov looked at each other. Neither of them understood Solomon. Kuzmitchov looked at him sternly and dryly, and asked:

"How can you compare yourself with Varlamov, you blockhead?"

"I am not such a fool as to put myself on a level with Varlamov," answered Solomon, looking sarcastically at the speaker. "Though Varlamov is a Russian, he is at heart a scabby Jew; money and gain are all he lives for, but I threw my money in the stove! I don't want money, or land, or sheep, and there is no need for people to be afraid of me and to take off their hats when I pass. So I am wiser than your Varlamov and more like a man!"

A little later Yegorushka, half asleep, heard Solomon in a hoarse hollow voice choked with hatred, in hurried stuttering phrases, talking about the Jews. At first he talked correctly in Russian, then he fell into the tone of a Jewish recitation, and began speaking as he had done at the fair with an exaggerated Jewish accent.

"Stop! ..." Father Christopher said to him. "If you don't like your religion you had better change it, but to laugh at it is a sin; it is only the lowest of the low who will make fun of his religion."

"You don't understand," Solomon cut him short rudely. "I am talking of one thing and you are talking of something else...."

"One can see you are a foolish fellow," sighed Father Christopher. "I admonish you to the best of my ability, and you are angry. I speak to you like an old man quietly, and you answer like a turkeycock: 'Bla---bla---bla!' You really are a queer fellow...."

Moisey Moisevitch came in. He looked anxiously at Solomon and at his visitors, and again the skin on his face quivered nervously. Yegorushka shook his head and looked about him; he caught a passing glimpse of Solomon's face at the very moment when it was turned three-quarters towards him and when the shadow of his long nose divided his left cheek in half; the contemptuous smile mingled with that shadow; the gleaming sarcastic eyes, the haughty expression, and the whole plucked-looking little figure, dancing and doubling itself before Yegorushka's eyes, made him now not like a buffoon, but like something one sometimes dreams of, like an evil spirit.

"What a ferocious fellow you've got here, Moisey Moisevitch! God bless him!" said Father Christopher with a smile. "You ought to find him a place or a wife or something."



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