Creatures That Once Were Men

Maxim Gorky

Table of Contents

Creatures That Once Were Men

Maxim Gorky

INTRODUCTORY.

By G. K. CHESTERTON.

It is certainly a curious fact that so many of the voices of what is called our modern religion have come from countries which are not only simple, but may even be called barbaric. A nation like Norway has a great realistic drama without having ever had either a great classical drama or a great romantic drama. A nation like Russia makes us feel its modern fiction when we have never felt its ancient fiction. It has produced its Gissing without producing its Scott. Everything that is most sad and scientific, everything that is most grim and analytical, everything that can truly be called most modern, everything that can without unreasonableness be called most morbid, comes from these fresh and untried and unexhausted nationalities. Out of these infant peoples come the oldest voices of the earth. This contradiction, like many other contradictions, is one which ought first of all to be registered as a mere fact; long before we attempt to explain why things contradict themselves, we ought, if we are honest men and good critics, to register the preliminary truth that things do contradict themselves. In this case, as I say, there are many possible and suggestive explanations. It may be, to take an example, that our modern Europe is so exhausted that even the vigorous expression of that exhaustion is difficult for every one except the most robust. It may be that all the nations are tired; and it may be that only the boldest and breeziest are not too tired to say that they are tired. It may be that a man like Ibsen in Norway or a man like Gorky in Russia are the only people left who have so much faith that they can really believe in scepticism. It may be that they are the only people left who have so much animal spirits that they can really feast high and drink deep at the ancient banquet of pessimism. This is one of the possible hypotheses or explanations in the matter: that all Europe feels these things and that they only have strength to believe them also. Many other explanations might, however, also be offered. It might be suggested that half−barbaric countries like Russia or Norway, which have always lain, to say the least of it, on the extreme edge of the circle of our European civilisation, have a certain primal melancholy which belongs to them through all the ages. It is highly probable that this sadness, which to us is modern, is to them eternal. It is highly probable that what we have solemnly and suddenly discovered in scientific text−books and philosophical magazines they absorbed and experienced thousands of years ago, when they offered human sacrifice in black and cruel forests and cried to their gods in the dark. Their agnosticism is perhaps merely paganism; their paganism, as in old times, is merely devilworship. Certainly, Schopenhauer could hardly have written his hideous essay on women except in a country which had once been full of slavery and the service of fiends. It may be that these moderns are tricking us altogether, and are hiding in their current scientific jargon things that they knew before science or civilisation were. They say that they are determinists; but the truth is, probably, that they are still worshipping the Norns. They say that they describe scenes which are sickening and dehumanising in the name of art or in the name of truth; but it may be that they do it in the name of some deity

indescribable, whom they propitiated with blood and terror before the beginning of history.

This hypothesis, like the hypothesis mentioned before it, is highly disputable, and is at best a suggestion. But there is one broad truth in the matter which may in any case be considered as established. A country like Russia has far more inherent capacity for producing revolution in revolutionists than any country of the type of England or America. Communities highly civilised and largely urban tend to a thing which is now called evolution, the most cautious and the most conservative of all social influences. The loyal Russian obeys the Czar because he remembers the Czar and the Czar's importance. The disloyal Russian frets against the Czar because he also remembers the Czar, and makes a note of the necessity of knifing him. But the loyal Englishman obeys the upper classes because he has forgotten that they are there. Their operation has become to him like daylight, or gravitation, or any of the forces of nature. And there are no disloyal Englishmen; there are no English revolutionists, because the oligarchic management of England is so complete as to be invisible. The thing which can once get itself forgotten can make itself omnipotent.

Gorky is pre−eminently Russian, in that he is a revolutionist; not because most Russians are revolutionists (for I imagine that they are not), but because most Russians−−indeed, nearly all Russians−−are in that attitude of mind which makes revolution possible and which makes religion possible, an attitude of primary and dogmatic assertion. To be a revolutionist it is first necessary to be a revelationist. It is necessary to believe in the sufficiency of some theory of the universe or the State. But in countries that have come under the influence of what is called the evolutionary idea, there has been no dramatic righting of wrongs, and (unless the evolutionary idea loses its hold) there never will be. These countries have no revolution, they have to put up with an inferior and largely fictitious thing which they call progress.

The interest of the Gorky tale, like the interest of so many other Russian masterpieces, consists in this sharp contact between a simplicity, which we in the West feel to be very old, and a rebelliousness which we in the West feel to be very new. We cannot in our graduated and polite civilisation quite make head or tail of the Russian anarch; we can only feel in a vague way that his tale is the tale of the Missing Link, and that his head is the head of the superman. We hear his lonely cry of anger. But we cannot be quite certain whether his protest is the protest of the first anarchist against government, or whether it is the protest of the last savage against civilisation. The cruelty of ages and of political cynicism or necessity has done much to burden the race of which Gorky writes; but time has left them one thing which it has not left to the people in Poplar or West Ham. It has left them, apparently, the clear and childlike power of seeing the cruelty which encompasses them. Gorky is a tramp, a man of the people, and also a critic and a bitter one. In the West poor men, when they become articulate in literature, are always sentimentalists and nearly always optimists.

It is no exaggeration to say that these people of whom Gorky writes in such a story as this of "Creatures that once were Men" are to the Western mind children. They have, indeed, been tortured and broken by experience and sin. But this has only sufficed to make them sad children or naughty children or bewildered children. They have absolutely no trace of that quality upon which secure government rests so largely in Western Europe, the quality of being soothed by long words as if by an incantation. They do not call hunger "economic pressure"; they call it hunger. They do not call rich men "examples of capitalistic concentration," they call them rich men. And this note of plainness and of something nobly prosaic is as characteristic of Gorky, the most recent and in some ways the most modern and sophisticated of Russian authors, as it is of Tolstoy or any of the Tolstoyan type of mind. The very title of this story strikes the note of this sudden and simple vision. The philanthropist writing long letters to the Daily Telegraph says, of men living in a slum, that "their degeneration is of such a kind as almost to pass the limits of the semblance of humanity," and we read the whole thing with a tepid assent as we should read phrases about the virtues of Queen Victoria or the dignity of the House of Commons. The Russian novelist, when he describes a dosshouse, says, "Creatures that once were Men." And we are arrested, and regard the facts as a kind of terrible fairy tale. This story is a test case of the Russian manner, for it is in itself a study of decay, a study of failure, and a study of old age. And yet the author is forced to write even of staleness freshly; and though he is treating of the world as seen by eyes darkened or blood−shot with evil experience, his own eyes look out upon the

scene with a clarity that is almost babyish. Through all runs that curious Russian sense that every man is only a man, which, if the Russians ever are a democracy, will make them the most democratic democracy that the world has ever seen. Take this passage, for instance, from the austere conclusion of "Creatures that once were Men."

Petunikoff smiled the smile of the conqueror and went back into the dosshouse, but suddenly he stopped and trembled. At the door facing him stood an old man with a stick in his hand and a large bag on his back, a horrible odd man in rags and tatters, which covered his bony figure. He bent under the weight of his burden, and lowered his head on his breast, as if he wished to attack the merchant.

"What are you? Who are you?" shouted Petunikoff.

"A man . . ." he answered, in a hoarse voice. This hoarseness pleased and tranquillised Petunikoff, he even smiled.

"A man! And are there really men like you?" Stepping aside he let the old man pass. He went, saying slowly:

"Men are of various kinds . . . as God wills . . . There are worse than me . . . still worse . . . Yes . . ."

Here, in the very act of describing a kind of a fall from humanity, Gorky expresses a sense of the strangeness and essential value of the human being which is far too commonly absent altogether from such complex civilisations as our own. To no Western, I am afraid, would it occur when asked what he was to say, "A man." He would be a plasterer who had walked from Reading, or an iron−puddler who had been thrown out of work in Lancashire, or a University man who would be really most grateful for the loan of five shillings, or the son of a lieutenant−general living in Brighton, who would not have made such an application if he had not known that he was talking to another gentleman. With us it is not a question of men being of various kinds; with us the kinds are almost different animals. But in spite of all Gorky's superficial scepticism and brutality, it is to him the fall from humanity, or the apparent fall from humanity, which is not merely great and lamentable, but essential and even mystical. The line between man and the beasts is one of the transcendental essentials of every religion; and it is, like most of the transcendental things of religion, identical with the main sentiments of the man of common sense. We feel this gulf when theologies say that it cannot be crossed. But we feel it quite as much (and that with a primal shudder) when philosophers or fanciful writers suggest that it might be crossed. And if any man wishes to discover whether or no he has really learnt to regard the line between man and brute as merely relative and evolutionary, let him say again to himself those frightful words, "Creatures that once were Men."

G. K. CHESTERTON.

PART I.

In front of you is the main street, with two rows of miserable looking huts with shuttered windows and old walls pressing on each other and leaning forward. The roofs of these time−worn habitations are full of holes, and have been patched here and there with laths; from underneath them project mildewed beams, which are shaded by the dusty−leaved elder−trees and crooked white willows−−pitiable flora of those suburbs inhabited by the poor.

The dull green time−stained panes of the windows look upon each other with the cowardly glances of cheats. Through the street and towards the adjacent mountain, runs the sinuous path, winding through the deep ditches filled with rain−water. Here and there are piled heaps of dust and other rubbish−−either refuse or else put there purposely to keep the rain−water from flooding the houses. On the top of the mountain, among green gardens with dense foliage, beautiful stone houses lie hidden; the belfries of the churches rise proudly towards the sky, and their gilded crosses shine beneath the rays of the sun. During the rainy weather the neighbouring town pours its water into this main road, which, at other times, is full of its dust, and all these miserable houses seem, as it were, thrown by some powerful hand into that heap of dust, rubbish, and rain−water. They cling to the ground

beneath the high mountain, exposed to the sun, surrounded by decaying refuse, and their sodden appearance impresses one with the same feeling as would the half−rotten trunk of an old tree.

At the end of the main street, as if thrown out of the town, stood a two−storied house, which had been rented from Petunikoff, a merchant and resident of the town. It was in comparatively good order, being further from the mountain, while near it were the open fields, and about half−a−mile away the river ran its winding course.

This large old house had the most dismal aspect amidst its surroundings. The walls bent outwards and there was hardly a pane of glass in any of the windows, except some of the fragments which looked like the water of the marshes−−dull green. The spaces of wall between the windows were covered with spots, as if time were trying to write there in hieroglyphics the history of the old house, and the tottering roof added still more to its pitiable condition. It seemed as if the whole building bent towards the ground, to await the last stroke of that fate which should transform it into a chaos of rotting remains, and finally into dust.

The gates were open, one half of them displaced and lying on the ground at the entrance, while between its bars had grown the grass, which also covered the large and empty court−yard. In the depths of this yard stood a low, iron−roofed, smoke−begrimed building. The house itself was of course unoccupied, but this shed, formerly a blacksmith's forge, was now turned into a "dosshouse," kept by a retired Captain named Aristid Fomich Kuvalda.

In the interior of the dosshouse was a long, wide and grimy board, measuring some 28 by 70 feet. The room was lighted on one side by four small square windows, and on the other by a wide door. The unpainted brick walls were black with smoke, and the ceiling, which was built of timber, was almost black. In the middle stood a large stove, the furnace of which served as its foundation, and around this stove and along the walls were also long, wide boards, which served as beds for the lodgers. The walls smelt of smoke, the earthen floor of dampness, and the long wide board of rotting rags.

The place of the proprietor was on the top of the stove, while the boards surrounding it were intended for those who were on good terms with the owner and who were honoured by his friendship. During the day the captain passed most of his time sitting on a kind of bench, made by himself by placing bricks against the wall of the courtyard, or else in the eating house of Egor Vavilovitch, which was opposite the house, where he took all his meals and where he also drank vodki.

Before renting this house, Aristid Kuvalda had kept a registry office for servants in the town. If we look further back into his former life, we shall find that he once owned printing works, and previous to this, in his own words, he "just lived! And lived well too, Devil take it, and like one who knew how!"

He was a tall, broad−shouldered man of fifty, with a rawlooking face, swollen with drunkenness, and with a dirty yellowish beard. His eyes were large and grey, with an insolent expression of happiness. He spoke in a bass voice and with a sort of grumbling sound in his throat, and he almost always held between his teeth a German china pipe with a long bowl. When he was angry the nostrils of his big crooked red nose swelled, and his lips trembled, exposing to view two rows of large and wolf−like yellow teeth. He had long arms, was lame, and always dressed in an old officer's uniform, with a dirty, greasy cap with a red band, a hat without a brim, and ragged felt boots which reached almost to his knees. In the morning, as a rule, he had a heavy drunken headache, and in the evening he caroused. However much he drank, he was never drunk, and so was always merry.

In the evenings he received lodgers, sitting on his brickmade bench with his pipe in his mouth.

"Whom have we here?" he would ask the ragged and tattered object approaching him, who had probably been chucked out of the town for drunkenness, or perhaps for some other reason not quite so simple. And after the man had answered him, he would say, "Let me see legal papers in confirmation of your lies." And if there were such papers they were shown. The Captain would then put them in his bosom, seldom taking any interest in them, and

would say:

"Everything is in order. Two kopecks for the night, ten kopecks for the week, and thirty kopecks for the month. Go and get a place for yourself, and see that it is not other people's, or else they will blow you up. The people that live here are particular."

"Don't you sell tea, bread, or anything to eat?"

"I trade only in walls and roofs, for which I pay to the swindling proprietor of this hole−−Judas Petunikoff, merchant of the second guild−−five roubles a month," explained Kuvalda in a business−like tone. "Only those come to me who are not accustomed to comfort and luxuries . . . . but if you are accustomed to eat every day, then there is the eating−house opposite. But it would be better for you if you left off that habit. You see you are not a gentleman. What do you eat? You eat yourself!"

For such speeches, delivered in a strictly business−like manner, and always with smiling eyes, and also for the attention he paid to his lodgers the Captain was very popular among the poor of the town. It very often happened that a former client of his would appear, not in rags, but in something more respectable and with a slightly happier face.

"Good−day, your honour, and how do you do?"

"Alive, in good health! Go on."

"Don't you know me?"

"I did not know you."

"Do you remember that I lived with you last winter for nearly a month . . . . when the fight with the police took place, and three were taken away?"

"My brother, that is so. The police do come even under my hospitable roof!"

"My God! You gave a piece of your mind to the police inspector of this district!"

"Wouldn't you accept some small hospitality from me? When I lived with you, you were . . ."

"Gratitude must be encouraged because it is seldom met with. You seem to be a good man, and, though I don't remember you, still I will go with you into the public−house and drink to your success and future prospects with the greatest pleasure."

"You seem always the same . . . Are you always joking?"

"What else can one do, living among you unfortunate men?"

They went. Sometimes the Captain's former customer, uplifted and unsettled by the entertainment, returned to the dosshouse, and on the following morning they would again begin treating each other till the Captain's companion would wake up to realise that he had spent all his money in drink.

"Your honour, do you see that I have again fallen into your hands? What shall we do now?"

"The position, no doubt, is not a very good one, but still you need not trouble about it," reasoned the Captain. "You must, my friend, treat everything indifferently, without spoiling yourself by philosophy, and without asking yourself any question. To philosophise is always foolish; to philosophise with a drunken headache, ineffably so. Drunken headaches require vodki and not the remorse of conscience or gnashing of teeth . . . save your teeth, or else you will not be able to protect yourself. Here are twenty kopecks. Go and buy a bottle of vodki for five kopecks, hot tripe or lungs, one pound of bread and two cucumbers. When we have lived off our drunken headache we will think of the condition of affairs . . ."

As a rule the consideration of the "condition of affairs" lasted some two or three days, and only when the Captain had not a farthing left of the three roubles or five roubles given him by his grateful customer did he say:

"You came! Do you see? Now that we have drunk everything with you, you fool, try again to regain the path of virtue and soberness. It has been truly said that if you do not sin, you will not repent, and, if you do not repent, you shall not be saved. We have done the first, and to repent is useless. Let us make direct for salvation. Go to the river and work, and if you think you cannot control yourself, tell the contractor, your employer, to keep your money, or else give it to me. When you get sufficient capital, I will get you a pair of trousers and other things necessary to make you seem a respectable and hard−working man, persecuted by fate. With decent−looking trousers you can go far. Now then, be off!"

Then the client would go to the river to work as a porter, smiling the while over the Captain's long and wise speeches. He did not distinctly understand them, but only saw in front of him two merry eyes, felt their encouraging influence, and knew that in the loquacious Captain he had an arm that would assist him in time of need.

And really it happened very often that, for a month or so, some ticket−of−leave client, under the strict surveillance of the Captain, had the opportunity of raising himself to a condition better than that to which, thanks to the Captain's co−operation, he had fallen.

"Now, then, my friend!" said the Captain, glancing critically at the restored client, "we have a coat and jacket. When I had respectable trousers I lived in town like a respectable man. But when the trousers wore out, I too fell off in the opinion of my fellow−men and had to come down here from the town. Men, my fine mannikin, judge everything by the outward appearance, while, owing to their foolishness, the actual reality of things is incomprehensible to them. Make a note of this on your nose, and pay me at least half your debt. Go in peace; seek, and you may find."

"How much do I owe you, Aristid Fomich?" asks the client, in confusion.

"One rouble and 70 kopecks. . . . Now, give me only one rouble, or, if you like, 70 kopecks, and as for the rest, I shall wait until you have earned more than you have now by stealing or by hard work, it does not matter to me."

"I thank you humbly for your kindness!" says the client, touched to the heart. "Truly you are a kind man. . . . ; Life has persecuted you in vain. . . . What an eagle you would have been in your own place!"

The Captain could not live without eloquent speeches.

"What does 'in my own place' mean? No one really knows his own place in life, and every one of us crawls into his harness. The place of the merchant Judas Petunikoff ought to be in penal servitude, but he still walks through the streets in daylight, and even intends to build a factory. The place of our teacher ought to be beside a wife and half−a−dozen children, but he is loitering in the public−house of Vaviloff. And then, there is yourself. You are going to seek a situation as a hall porter or waiter, but I can see that you ought to be a soldier in the army, because you are no fool, are patient and understand discipline. Life shuffles us like cards, you see, and it is only

accidentally, and only for a time, that we fall into our own places!"

Such farewell speeches often served as a preface to the continuation of their acquaintance, which again began with drinking and went so far that the client would spend his last farthing. Then the Captain would stand him treat, and they would drink all they had.

A repetition of similar doings did not affect in the least the good relations of the parties.

The teacher mentioned by the Captain was another of those customers who were thus reformed only in order that they should sin again. Thanks to his intellect, he was the nearest in rank to the Captain, and this was probably the cause of his falling so low as dosshouse life, and of his inability to rise again. It was only with him that Aristid Kuvalda could philosophise with the certainty of being understood. He valued this, and when the reformed teacher prepared to leave the dosshouse in order to get a corner in town for himself, then Aristid Kuvalda accompanied him so sorrowfully and sadly that it ended, as a rule, in their both getting drunk and spending all their money. Probably Kuvalda arranged the matter intentionally so that the teacher could not leave the dosshouse, though he desired to do so with all his heart. Was it possible for Aristid Kuvalda, a nobleman (as was evident from his speeches), one who was accustomed to think, though the turn of fate may have changed his position, was it possible for him not to desire to have close to him a man like himself? We can pity our own faults in others.

This teacher had once taught at an institution in one of the towns on the Volga, but in consequence of some story was dismissed. After this he was a clerk in a tannery, but again had to leave. Then he became a librarian in some private library, subsequently following other professions. Finally, after passing examinations in law he became a lawyer, but drink reduced him to the Captain's dosshouse. He was tall, round−shouldered, with a long sharp nose and bald head. In his bony and yellow face, on which grew a wedge−shaped beard, shone large, restless eyes, deeply sunk in their sockets, and the corners of his mouth drooped sadly down. He earned his bread, or rather his drink, by reporting for the local papers. He sometimes earned as much as fifteen roubles. These he gave to the Captain and said:

"It is enough. I am going back into the bosom of culture. Another week's hard work and I shall dress respectably, and then Addio, mio caro!"

"Very exemplary! As I heartily sympathise with your decision, Philip, I shall not give you another glass all this week," the Captain warned him sternly.

"I shall be thankful! . . . . You will not give me one drop?"

The Captain heard in his voice a beseeching note to which he turned a deaf ear.

"Even though you roar, I shall not give it you!"

"As you like, then," sighed the teacher, and went away to continue his reporting. But after a day or two he would return tired and thirsty, and would look at the Captain with a beseeching glance out of the corners of his eyes, hoping that his friend's heart would soften.

The Captain in such cases put on a serious face and began speaking with killing irony on the theme of weakness of character, of the animal delight of intoxication, and on such subjects as suited the occasion. One must do him justice: he was captivated by his role of mentor and moralist, but the lodgers dogged him, and, listening sceptically to his exhortations to repentance, would whisper aside to each other:

"Cunning, skilful, shifty rogue! I told you so, but you would not listen. It's your own fault!"

"His honour is really a good soldier. He goes first and examines the road behind him!"

The teacher then hunted here and there till he found his friend again in some corner, and grasping his dirty coat, trembling and licking his dry lips, looked into his face with a deep, tragic glance, without articulate words.

"Can't you?" asked the Captain sullenly.

The teacher answered by bowing his head and letting it fall on his breast, his tall, thin body trembling the while.

"Wait another day . . . perhaps you will be all right then," proposed Kuvalda. The teacher sighed, and shook his head hopelessly.

The Captain saw that his friend's thin body trembled with the thirst for the poison, and took some money from his pocket.

"In the majority of cases it is impossible to fight against fate," said he, as if trying to justify himself before someone. But if the teacher controlled himself for a whole week then there was a touching farewell scene between the two friends, which ended as a rule in the eating−house of Vaviloff. The teacher did not spend all his money, but spent at least half on the children of the main street. The poor are always rich in children, and in the dirt and ditches of this street there were groups of them from morning to night, hungry, naked and dirty. Children are the living flowers of the earth, but these had the appearance of flowers that have faded prematurely, because they grew in ground where there was no healthy nourishment. Often the teacher would gather them round him, would buy them bread, eggs, apples and nuts, and take them into the fields by the river side. There they would sit and greedily eat everything he offered them, after which they would begin to play, filling the fields for a mile around with careless noise and laughter. The tall, thin figure of the drunkard towered above these small people, who treated him familiarly, as if he were one of their own age. They called him "Philip," and did not trouble to prefix "Uncle" to his name. Playing around him, like little wild animals, they pushed him, jumped upon his back, beat him upon his bald head, and caught hold of his nose. All this must have pleased him, as he did not protest against such liberties. He spoke very little to them, and when he did so he did it cautiously as if afraid that his words would hurt or contaminate them. He passed many hours thus as their companion and plaything, watching their lively faces with his gloomy eyes. Then he would thoughtfully and slowly direct his steps to the eatinghouse of Vaviloff, where he would drink silently and quickly till all his senses left him.

* * * * *

Almost every day after his reporting he would bring a newspaper, and then gather round him all these creatures that once were men.

On seeing him, they would come forward from all corners of the court−yard, drunk, or suffering from drunken headache, dishevelled, tattered, miserable, and pitiable. Then would come the barrel−like, stout Aleksei Maksimovitch Simtsoff, formerly Inspector of Woods and Forests, under the Department of Appendages, but now trading in matches, ink, blacking, and lemons. He was an old man of sixty, in a canvas overcoat and a wide−brimmed hat, the greasy borders of which hid his stout fat red face. He had a thick white beard, out of which a small red nose turned gaily heavenwards. He had thick, crimson lips and watery, cynical eyes. They called him "Kubar," a name which well described his round figure and buzzing speech. After him, Kanets appeared from some corner−−a dark, sad−looking, silent drunkard: then the former governor of the prison, Luka Antonovitch Martyanoff, a man who existed on "remeshok," "trilistika," and "bankovka,"* and many such cunning games, not much appreciated by the police. He would throw his hard and oft−scourged body on the grass beside the teacher, and, turning his eyes round and scratching his head, would ask in a hoarse, bass voice, "May I?"

Note by translator.−−Well−known games of chance, played by the lower classes. The police specially endeavour to stop them, but unsuccessfully.

Then appeared Pavel Solntseff, a man of thirty years of age, suffering from consumption. The ribs of his left side had been broken in a quarrel, and the sharp, yellow face, like that of a fox, always wore a malicious smile. The thin lips, when opened, exposed two rows of decayed black teeth, and the rags on his shoulders swayed backwards and forwards as if they were hung on a clothes pole. They called him "Abyedok." He hawked brushes and bath brooms of his own manufacture, good strong brushes made from a peculiar kind of grass.

Then followed a lean and bony man of whom no one knew anything, with a frightened expression in his eyes, the left one of which had a squint. He was silent and timid, and had been imprisoned three times for theft by the High Court of Justice and the Magisterial Courts. His family name was Kiselnikoff, but they called him Paltara Taras, because he was a head and shoulders taller than his friend, Deacon Taras, who had been degraded from his office for drunkenness and immorality. The Deacon was a short, thick−set person, with the chest of an athlete and a round, strong head. He danced skilfully, and was still more skilful at swearing. He and Paltara Taras worked in the wood on the banks of the river, and in free hours he told his friend or any one who would listen, "Tales of my own composition," as he used to say. On hearing these stories, the heroes of which always seemed to be saints, kings, priests, or generals, even the inmates of the dosshouse spat and rubbed their eyes in astonishment at the imagination of the Deacon, who told them shameless tales of lewd, fantastic adventures, with blinking eyes and a passionless expression of countenance. The imagination of this man was powerful and inexhaustible; he could go on relating and composing all day, from morning to night, without once repeating what he had said before. In his expression you sometimes saw the poet gone astray, sometimes the romancer, and he always succeeded in making his tales realistic by the effective and powerful words in which he told them.

There was also a foolish young man called Kuvalda Meteor. One night he came to sleep in the dosshouse and had remained ever since among these men, much to their astonishment. At first they did not take much notice of him. In the daytime, like all the others, he went away to find something to eat, but at nights he always loitered around this friendly company till at last the Captain took notice of him.

"Boy! What business have you here on this earth?"

The boy answered boldly and stoutly:

"I am a barefooted tramp . . . ."

The Captain looked critically at him. This youngster had long hair and a weak face, with prominent cheek−bones and a turned−up nose. He was dressed in a blue blouse without a waistband, and on his head he wore the remains of a straw hat, while his feet were bare.

"You are a fool!" decided Aristid Kuvalda. "What are you knocking about here for? You are of absolutely no use to us . . . Do you drink vodki? . . . No? . . . Well, then, can you steal?" Again, "No." "Go away, learn, and come back again when you know something, and are a man . . ."

The youngster smiled.

"No. I shall live with you."

"Why?"

"Just because . . ."

"Oh you . . . Meteor!" said the Captain.

"I will break his teeth for him," said Martyanoff.

"And why?" asked the youngster.

"Just because. . . ."

"And I will take a stone and hit you on the head," the young man answered respectfully.

Martyanoff would have broken his bones, had not Kuvalda interrupted with:

"Leave him alone. . . . Is this a home to you or even to us? You have no sufficient reason to break his teeth for him. You have no better reason than he for living with us."

"Well, then, Devil take him! . . . We all live in the world without sufficient reason. . . . We live, and why? Because! He also because . . . let him alone. . . ."

"But it is better for you, young man, to go away from us," the teacher advised him, looking him up and down with his sad eyes. He made no answer, but remained. And they soon became accustomed to his presence, and ceased to take any notice of him. But he lived among them, and observed everything.

The above were the chief members of the Captain's company, and he called them with kind−hearted sarcasm "Creatures that once were men." For though there were men who had experienced as much of the bitter irony of fate as these men, yet they were not fallen so low. Not infrequently, respectable men belonging to the cultured classes are inferior to those belonging to the peasantry, and it is always a fact that the depraved man from the city is immeasurably worse than the depraved man from the village. This fact was strikingly illustrated by the contrast between the formerly well−educated men and the mujiks who were living in Kuvalda's shelter.

The representative of the latter class was an old mujik called Tyapa. Tall and angular, he kept his head in such a position that his chin touched his breast. He was the Captain's first lodger, and it was said of him that he had a great deal of money hidden somewhere, and for its sake had nearly had his throat cut some two years ago: ever since then he carried his head thus. Over his eyes hung greyish eyebrows, and, looked at in profile, only his crooked nose was to be seen. His shadow reminded one of a poker. He denied that he had money, and said that they "only tried to cut his throat out of malice," and from that day he took to collecting rags, and that is why his head was always bent as if incessantly looking on the ground. When he went about shaking his head, and minus a walking−stick in his hand, and a bag on his back−−the signs of his profession−−he seemed to be thinking almost to madness, and, at such times, Kuvalda spoke thus, pointing to him with his finger:

"Look, there is the conscience of Merchant Judas Petunikoff. See how disorderly, dirty, and low is the escaped conscience."

Tyapa, as a rule, spoke in a hoarse and hardly audible voice, and that is why he spoke very little, and loved to be alone. But whenever a stranger, compelled to leave the village, appeared in the dosshouse, Tyapa seemed sadder and angrier, and followed the unfortunate about with biting jeers and a wicked chuckling in his throat. He either put some beggar against him, or himself threatened to rob and beat him, till the frightened mujik would disappear from the dosshouse and never more be seen. Then Tyapa was quiet again, and would sit in some corner mending his rags, or else reading his Bible, which was as dirty, worn, and old as himself. Only when the teacher brought a newspaper and began reading did he come from his corner once more. As a rule, Tyapa listened to what was read silently and sighed often, without asking anything of anyone. But once when the teacher, having read the paper, wanted to put it away, Tyapa stretched out his bony hand, and said, "Give it to me . . ."

"What do you want it for?"

"Give it to me . . . Perhaps there is something in it about us . . ."

"About whom?"

"About the village."

They laughed at him, and threw him the paper. He took it, and read in it how in the village the hail had destroyed the cornfields, how in another village fire destroyed thirty houses, and that in a third a woman had poisoned her family,−−in fact, everything that it is customary to write of,−−everything, that is to say, which is bad, and which depicts only the worst side of the unfortunate village. Tyapa read all this silently and roared, perhaps from sympathy, perhaps from delight at the sad news.

He passed the whole Sunday in reading his Bible, and never went out collecting rags on that day. While reading, he groaned and sighed continually. He kept the book close to his breast, and was angry with any one who interrupted him or who touched his Bible.

"Oh, you drunken blackguard," said Kuvalda to him, "what do you understand of it?"

"Nothing, wizard! I don't understand anything, and I do not read any books . . . But I read . . ."

"Therefore you are a fool . . ." said the Captain, decidedly. "When there are insects in your head, you know it is uncomfortable, but if some thoughts enter there too, how will you live then, you old toad?"

"I have not long to live," said Tyapa, quietly.

Once the teacher asked how he had learned to read.

"In prison," answered Tyapa, shortly.

"Have you been there?"

"I was there. . . ."

"For what?"

"Just so. . . . It was a mistake. . . . But I brought the Bible out with me from there. A lady gave it to me. . . . It is good in prison, brother."

"Is that so? And why?"

"It teaches one. . . . I learned to read there. . . . I also got this book. . . . And all these you see, free. . . ."

When the teacher appeared in the dosshouse, Tyapa had already lived there for some time. He looked long into the teacher's face, as if to discover what kind of a man he was. Tyapa often listened to his conversation, and once, sitting down beside him, said:

"I see you are very learned. . . . Have you read the Bible?"

"I have read it. . . ."

"I see; I see. . . . Can you remember it?"

"Yes. . . . I remember it. . . ."

Then the old man leaned to one side and gazed at the other with a serious, suspicious glance.

"There were the Amalekites, do you remember?"

"Well?"

"Where are they now?"

"Disappeared . . . Tyapa . . . died out . . ."

The old man was silent, then asked again: "And where are the Philistines?"

"These also . . ."

"Have all these died out?"

"Yes . . . all . . ."

"And so . . . we also will die out?"

"There will come a time when we also will die," said the teacher indifferently.

"And to what tribe of Israel do we belong?"

The teacher looked at him, and began telling him about Scythians and Slavs. . . .

The old man became all the more frightened, and glanced at his face.

"You are lying!" he said scornfully, when the teacher had finished.

"What lie have I told?" asked the teacher.

"You mentioned tribes that are not mentioned in the Bible."

He got up and walked away, angry and deeply insulted.

"You will go mad, Tyapa," called the teacher after him with conviction.

Then the old man came back again, and stretching out his hand, threatened him with his crooked and dirty finger.

"God made Adam−−from Adam were descended the Jews, that means that all people are descended from Jews . . . and we also . . ."

"Well?"

"Tartars are descended from Ishmael, but he also came of the Jews . . ."

"What do you want to tell me all this for?"

"Nothing! Only why do you tell lies?" Then he walked away, leaving his companion in perplexity. But after two days he came again and sat by him.

"You are learned . . . Tell me, then, whose descendants are we? Are we Babylonians, or who are we?"

"We are Slavs, Tyapa," said the teacher, and attentively awaited his answer, wishing to understand him.

"Speak to me from the Bible. There are no such men there."

Then the teacher began criticising the Bible. The old man listened, and interrupted him after a long while.

"Stop . . . Wait! That means that among people known to God there are no Russians? We are not known to God? Is it so? God knew all those who are mentioned in the Bible . . . He destroyed them by sword and fire, He destroyed their cities; but He also sent prophets to teach them. That means that He also pitied them. He scattered the Jews and the Tartars . . . But what about us? Why have we prophets no longer?"

"Well, I don't know!" replied the teacher, trying to understand the old man. But the latter put his hand on the teacher's shoulder, and slowly pushed him backwards and forwards, and his throat made a noise as if he were swallowing something. . . .

"Tell me! You speak so much . . . as if you knew everything. It makes me sick to listen to you . . . you darken my soul. . . . I should be better pleased if you were silent. Who are we, eh? Why have we no prophets? Ha, ha! . . . Where were we when Christ walked on this earth? Do you see? And you too, you are lying. . . . Do you think that all die out? The Russian people will never disappear. . . . You are lying. . . . It has been written in the Bible, only it is not known what name the Russians are given. Do you see what kind of people they are? They are numberless. . . . How many villages are there on the earth? Think of all the people who live on it, so strong, so numerous! And you say that they will die out; men shall die, but God wants the people, God the Creator of the earth! The Amalekites did not die out. They are either German or French. . . . But you, eh, you! Now then, tell me why we are abandoned by God? Have we no punishments nor prophets from the Lord? Who then will teach us?" Tyapa spoke strongly and plainly, and there was faith in his words. He had been speaking a long time, and the teacher, who was generally drunk and in a speechless condition, could not stand it any longer. He looked at the dry, wrinkled old man, felt the great force of these words, and suddenly began to pity himself. He wished to say something so strong and convincing to the old man that Tyapa would be disposed in his favour; he did not wish to speak in such a serious, earnest way, but in a soft and fatherly tone. And the teacher felt as if something were rising from his breast into his throat . . . But he could not find any powerful words.

"What kind of a man are you? . . . Your soul seems to be torn away−−and you still continue speaking . . . as if you knew something . . . It would be better if you were silent."

"Ah, Tyapa, what you say is true," replied the teacher, sadly. "The people . . . you are right . . . they are numberless . . . but I am a stranger to them . . . and they are strangers to me . . . Do you see where the tragedy of my life is hidden? . . . But let me alone! I shall suffer . . . and there are no prophets also . . . No. You are right, I speak a great deal . . . But it is no good to anyone. I shall be always silent . . . Only don't speak with me like this . . . Ah, old man, you do not know . . . You do not know . . . And you cannot understand."

And in the end the teacher cried. He cried so easily and so freely, with such torrents of flowing tears, that he soon found relief.

"You ought to go into a village . . . become a clerk or a teacher . . . You would be well fed there. What are you crying for?" asked Tyapa, sadly.

But the teacher was crying as if the tears quieted and comforted him.

From this day they became friends, and the "creatures that once were men," seeing them together, said: "The teacher is friendly with Tyapa . . . He wishes his money. Kuvalda must have put this into his head . . . To look about to see where the old man's fortune is . . ."

Probably they did not believe what they said. There was one strange thing about these men, namely, that they painted themselves to others worse than they actually were. A man who has good in him does not mind sometimes showing his worse nature.

* * * * *

When all these people were gathered round the teacher, then the reading of the newspaper would begin.

"Well, what does the newspaper discuss to−day? Is there any feuilleton?"

"No," the teacher informs him.

"Your publisher seems greedy . . . but is there any leader?"

"There is one to−day. . . . It appears to be by Gulyaeff."

"Aha! Come, out with it. He writes cleverly, the rascal."

"'The taxation of immovable property,'" reads the teacher, "'was introduced some fifteen years ago, and up to the present it has served as the basis for collecting these taxes in aid of the city revenue . . .'"

"That is simple," comments Captain Kuvalda. "It continues to serve. That is ridiculous. To the merchant who is moving about in the city, it is profitable that it should continue to serve. Therefore it does continue."

"The article, in fact, is written on the subject," says the teacher.

"Is it? That is strange, it is more a subject for a feuilleton. . ."

"Such a subject must be treated with plenty of pepper . . . ."

Then a short discussion begins. The people listen attentively, as only one bottle of vodki has been drunk.

After the leader, they read the local events, then the court proceedings, and, if in the police court it reports that the defendant or plaintiff is a merchant, then Aristid Kuvalda sincerely rejoices. If someone has robbed the merchant, "That is good," says he. "Only it is a pity they robbed him of so little." If his horses have broken down, "It is sad that he is still alive." If the merchant has lost his suit in court, "It is a pity that the costs were not double the amount."

"That would have been illegal," remarks the teacher

"Illegal! But is the merchant himself legal?" inquires Kuvalda, bitterly. "What is the merchant? Let us investigate this rough and uncouth phenomenon. First of all, every merchant is a mujik.

He comes from a village, and in course of time becomes a merchant. In order to be a merchant, one must have money. Where can the mujik get the money from? It is well known that he does not get it by honest hard work, and that means that the mujik, somehow or other, has been swindling. That is to say, a merchant is simply a dishonest mujik."

"Splendid!" cry the people, approving the orator's deduction, and Tyapa bellows all the time, scratching his breast. He always bellows like this as he drinks his first glass of vodki, when he has a drunken headache. The Captain beams with joy. They next read the correspondence. This is, for the Captain, "an abundance of drinks," as he himself calls it. He always notices how the merchants make this life abominable, and how cleverly they spoil everything. His speeches thunder at and annihilate merchants. His audience listens to him with the greatest pleasure, because he swears atrociously. "If I wrote for the papers," he shouts, "I would show up the merchant in his true colours . . . I would show that he is a beast, playing for a time the role of a man. I understand him! He is a rough boor, does not know the meaning of the words 'good taste,' has no notion of patriotism, and his knowledge is not worth five kopecks."

Abyedok, knowing the Captain's weak point, and fond of making other people angry, cunningly adds:

"Yes, since the nobility began to make acquaintance with hunger, men have disappeared from the world . . ."

"You are right, you son of a spider and a toad. Yes, from the time that the noblemen fell, there have been no men. There are only merchants, and I hate them."

"That is easy to understand, brother, because you, too, have been brought down by them . . ."

"I? I was ruined by love of life . . . Fool that I was, I loved life, but the merchant spoils it, and I cannot bear it, simply for this reason, and not because I am a nobleman. But if you want to know the truth, I was once a man, though I was not noble. I care now for nothing and nobody . . . and all my life has been tame−−a sweetheart who has jilted me−−therefore I despise life, and am indifferent to it."

"You lie!" says Abyedok.

"I lie?" roars Aristid Kuvalda, almost crimson with anger.

"Why shout?" comes in the cold sad voice of Martyanoff.

"Why judge others? Merchants, noblemen . . . what have we to do with them?"

"Seeing that we are " . . . puts in Deacon Taras.

"Be quiet, Abyedok," says the teacher, goodnaturedly.

"Why do you provoke him?" He does not love either discussion or noise, and when they quarrel all around him his lips form into a sickly grimace, and he endeavours quietly and reasonably to reconcile each with the other, and if he does not succeed in this he leaves the company. Knowing this, the Captain, if he is not very drunk, controls himself, not wishing to lose, in the person of the teacher, one of the best of his listeners.

"I repeat," he continues, in a quieter tone, "that I see life in the hands of enemies, not only enemies of the noble but of everything good, avaricious and incapable of adorning existence in any way."

"But all the same," says the teacher, "merchants, so to speak, created Genoa, Venice, Holland−−and all these were merchants, merchants from England, India, the Stroyanoff merchants . . ."

"I do not speak of these men, I am thinking of Judas Petunikoff, who is one of them. . . ."

"And you say you have nothing to do with them?" asks the teacher, quietly.

"But do you think that I do not live? Aha! I do live, but I suppose I ought not to be angry at the fact that life is desecrated and robbed of all freedom by these men."

"And they dare to laugh at the kindly anger of the Captain, a man living in retirement?" says Abyedok, teasingly.

"Very well! I agree with you that I am foolish. Being a creature who was once a man, I ought to blot out from my heart all those feelings that once were mine. You may be right, but then how could I or any of you defend ourselves if we did away with all these feelings?"

"Now then, you are talking sense," says the teacher, encouragingly.

"We want other feelings and other views on life. . . . We want something new . . . because we ourselves are a novelty in this life. . . ."

"Doubtless this is most important for us," remarks the teacher.

"Why?" asks Kanets. "Is it not all the same whatever we say or think? We have not got long to live . . . I am forty, you are fifty . . . there is no one among us younger than thirty, and even at twenty one cannot live such a life long."

"And what kind of novelty are we?" asked Abyedok, mockingly.

"Since nakedness has always existed . . ."

"Yes, and it created Rome," said the teacher.

"Yes, of course," says the Captain, beaming with joy. "Romulus and Remus, eh? We also shall create when our time comes . . ."

"Violation of public peace," interrupts Abyedok. He laughs in a self−satisfied way. His laughter is impudent and insolent, and is echoed by Simtsoff, the Deacon and Paltara Taras. The naive eyes of young Meteor light up, and his cheeks flush crimson.

Kanets speaks, and it seems as if he were hammering their heads.

"All these are foolish illusions . . . fiddle−sticks!"

It was strange to see them reasoning in this manner, these outcasts from life, tattered, drunken with vodki and wickedness, filthy and forlorn. Such conversations rejoiced the Captain's heart. They gave him an opportunity of speaking more, and therefore he thought himself better than the rest. However low he may fall, a man can never deny himself the delight of feeling cleverer, more powerful, or even better fed than his companions. Aristid Kuvalda abused this pleasure, and never could have enough of it, much to the disgust of Abyedok, Kubar, and others of these creatures that once were men, who were less interested in such things.

Politics, however, were more to the popular taste. The discussions as to the necessity of taking India or of subduing England were lengthy and protracted. Nor did they speak with less enthusiasm of the radical measure of clearing Jews off the face of the earth. On this subject Abyedok was always the first to propose dreadful plans to

effect the desired end, but the Captain, always first in every other argument, did not join in this one. They also spoke much and impudently about women, but the teacher always defended them, and sometimes was very angry when they went so far as to pass the limits of decency. They all, as a rule, gave in to him, because they did not look upon him as a common person, and also because they wished to borrow from him on Saturdays the money which he had earned during the week. He had many privileges. They never beat him, for instance, on these occasions when the conversation ended in a free fight. He had the right to bring women into the dosshouse; a privilege accorded to no one else, as the Captain had previously warned them.

"No bringing of women to my house," he had said. "Women, merchants and philosophers, these are the three causes of my ruin. I will horsewhip anyone bringing in women. I will horsewhip the woman also. . . . And as to the philosopher I'll knock his head off for him." And notwithstanding his age he could have knocked anyone's head off, for he possessed wonderful strength. Besides that, whenever he fought or quarrelled, he was assisted by Martyanoff, who was accustomed during a general fight to stand silently and sadly back to back with Kuvalda, when he became an all−destroying and impregnable engine of war. Once when Simtsoff was drunk, he rushed at the teacher for no reason whatever, and getting hold of his head tore out a bunch of hair. Kuvalda, with one stroke of his fist in the other's chest sent him spinning, and he fell to the ground. He was unconscious for almost half−an−hour, and when he came to himself, Kuvalda compelled him to eat the hair he had torn from the teacher's head. He ate it, preferring this to being beaten to death.

Besides reading newspapers, fighting and indulging in general conversation, they amused themselves by playing cards. They played without Martyanoff because he could not play honestly. After cheating several times, he openly confessed:

"I cannot play without cheating . . . it is a habit of mine."

"Habits do get the better of you," assented Deacon Taras. "I always used to beat my wife every Sunday after Mass, and when she died I cannot describe how extremely dull I felt every Sunday. I lived through one Sunday−−it was dreadful, the second I still controlled myself, the third Sunday I struck my Asok. . . . She was angry and threatened to summon me. Just imagine if she had done so! On the fourth Sunday, I beat her just as if she were my own wife! After that I gave her ten roubles, and beat her according to my own rules till I married again!" . . .

"You are lying, Deacon! How could you marry a second time?" interrupted Abyedok.

"Ay, just so. . . She looked after my house. . . ."

"Did you have any children?" asked the teacher.

"Five of them. . . . One was drowned . . . the oldest . . . he was an amusing boy! Two died of diphtheria . . . One of the daughters married a student and went with him to Siberia. The other went to the University of St. Petersburg and died there . . . of consumption they say. Ye−−es, there were five of them. . . . Ecclesiastics are prolific, you know." He began explaining why this was so, and they laughed till they nearly burst at his tales. When the laughter stopped, Aleksei Maksimovitch Simtsoff remembered that he too had once had a daughter.

"Her name was Lidka . . . she was very stout . . ." More than this he did not seem to remember, for he looked at them all, was silent and smiled . . . in a guilty way. Those men spoke very little to each other about their past, and they recalled it very seldom and then only its general outlines. When they did mention it, it was in a cynical tone. Probably, this was just as well, since, in many people, remembrance of the past kills all present energy and deadens all hope for the future.

* * * * *

On rainy, cold, or dull days in the late autumn, these "creatures that once were men" gathered in the eatinghouse of Vaviloff. They were well known there, where some feared them as thieves and rogues, and some looked upon them contemptuously as hard drinkers, although they respected them, thinking that they were clever.

The eating−house of Vaviloff was the club of the main street, and the "creatures that once were men" were its most intellectual members. On Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings, when the eating−house was packed, the "creatures that once were men" were only too welcome guests. They brought with them, besides the forgotten and poverty−stricken inhabitants of the street, their own spirit, in which there was something that brightened the lives of men exhausted and worn out in the struggle for existence, as great drunkards as the inhabitants of Kuvalda's shelter, and, like them, outcasts from the town. Their ability to speak on all subjects, their freedom of opinion, skill in repartee, courage in the presence of those of whom the whole street was in terror, together with their daring demeanour, could not but be pleasing to their companions. Then, too, they were well versed in law, and could advise, write petitions, and help to swindle without incurring the risk of punishment. For all this they were paid with vodki and flattering admiration of their talents.

The inhabitants of the street were divided into two parties according to their sympathies. One was in favour of Kuvalda, who was thought "a good soldier, clever, and courageous," the other was convinced of the fact that the teacher was "superior" to Kuvalda. The latter's admirers were those who were known to be drunkards, thieves, and murderers, for whom the road from beggary to prison was inevitable. But those who respected the teacher were men who still had expectations, still hoped for better things, who were eternally occupied with nothing, and who were nearly always hungry.

The nature of the teacher's and Kuvalda's relations towards the street may be gathered from the following:

Once in the eating−house they were discussing the resolution passed by the Corporation regarding the main street, viz., that the inhabitants were to fill up the pits and ditches in the street, and that neither manure nor the dead bodies of domestic animals should be used for the purpose, but only broken tiles, etc., from the ruins of other houses.

"Where am I going to get these same broken tiles and bricks? I could not get sufficient bricks together to build a hen−house," plaintively said Mokei Anisimoff, a man who hawked kalaches (a sort of white bread) which were baked by his wife.

"Where can you get broken bricks and lime rubbish? Take bags with you, and go and remove them from the Corporation buildings. They are so old that they are of no use to anyone, and you will thus be doing two good deeds; firstly, by repairing the main street; and secondly, by adorning the city with a new Corporation building."

"If you want horses get them from the Lord Mayor, and take his three daughters, who seem quite fit for harness. Then destroy the house of Judas Petunikoff and pave the street with its timbers. By the way, Mokei, I know out of what your wife baked to−day's kalaches; out of the frames of the third window and the two steps from the roof of Judas' house."

When those present had laughed and joked sufficiently over the Captain's proposal, the sober market gardener, Pavlyugus asked:

"But seriously, what are we to do, your honour? . . . Eh? What do you think?"

"I? I shall neither move hand nor foot. If they wish to clean the street let them do it."

"Some of the houses are almost coming down. . . ."

"Let them fall; don't interfere; and when they fall ask help from the city. If they don't give it you, then bring a suit in court against them! Where does the water come from? From the city! Therefore let the city be responsible for the destruction of the houses."

"They will say it is rain−water."

"Does it destroy the houses in the city? Eh? They take taxes from you but they do not permit you to speak! They destroy your property and at the same time compel you to repair it!" And half the radicals in the street, convinced by the words of Kuvalda, decided to wait till the rain−water came down in huge streams and swept away their houses. The others, more sensible, found in the teacher a man who composed for them an excellent and convincing report for the Corporation. In this report the refusal of the street's inhabitants to comply with the resolution of the Corporation was so well explained that the Corporation actually entertained it. It was decided that the rubbish left after some repairs had been done to the barracks should be used for mending and filling up the ditches in their street, and for the transport of this five horses were given by the fire brigade. Still more, they even saw the necessity of laying a drain−pipe through the street. This and many other things vastly increased the popularity of the teacher. He wrote petitions for them and published various remarks in the newspapers. For instance, on one occasion Vaviloff's customers noticed that the herrings and other provisions of the eating−house were not what they should be, and after a day or two they saw Vaviloff standing at the bar with the newspaper in his hand making a public apology.

"It is true, I must acknowledge, that I bought old and not very good herrings, and the cabbage . . . also . . . was old. It is only too well known that anyone can put many a five−kopeck piece in his pocket in this way. And what is the result? It has not been a success; I was greedy, I own, but the cleverer man has exposed me, so we are quits . . ."

This confession made a very good impression on the people, and it also gave Vaviloff the opportunity of still feeding them with herrings and cabbages which were not good, though they failed to notice it, so much were they impressed.

This incident was very significant, because it increased not only the teacher's popularity, but also the effect of press opinion.

It often happened, too, that the teacher read lectures on practical morality in the eating−house.

"I saw you," he said to the painter Yashka Tyarin, "I saw you, Yakov, beating your wife . . ."

Yashka was "touched with paint" after two glasses of vodki, and was in a slightly uplifted condition.

The people looked at him, expecting him to make a row, and all were silent.

"Did you see me? And how did it please you?" asks Yashka.

The people control their laughter.

"No; it did not please me," replies the teacher. His tone is so serious that the people are silent.

"You see I was just trying it," said Yashka, with bravado, fearing that the teacher would rebuke him. "The wife is satisfied. . . . She has not got up yet to−day. . . ."

The teacher, who was drawing absently with his fingers on the table, said, "Do you see, Yakov, why this did not please me? . . . Let us go into the matter thoroughly, and understand what you are really doing, and what the result

may be. Your wife is pregnant. You struck her last night on her sides and breast. That means that you beat not only her but the child too. You may have killed him, and your wife might have died or else have become seriously ill. To have the trouble of looking after a sick woman is not pleasant. It is wearing, and would cost you dear, because illness requires medicine, and medicine money. If you have not killed the child, you may have crippled him, and he will be born deformed, lop−sided, or hunch−backed. That means that he will not be able to work, and it is only too important to you that he should be a good workman. Even if he be born ill, it will be bad enough, because he will keep his mother from work, and will require medicine. Do you see what you are doing to yourself? Men who live by hard work must be strong and healthy, and they should have strong and healthy children. . . . Do I speak truly?"

"Yes," assented the listeners.

"But all this will never happen," says Yashka, becoming rather frightened at the prospect held out to him by the teacher. "She is healthy, and I cannot have reached the child . . . She is a devil−−a hag!" he shouts angrily. "I would . . . She will eat me away as rust eats iron."

"I understand, Yakov, that you cannot help beating your wife," the teacher's sad and thoughtful voice again breaks in. "You have many reasons for doing so . . . It is your wife's character that causes you to beat her so incautiously . . . But your own dark and sad life . . ."

"You are right!" shouts Yakov. "We live in darkness, like the chimney−sweep when he is in the chimney!"

"You are angry with your life, but your wife is patient; the closest relation to you−−your wife, and you make her suffer for this, simply because you are stronger than she. She is always with you, and cannot get away. Don't you see how absurd you are?"

"That is so. . . . Devil take it! But what shall I do? Am I not a man?"

"Just so! You are a man. . . . I only wish to tell you that if you cannot help beating her, then beat her carefully and always remember that you may injure her health or that of the child. It is not good to beat pregnant women . . . on their belly or on their sides and chests. . . . Beat her, say, on the neck . . . or else take a rope and beat her on some soft place . . ."

The orator finished his speech and looked upon his hearers with his dark, pathetic eyes, seeming to apologise to them for some unknown crime.

The public understands it. They understand the morale of the creature who was once a man, the morale of the public−house and much misfortune.

"Well, brother Yashka, did you understand? See how true it is!"

Yakov understood that to beat her incautiously might be injurious to his wife. He is silent, replying to his companions' jokes with confused smiles.

"Then again, what is a wife?" philosophises the baker, Mokei Anisimoff. "A wife . . . is a friend . . . if we look at the matter in that way. She is like a chain, chained to you for life . . . and you are both just like galley slaves. And if you try to get away from her, you cannot, you feel the chain . . ."

"Wait," says Yakovleff; "but you beat your wife too."

"Did I say that I did not? I beat her. . . There is nothing else handy. . . Do you expect me to beat the wall with my fist when my patience is exhausted?"

"I feel just like that too. . ." says Yakov.

"How hard and difficult our life is, my brothers! There is no real rest for us anywhere!"

"And even you beat your wife by mistake," some one remarks humorously. And thus they speak till far on in the night or till they have quarrelled, the usual result of drink or of passions engendered by such discussions.

The rain beats on the windows, and outside the cold wind is blowing. The eating−house is close with tobacco smoke, but it is warm, while the street is cold and wet. Now and then, the wind beats threateningly on the windows of the eating−house, as if bidding these men to come out and be scattered like dust over the face of the earth. Sometimes a stifled and hopeless groan is heard in its howling which again is drowned by cold, cruel laughter. This music fills one with dark, sad thoughts of the approaching winter, with its accursed short, sunless days and long nights, of the necessity of possessing warm garments and plenty to eat. It is hard to sleep through the long winter nights on an empty stomach. Winter is approaching. Yes, it is approaching. . . How to live?

These gloomy forebodings created a strong thirst among the inhabitants of the main street, and the sighs of the "creatures that once were men" increased with the wrinkles on their brows, their voices became thick and their behaviour to each other more blunt. And brutal crimes were committed among them, and the roughness of these poor unfortunate outcasts was apt to increase at the approach of that inexorable enemy, who transformed all their lives into one cruel farce. But this enemy could not be captured because it was invisible.

Then they began beating each other brutally, and drank till they had drunk everything which they could pawn to the indulgent Vaviloff. And thus they passed the autumn days in open wickedness, in suffering which was eating their hearts out, unable to rise out of this vicious life and in dread of the still crueller days of winter.

Kuvalda in such cases came to their assistance with his philosophy.

"Don't lose your temper, brothers, everything has an end, this is the chief characteristic of life. The winter will pass, summer will follow . . . a glorious time, when the very sparrows are filled with rejoicing." But his speeches did not have any effect−−a mouthful of even the freshest and purest water will not satisfy a hungry man.

Deacon Taras also tried to amuse the people by singing his songs and relating his tales. He was more successful, and sometimes his endeavours ended in a wild and glorious orgy at the eating−house. They sang, laughed and danced, and for hours behaved like madmen. After this they again fell into a despairing mood, sitting at the tables of the eating−house, in the black smoke of the lamp and the tobacco; sad and tattered, speaking lazily to each other, listening to the wild howling of the wind, and thinking how they could get enough vodki to deaden their senses.

And their hand was against every man, and every man's hand against them.

PART II.

All things are relative in this world, and a man cannot sink into any condition so bad that it could not be worse. One day, towards the end of September, Captain Aristid Kuvalda was sitting, as was his custom, on the bench near the door of the dosshouse, looking at the stone building built by the merchant Petunikoff close to Vaviloff's eatinghouse, and thinking deeply. This building, which was partly surrounded by woods, served the purpose of a candle factory.

Painted red, as if with blood, it looked like a cruel machine which, though not working, opened a row of deep, hungry, gaping jaws, as if ready to devour and swallow anything. The grey wooden eating−house of Vaviloff, with its bent roof covered with patches, leaned against one of the brick walls of the factory, and seemed as if it were some large form of parasite clinging to it. The Captain was thinking that they would very soon be making new houses to replace the old building. "They will destroy the dosshouse even," he reflected. "It will be necessary to look out for another, but such a cheap one is not to be found. It seems a great pity to have to leave a place to which one is accustomed, though it will be necessary to go, simply because some merchant or other thinks of manufacturing candles and soap." And the Captain felt that if he could only make the life of such an enemy miserable, even temporarily, oh! with what pleasure he would do it!

Yesterday, Ivan Andreyevitch Petunikoff was in the dosshouse yard with his son and an architect. They measured the yard and put small wooden sticks in various places, which, after the exit of Petunikoff and at the order of the Captain, Meteor took out and threw away. To the eyes of the Captain this merchant appeared small and thin. He wore a long garment like a frock−coat, a velvet cap, and high, well−cleaned boots. He had a thin face with prominent cheekbones, a wedge−shaped greyish beard, and a high forehead seamed with wrinkles from beneath which shone two narrow, blinking, and observant grey eyes . . . a sharp, gristly nose, a small mouth with thin lips . . . altogether his appearance was pious, rapacious, and respectably wicked. "Cursed cross−bred fox and pig!" swore the Captain under his breath, recalling his first meeting with Petunikoff. The merchant came with one of the town councillors to buy the house, and seeing the Captain asked his companion:

"Is this your lodger?"

And from that day, a year and a half ago, there has been keen competition among the inhabitants of the dosshouse as to which can swear the hardest at the merchant. And last night there was a "slight skirmish with hot words," as the Captain called it, between Petunikoff and himself. Having dismissed the architect the merchant approached the Captain.

"What are you hatching?" asked he, putting his hand to his cap, perhaps to adjust it, perhaps as a salutation.

"What are you plotting?" answered the Captain in the same tone. He moved his chin so that his beard trembled a little; a non−exacting person might have taken it for a bow; otherwise it only expressed the desire of the Captain to move his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other. "You see, having plenty of money, I can afford to sit hatching it. Money is a good thing, and I possess it," the Captain chaffed the merchant, casting cunning glances at him. "It means that you serve money, and not money you," went on Kuvalda, desiring at the same time to punch the merchant's belly.

"Isn't it all the same? Money makes life comfortable, but no money," . . . and the merchant looked at the Captain with a feigned expression of suffering. The other's upper lip curled, and exposed large, wolf−like teeth.

"With brains and a conscience, it is possible to live without it. Men only acquire riches when they cease to listen to their conscience . . . the less conscience the more money!"

"Just so; but then there are men who have neither money nor conscience."

"Were you just like what you are now when you were young?" asked Kuvalda simply. The other's nostrils twitched. Ivan Andreyevitch sighed, passed his hand over his eyes and said:

"Oh! When I was young I had to undergo a great many difficulties . . . Work! Oh! I did work!"

"And you cheated, too, I suppose?"

"People like you? Nobles? I should just think so! They used to grovel at my feet!"

"You only went in for robbing, not murder, I suppose?" asked the Captain. Petunikoff turned pale, and hastily changed the subject.

"You are a bad host. You sit while your guest stands."

"Let him sit, too," said Kuvalda.

"But what am I to sit on?"

"On the earth . . . it will take any rubbish . . ."

"You are the proof of that," said Petunikoff quietly, while his eyes shot forth poisonous glances.

And he went away, leaving Kuvalda under the pleasant impression that the merchant was afraid of him. If he were not afraid of him he would long ago have evicted him from the dosshouse. But then he would think twice before turning him out, because of the five roubles a month. And the Captain gazed with pleasure at Petunikoff's back as he slowly retreated from the courtyard. Following him with his eyes, he noticed how the merchant passed the factory and disappeared into the wood, and he wished very much that he might fall and break all his bones. He sat imagining many horrible forms of disaster while watching Petunikoff, who was descending the hill into the wood like a spider going into its web. Last night he even imagined that the wood gave way before the merchant and he fell . . . but afterwards he found that he had only been dreaming.

And to−day, as always, the red building stands out before the eyes of Aristid Kuvalda, so plain, so massive, and clinging so strongly to the earth, that it seems to be sucking away all its life. It appears to be laughing coldly at the Captain with its gaping walls. The sun pours its rays on them as generously as it does on the miserable hovels of the main street.

"Devil take the thing!" exclaimed the Captain, thoughtfully measuring the walls of the factory with his eyes. "If only . . ."

Trembling with excitement at the thought that had just entered his mind, Aristid Kuvalda jumped up and ran to Vaviloff's eating−house, muttering to himself all the time.

Vaviloff met him at the bar, and gave him a friendly welcome.

"I wish your honour good health!" He was of middle height, and had a bald head, grey hair, and straight moustaches like tooth−brushes. Upright and neat in his clean jacket, he showed by every movement that he was an old soldier.

"Egorka, show me the lease and plan of your house," demanded Kuvalda, impatiently.

"I have shown it you before." Vaviloff looked up suspiciously and closely scanned the Captain's face.

"Show it me!" shouted the Captain, striking the bar with his fist and sitting down on a stool close by.

"But why?" asked Vaviloff, knowing that it was better to keep his wits about him when Kuvalda got excited.

"You fool! Bring it at once."

Vaviloff rubbed his forehead, and turned his eyes to the ceiling in a tired way.

"Where are those papers of yours?"

There was no answer to this on the ceiling, so the old sergeant looked down at the floor, and began drumming with his fingers on the bar in a worried and thoughtful manner.

"It's no good your making wry faces!" shouted the Captain, for he had no great affection for him, thinking that a former soldier should rather have become a thief than an eating−house keeper.

"Oh! Yes! Aristid Fomich, I remember now. They were left at the High Court of Justice at the time when I came into possession."

"Get along, Egorka! It is to your own interest to show me the plan, the title−deeds, and everything you have immediately. You will probably clear at least a hundred roubles over this, do you understand?"

Vaviloff did not understand at all; but the Captain spoke in such a serious and convincing tone that the sergeant's eyes burned with curiosity, and, telling him that he would see if the papers were in his desk, he went through the door behind the bar. Two minutes later he returned with the papers in his hand, and an expression of extreme astonishment on his face.

"Here they are; the deeds about the damned houses!"

"Ah! You . . . vagabond! And you pretend to have been a soldier, too!" And Kuvalda did not cease to belabour him with his tongue, as he snatched the blue parchment from his hands. Then, spreading the papers out in front of him, and excited all the more by Vaviloff's inquisitiveness, the Captain began reading and bellowing at the same time. At last he got up resolutely, and went to the door, leaving all the papers on the bar, and saying to Vaviloff:

"Wait! Don't lift them!"

Vaviloff gathered them up, put them into the cash−box, and locked it, then felt the lock with his hand, to see if it were secure. After that, he scratched his bald head, thoughtfully, and went up on the roof of the eating−house. There he saw the Captain measuring the front of the house, and watched him anxiously, as he snapped his fingers, and began measuring the same line over again. Vaviloff's face lit up suddenly, and he smiled happily.

"Aristid Fomich, is it possible?" he shouted, when the Captain came opposite to him.

"Of course it is possible. There is more than one short in the front alone, and as to the depth I shall see immediately."

"The depth . . . seventy−three feet."

"What? Have you guessed, you shaved ugly face?"

"Of course, Aristid Fomich! If you have eyes you can see a thing or two," shouted Vaviloff, joyfully.

A few minutes afterwards they sat side by side in Vaviloff's parlour, and the Captain was engaged in drinking large quantities of beer.

"And so all the walls of the factory stand on your ground," said he to the eating−house keeper. "Now, mind you show no mercy! The teacher will be here presently, and we will get him to draw up a petition to the court. As to

the amount of the damages you will name a very moderate sum in order not to waste money in deed stamps, but we will ask to have the factory knocked down. This, you see, donkey, is the result of trespassing on other people's property. It is a splendid piece of luck for you. We will force him to have the place smashed, and I can tell you it will be an expensive job for him. Off with you to the court. Bring pressure to bear on Judas. We will calculate how much it will take to break the factory down to its very foundations. We will make an estimate of it all, counting the time it will take too, and we will make honest Judas pay two thousand roubles besides."

"He will never give it!" cried Vaviloff, but his eyes shone with a greedy light.

"You lie! He will give it . . . Use your brains. . . What else can he do? But look here, Egorka, mind you don't go in for doing it on the cheap. They are sure to try to buy you off. Don't sell yourself cheap. They will probably use threats, but rely upon us. . ."

The Captain's eyes were alight with happiness, and his face red with excitement. He worked upon Vaviloff's greed, and urging upon him the importance of immediate action in the matter, went away in a very joyful and happy frame of mind.

* * * * *

In the evening everyone was told of the Captain's discovery, and they all began to discuss Petunikoff's future predicament, painting in vivid colours his excitement and astonishment on the day the court messenger handed him the copy of the summons. The Captain felt himself quite a hero. He was happy and all his friends highly pleased. The heap of dark and tattered figures that lay in the courtyard made noisy demonstrations of pleasure. They all knew the merchant, Petunikoff, who passed them very often, contemptuously turning up his eyes and giving them no more attention than he bestowed on the other heaps of rubbish lying on the ground. He was well fed, and that exasperated them still more; and now how splendid it was that one of themselves had struck a hard blow at the selfish merchant's purse! It gave them all the greatest pleasure. The Captain's discovery was a powerful instrument in their hands. Every one of them felt keen animosity towards all those who were well fed and well dressed, but in some of them this feeling was only beginning to develop. Burning interest was felt by those "creatures that once were men" in the prospective fight between Kuvalda and Petunikoff, which they already saw in imagination.

For a fortnight the inhabitants of the dosshouse awaited the further development of events, but Petunikoff never once visited the building. It was known that he was not in town and that the copy of the petition had not yet been handed to him. Kuvalda raged at the delays of the civil court. It is improbable that anyone had ever awaited the merchant with such impatience as did this bare−footed brigade.

"He isn't even thinking of coming, the wretch! . . ."

"That means that he does not love me!" sang Deacon Taras, leaning his chin on his hand and casting a humorous glance towards the mountain.

At last Petunikoff appeared. He came in a respectable cart with his son playing the role of groom. The latter was a red−checked, nice−looking youngster, in a long square−cut overcoat. He wore smoked eyeglasses. They tied the horse to an adjoining tree, the son took the measuring instrument out of his pocket and gave it to his father, and they began to measure the ground. Both were silent and worried.

"Aha!" shouted the Captain, gleefully.

All those who were in the dosshouse at the moment came out to look at them and expressed themselves loudly and freely in reference to the matter.

"What does the habit of thieving mean? A man may sometimes make a big mistake when he steals, standing to lose more than he gets," said the Captain, causing much laughter among his staff and eliciting various murmurs of assent.

"Take care, you devil!" shouted Petunikoff, "lest I have you in the police court for your words!"

"You can do nothing to me without witnesses . . . Your son cannot give evidence on your side " . . . the Captain warned him.

"Look out all the same, you old wretch, you may be found guilty too!" And Petunikoff shook his fist at him. His son, deeply engrossed in his calculations, took no notice of the dark group of men, who were taking such a wicked delight in adding to his father's discomfiture. He did not even once look in their direction.

"The young spider has himself well in hand," remarked Abyedok, watching young Petunikoff's every movement and action. Having taken all the measurements he desired, Ivan Andreyevitch knit his brows, got into the cart, and drove away. His son went with a firm step into Vaviloff's eating−house, and disappeared behind the door.

"Ho, ho! That's a determined young thief! . . . What will happen next, I wonder . . .?" asked Kuvalda.

"Next? Young Petunikoff will buy out Egor Vaviloff," said Abyedok with conviction, and smacked his lips as if the idea gave him great pleasure.

"And you are glad of that?" Kuvalda asked him, gravely.

"I am always pleased to see human calculations miscarry," explained Abyedok, rolling his eyes and rubbing his hands with delight. The Captain spat angrily on the ground and was silent. They all stood in front of the tumble−down building, and silently watched the doors of the eating−house. More than an hour passed thus. Then the doors opened and Petunikoff came out as silently as he had entered. He stopped for a moment, coughed, turned up the collar of his coat, glanced at the men, who were following all his movements with their eyes, and then went up the street towards the town.

The Captain watched him for a moment, and turning to Abyedok said, smilingly:

"Probably you were right after all, you son of a scorpion and a wood−louse! You nose out every evil thing. Yes, the face of that young swindler shows that he has got what he wanted. . . I wonder how much Egorka has got out of them. He has evidently taken something. . . He is just the same sort of rogue that they are . . . they are all tarred with the same brush. He has got some money, and I'm damned if I did not arrange the whole thing for him! It is best to own my folly. . . Yes, life is against us all, brothers . . . and even when you spit upon those nearest to you, the spittle rebounds and hits your own face."

Having satisfied himself with this reflection, the worthy Captain looked round upon his staff. Every one of them was disappointed, because they all knew that something they did not expect had taken place between Petunikoff and Vaviloff, and they all felt that they had been insulted. The feeling that one is unable to injure anyone is worse than the feeling that one is unable to do good, because to do harm is far easier and simpler.

"Well, why are we loitering here? We have nothing more to wait for . . . except the reward that I shall get out−−out of Egorka, . . . " said the Captain, looking angrily at the eating−house. "So our peaceful life under the roof of Judas has come to an end. Judas will now turn us out. . . . So do not say that I have not warned you."

Kanets smiled sadly.

"What are you laughing at, jailer?" Kuvalda asked.

"Where shall I go then?"

"That, my soul, is a question that fate will settle for you, so do not worry," said the Captain, thoughtfully, entering the dosshouse. "The creatures that once were men" followed him.

"We can do nothing but await the critical moment," said the Captain, walking about among them. "When they turn us out we shall seek a new place for ourselves, but at present there is no use spoiling our life by thinking of it . . . In times of crisis one becomes energetic . . . and if life were fuller of them and every moment of it so arranged that we were compelled to tremble for our lives all the time . . . By God! life would be livelier and even fuller of interest and energy than it is!"

"That means that people would all go about cutting one another's throats," explained Abyedok, smilingly.

"Well, what about it?" asked the Captain, angrily. He did not like to hear his thoughts illustrated.

"Oh! Nothing! When a person wants to get anywhere quickly he whips up the horses, but of course it needs fire to make engines go . . ."

"Well, let everything go to the Devil as quickly as possible. I'm sure I should be pleased if the earth suddenly opened up or was burned or destroyed somehow . . only I were left to the last in order to see the others consumed . . ."

"Ferocious creature!" smiled Abyedok.

"Well, what of that? I . . . I was once a man . . now I am an outcast . . . that means I have no obligations. It means that I am free to spit on everyone. The nature of my present life means the rejection of my past . . . giving up all relations towards men who are well fed and well dressed, and who look upon me with contempt because I am inferior to them in the matter of feeding or dressing. I must develop something new within myself, do you understand? Something that will make Judas Petunikoff and his kind tremble and perspire before me!"

"Ah! You have a courageous tongue!" jeered Abyedok.

"Yes . . . You miser!" And Kuvalda looked at him contemptuously. "What do you understand? What do you know? Are you able to think? But I have thought and I have read . . . books of which you could not have understood one word."

"Of course! One cannot eat soup out of one's hand . . . But though you have read and thought, and I have not done that or anything else, we both seem to have got into pretty much the same condition, don't we?"

"Go to the Devil!" shouted Kuvalda. His conversations with Abyedok always ended thus. When the teacher was absent his speeches, as a rule, fell on the empty air, and received no attention, and he knew this, but still he could not help speaking. And now, having quarrelled with his companion, he felt rather deserted; but, still longing for conversation, he turned to Simtsoff with the following question: "And you, Aleksei Maksimovitch, where will you lay your grey head?"

The old man smiled good−humouredly, rubbed his hands, and replied, "I do not know . . . I will see. One does not require much, just a little drink."

"Plain but honourable fare!" the Captain said. Simtsoff was silent, only adding that he would find a place sooner than any of them, because women loved him. This was true. The old man had, as a rule, two or three prostitutes, who kept him on their very scant earnings. They very often beat him, but he took this stoically. They somehow never beat him too much, probably because they pitied him. He was a great lover of women, and said they were the cause of all his misfortunes. The character of his relations towards them was confirmed by the appearance of his clothes, which, as a rule, were tidy, and cleaner than those of his companions. And now, sitting at the door of the dosshouse, he boastingly related that for a long time past Redka had been asking him to go and live with her, but he had not gone because he did not want to part with the company. They heard this with jealous interest. They all knew Redka. She lived very near the town, almost below the mountain. Not long ago, she had been in prison for theft. She was a retired nurse; a tall, stout peasant woman, with a face marked by smallpox, but with very pretty, though always drunken, eyes.

"Just look at the old devil!" swore Abyedok, looking at Simtsoff, who was smiling in a self−satisfied way.

"And do you know why they love me? Because I know how to cheer up their souls."

"Do you?" inquired Kuvalda.

"And I can make them pity me. . . . And a woman, when she pities! Go and weep to her, and ask her to kill you . . . she will pity you−−and she will kill you."

"I feel inclined to commit a murder," declared Martyanoff, laughing his dull laugh.

"Upon whom?" asked Abyedok, edging away from him.

"It's all the same to me . . . Petunikoff . . . Egorka . . . or even you!"

"And why?" inquired Kuvalda.

"I want to go to Siberia . . . I have had enough of this vile life . . . one learns how to live there!"

"Yes, they have a particularly good way of teaching in Siberia," agreed the Captain, sadly.

They spoke no more of Petunikoff, or of the turning out of the inhabitants of the dosshouse. They all knew that they would have to leave soon, therefore they did not think the matter worth discussion. It would do no good, and besides the weather was not very cold though the rains had begun . . . and it would be possible to sleep on the ground anywhere outside the town. They sat in a circle on the grass and conversed about all sorts of things, discussing one subject after another, and listening attentively even to the poor speakers in order to make the time pass; keeping quiet was as dull as listening. This society of "creatures that once were men" had one fine characteristic −−no one of them endeavoured to make out that he was better than the others, nor compelled the others to acknowledge his superiority.

The August sun seemed to set their tatters on fire as they sat with their backs and uncovered heads exposed to it . . . a chaotic mixture of the vegetable, mineral, and animal kingdoms. In the corners of the yard the tall steppe grass grew luxuriantly. . . . Nothing else grew there but some dingy vegetables, not even attractive to those who nearly always felt the pangs of hunger.

* * * * *

The following was the scene that took place in Vaviloff's eating−house.

Young Petunikoff entered slowly, took off his hat, looked around him, and said to the eating−house keeper:

"Egor Terentievitch Vaviloff? Are you he?"

"I am," answered the sergeant, leaning on the bar with both arms as if intending to jump over it.

"I have some business with you," said Petunikoff.

"Delighted. Please come this way to my private room."

They went in and sat down, the guest on the couch and his host on the chair opposite to him. In one corner a lamp was burning before a gigantic icon, and on the wall at the other side there were several oil lamps. They were well kept and shone as if they were new. The room, which contained a number of boxes and a variety of furniture, smelt of tobacco, sour cabbage, and olive oil. Petunikoff looked around him and made a face. Vaviloff looked at the icon, and then they looked simultaneously at one another, and both seemed to be favourably impressed. Petunikoff liked Vaviloff's frankly thievish eyes, and Vaviloff was pleased with the open, cold, determined face of Petunikoff, with its large cheeks and white teeth.

"Of course you already know me, and I presume you guess what I am going to say to you," began Petunikoff.

"About the lawsuit? . . . I presume?" remarked the ex−sergeant, respectfully.

"Exactly! I am glad to see that you are not beating about the bush, but going straight to the point like a business man," said Petunikoff, encouragingly.

"I am a soldier," answered Vaviloff, with a modest air.

"That is easily seen, and I am sure we shall be able to finish this job without much trouble."

"Just so."

"Good! You have the law on your side, and will, of course, win your case. I want to tell you this at the very beginning."

"I thank you most humbly," said the sergeant, rubbing his eyes in order to hide the smile in them.

"But tell me, why did you make the acquaintance of your future neighbours like this through the law courts?"

Vaviloff shrugged his shoulders and did not answer.

"It would have been better to come straight to us and settle the matter peacefully, eh? What do you think?"

"That would have been better, of course, but you see there is a difficulty . . . I did not follow my own wishes, but those of others . . . I learned afterwards that it would have been better if . . . but it was too late."

"Oh! I suppose some lawyer taught you this?"

"Someone of that sort."

"Aha! Do you wish to settle the affair peacefully?"

"With all my heart!" cried the soldier.

Petunikoff was silent for a moment, then looked at him, and suddenly asked, coldly and drily, "And why do you wish to do so?"

Vaviloff did not expect such a question, and therefore had no reply ready. In his opinion the question was quite unworthy of any attention, and so he laughed at young Petunikoff.

"That is easy to understand. Men like to live peacefully with one another."

"But," interrupted Petunikoff, "that is not exactly the reason why. As far as I can see, you do not distinctly understand why you wish to be reconciled to us . . . I will tell you."

The soldier was a little surprised. This youngster, dressed in a check suit, in which he looked ridiculous, spoke as if he were Colonel Rakshin, who used to knock three of the unfortunate soldier's teeth out every time he was angry.

"You want to be friends with us because we should be such useful neighbours to you . . . because there will be not less than a hundred and fifty workmen in our factory, and in course of time even more. If a hundred men come and drink one glass at your place, after receiving their weekly wages, that means that you will sell every month four hundred glasses more than you sell at present. This is, of course, the lowest estimate . . . and then you have the eating−house besides. You are not a fool, and you can understand for yourself what profitable neighbours we shall be."

"That is true," Vaviloff nodded, "I knew that before."

"Well, what then?" asked the merchant, loudly.

"Nothing . . . Let us be friends!"

"It is nice to see that you have decided so quickly. Look here, I have already prepared a notification to the court of the withdrawal of the summons against my father. Here it is; read it, and sign it."

Vaviloff looked at his companion with his round eyes and shivered, as if experiencing an unpleasant sensation.

"Pardon me . . . sign it? And why?"

"There is no difficulty about it . . . write your Christian name and surname and nothing more," explained Petunikoff, pointing obligingly with his finger to the place for the signature.

"Oh! It is not that . . . I was alluding to the compensation I was to get for my ground."

"But then this ground is of no use to you," said Petunikoff, calmly.

"But it is mine!" exclaimed the soldier.

"Of course, and how much do you want for it?"

"Well, say the amount stated in the document," said Vaviloff, boldly.

"Six hundred!" and Petunikoff smiled softly. "You are a funny fellow!"

"The law is on my side. . . I can even demand two thousand. I can insist on your pulling down the building . . . and enforce it too. That is why my claim is so small. I demand that you should pull it down!"

"Very well. Probably we shall do so . . . after three years, and after having dragged you into enormous law expenses. And then, having paid up, we shall open our public−house and you will be ruined . . . annihilated like the Swedes at Poltava. We shall see that you are ruined . . . we will take good care of that. We could have begun to arrange about a public−house now, but you see our time is valuable, and besides we are sorry for you. Why should we take the bread out of your mouth without any reason?"

Egor Terentievitch looked at his guest, clenching his teeth, and felt that he was master of the situation, and held his fate in his hands. Vaviloff was full of pity for himself at having to deal with this calm, cruel figure in the checked suit.

"And being such a near neighbour you might have gained a good deal by helping us, and we should have remembered it too. Even now, for instance, I should advise you to open a small shop for tobacco, you know, bread, cucumbers, and so on. . . All these are sure to be in great demand."

Vaviloff listened, and being a clever man, knew that to throw himself upon the enemy's generosity was the better plan. It was as well to begin from the beginning, and, not knowing what else to do to relieve his mind, the soldier began to swear at Kuvalda.

"Curses be upon your head, you drunken rascal! May the Devil take you!"

"Do you mean the lawyer who composed your petition?" asked Petunikoff, calmly, and added, with a sigh, "I have no doubt he would have landed you in rather an awkward fix . . . had we not taken pity upon you."

"Ah!" And the angry soldier raised his hand. "There are two of them . . . One of them discovered it, the other wrote the petition, the accursed reporter!"

"Why the reporter?"

"He writes for the papers . . . He is one of your lodgers . . . there they all are outside . . . Clear them away, for Christ's sake! The robbers! They disturb and annoy everyone in the street. One cannot live for them . . . And they are all desperate fellows . . . You had better take care, or else they will rob or burn you . . ."

"And this reporter, who is he?" asked Petunikoff, with interest.

"He? A drunkard. He was a teacher but was dismissed. He drank everything he possessed . . . and now he writes for the papers and composes petitions. He is a very wicked man!"

"H'm! And did he write your petition, too? I suppose it was he who discovered the flaws in the building. The beams were not rightly put in?"

"He did! I know it for a fact! The dog! He read it aloud in here and boasted, 'Now I have caused Petunikoff some loss!'"

"Ye−−es. . . Well, then, do you want to be reconciled?"

"To be reconciled?" The soldier lowered his head and thought. "Ah! This is a hard life!" said he, in a querulous voice, scratching his head.

"One must learn by experience," Petunikoff reassured him, lighting a cigarette.

"Learn . . . It is not that, my dear sir; but don't you see there is no freedom? Don't you see what a life I lead? I live in fear and trembling . . . I am refused the freedom so desirable to me in my movements, and I fear this ghost of a teacher will write about me in the papers. Sanitary inspectors will be called for . . . fines will have to be paid . . . or else your lodgers will set fire to the place or rob and kill me . . . I am powerless against them. They are not the least afraid of the police, and they like going to prison, because they get their food for nothing there."

"But then we will have them turned out if we come to terms with you," promised Petunikoff.

"What shall we arrange, then?" asked Vaviloff, sadly and seriously.

"Tell me your terms."

"Well, give me the six hundred mentioned in the claim."

"Won't you take a hundred roubles?" asked the merchant, calmly, looking attentively at his companion, and smiling softly. "I will not give you one rouble more," . . . he added.

After this, he took out his eye−glasses, and began cleaning them with his handkerchief. Vaviloff looked at him sadly and respectfully. The calm face of Petunikoff, his grey eyes and clear complexion, every line of his thickset body betokened self−confidence and a well−balanced mind. Vaviloff also liked Petunikoff's straightforward manner of addressing him without any pretensions, as if he were his own brother, though Vaviloff understood well enough that he was his superior, he being only a soldier. Looking at him, he grew fonder and fonder of him, and, forgetting for a moment the matter in hand, respectfully asked Petunikoff:

"Where did you study?"

"In the technological institute. Why?" answered the other, smiling:

"Nothing. Only . . . excuse me!" The soldier lowered his head, and then suddenly exclaimed, "What a splendid thing education is! Science−−light. My brother, I am as stupid as an owl before the sun . . . Your honour, let us finish this job."

With an air of decision he stretched out his hand to Petunikoff and said:

"Well, five hundred?"

"Not more than one hundred roubles, Egor Terentievitch." Petunikoff shrugged his shoulders as if sorry at being unable to give more, and touched the soldier's hairy hand with his long white fingers. They soon ended the matter, for the soldier gave in quickly and met Petunikoff's wishes. And when Vaviloff had received the hundred roubles and signed the paper, he threw the pen down on the table and said, bitterly: "Now I will have a nice time! They will laugh at me, they will cry shame on me, the devils!"

"But you tell them that I paid all your claim," suggested Petunikoff, calmly puffing out clouds of smoke and watching them float upwards.

"But do you think they will believe it? They are as clever swindlers if not worse . . ."

Vaviloff stopped himself in time before making the intended comparison, and looked at the merchant's son in terror. The other smoked on, and seemed to be absorbed in that occupation. He went away soon, promising to

destroy the nest of vagabonds. Vaviloff looked after him and sighed, feeling as if he would like to shout some insult at the young man who was going with such firm steps towards the steep road, encumbered with its ditches and heaps of rubbish.

In the evening the Captain appeared in the eating−house. His eyebrows were knit and his fist clenched. Vaviloff smiled at him in a guilty manner.

"Well, worthy descendant of Judas and Cain, tell us . . ."

"They decided" . . . said Vaviloff, sighing and lowering his eyes.

"I don't doubt it; how many silver pieces did you receive?"

"Four hundred roubles . . ."

"Of course you are lying . . . But all the better for me. Without any further words, Egorka, ten per cent. of it for my discovery, four per cent. to the teacher for writing the petition, one 'vedro' of vodki to all of us, and refreshments all round. Give me the money now, the vodki and refreshments will do at eight o'clock."

Vaviloff turned purple with rage, and stared at Kuvalda with wide−open eyes.

"This is humbug! This is robbery! I will do nothing of the sort. What do you mean, Aristid Fomich? Keep your appetite for the next feast! I am not afraid of you now . . ."

Kuvalda looked at the clock.

"I give you ten minutes, Egorka, for your idiotic talk. Finish your nonsense by that time and give me what I demand. If you don't I will devour you! Kanets has sold you something? Did you read in the paper about the theft at Basoff's house? Do you understand? You won't have time to hide anything, we will not let you . . . and this very night . . . do you understand?"

"Why, Aristid Fomich?" sobbed the discomfited merchant.

"No more words! Did you understand or not?"

Tall, grey, and imposing, Kuvalda spoke in half whispers, and his deep bass voice rang through the house. Vaviloff always feared him because he was not only a retired military man, but a man who had nothing to lose. But now Kuvalda appeared before him in a new role. He did not speak much, and jocosely as usual, but spoke in the tone of a commander, who was convinced of the other's guilt. And Vaviloff felt that the Captain could and would ruin him with the greatest pleasure. He must needs bow before this power. But, nevertheless, the soldier thought of trying him once more. He sighed deeply, and began with apparent calmness:

"It is truly said that a man's sin will find him out . . . I lied to you, Aristid Fomich, . . . I tried to be cleverer than I am . . . I only received one hundred roubles."

"Go on!" said Kuvalda.

"And not four hundred as I told you . . . That means . . ."

"It does not mean anything. It is all the same to me whether you lied or not. You owe me sixty−five roubles. That is not much, eh?"

"Oh! my Lord! Aristid Fomich! I have always been attentive to your honour and done my best to please you."

"Drop all that, Egorka, grandchild of Judas!"

"All right! I will give it you . . . only God will punish you for this. . . ."

"Silence! You rotten pimple of the earth!" shouted the Captain, rolling his eyes. "He has punished me enough already in forcing me to have conversation with you. . . . I will kill you on the spot like a fly!"

He shook his fist in Vaviloff's face and ground his teeth till they nearly broke.

After he had gone Vaviloff began smiling and winking to himself. Then two large drops rolled down his cheeks. They were greyish, and they hid themselves in his moustache, whilst two others followed them. Then Vaviloff went into his own room and stood before the icon, stood there without praying, immovable, with the salt tears running down his wrinkled brown cheeks. . . .

* * * * *

Deacon Taras, who, as a rule, loved to loiter in the woods and fields, proposed to the "creatures that once were men" that they should go together into the fields, and there drink Vaviloff's vodki in the bosom of Nature. But the Captain and all the rest swore at the Deacon, and decided to drink it in the courtyard.

"One, two, three," counted Aristid Fomich; "our full number is thirty, the teacher is not here . . . but probably many other outcasts will come. Let us calculate, say, twenty persons, and to every person two−and−a−half cucumbers, a pound of bread, and a pound of meat . . . That won't be bad! One bottle of vodki each, and there is plenty of sour cabbage, and three watermelons. I ask you, what the devil could you want more, my scoundrel friends? Now, then, let us prepare to devour Egorka Vaviloff, because all this is his blood and body!"

They spread some old clothes on the ground, setting the delicacies and the drink on them, and sat around the feast, solemnly and quietly, but almost unable to control the craving for drink that shone in their eyes.

The evening began to fall, and its shadows were cast on the human refuse of the earth in the courtyard of the dosshouse; the last rays of the sun illumined the roof of the tumble−down building. The night was cold and silent.

"Let us begin, brothers!" commanded the Captain. "How many cups have we? Six . . . and there are thirty of us! Aleksei Maksimovitch, pour it out. Is it ready? Now then, the first toast. . . Come along!"

They drank and shouted, and began to eat.

"The teacher is not here. . . I have not seen him for three days. Has anyone seen him?" asked Kuvalda.

"No one."

"It is unlike . . . Let us drink to the health of Aristid Kuvalda . . . the only friend who has never deserted me for one moment of my life! Devil take him all the same! I might have had something to wear had he left my society at least for a little while."

"You are bitter . . ." said Abyedok, and coughed.

The Captain, with his feeling of superiority to the others, never talked with his mouth full.

Having drunk twice, the company began to grow merry; the food was grateful to them.

Paltara Taras expressed his desire to hear a tale, but the Deacon was arguing with Kubaroff over his preferring thin women to stout ones, and paid no attention to his friend's request. He was asserting his views on the subject to Kubaroff with all the decision of a man who was deeply convinced in his own mind.

The foolish face of Meteor, who was lying on the ground, showed that he was drinking in the Deacon's strong words.

Martyanoff sat, clasping his large hairy hands round his knees, looking silently and sadly at the bottle of vodki and pulling his moustache as if trying to bite it with his teeth, while Abyedok was teasing Tyapa.

"I have seen you watching the place where your money is hidden!"

"That is your luck," shouted Tyapa.

"I will go halves with you, brother."

"All right, take it and welcome."

Kuvalda felt angry with these men. Among them all there was not one worthy of hearing his oratory or of understanding him.

"I wonder where the teacher is?" he asked loudly.

Martyanoff looked at him and said, "He will come soon . . ."

"I am positive that he will come, but he won't come in a carriage. Let us drink to your future health. If you kill any rich man go halves with me . . . then I shall go to America, brother. To those . . . what do you call them? Limpas? Pampas? I will go there, and I will work my way until I become the President of the United States, and then I will challenge the whole of Europe to war and I will blow it up! I will buy the army . . . in Europe that is−−I will invite the French, the Germans, the Turks, and so on, and I will kill them by the hands of their own relatives. . . Just as Elia Marumets bought a Tartar with a Tartar. With money it would be possible even for Elia to destroy the whole of Europe and to take Judas Petunikoff for his valet. He would go. . . Give him a hundred roubles a month and he would go! But he would be a bad valet, because he would soon begin to steal . . ."

"Now, besides that, the thin woman is better than the stout one, because she costs one less," said the Deacon, convincingly. "My first Deaconess used to buy twelve arshins for her clothes, but the second one only ten. . . And so on even in the matter of provisions and food."

Paltara Taras smiled guiltily. Turning his head towards the Deacon and looking straight at him, he said, with conviction:

"I had a wife once, too."

"Oh! That happens to everyone," remarked Kuvalda; "but go on with your lies."

"She was thin, but she ate a lot, and even died from over−eating."

"You poisoned her, you hunchback!" said Abyedok, confidently.

"No, by God! It was from eating sturgeon," said Paltara Taras.

"But I say that you poisoned her!" declared Abyedok, decisively. It often happened, that having said something absolutely impossible and without proof, he kept on repeating it, beginning in a childish, capricious tone, and gradually raising his voice to a mad shriek.

The Deacon stood up for his friend. "No; he did not poison her. He had no reason to do so."

"But I say that he poisoned her!" swore Abyedok.

"Silence!" shouted the Captain, threateningly, becoming still angrier. He looked at his friends with his blinking eyes, and not discovering anything to further provoke his rage in their half−tipsy faces, he lowered his head, sat still for a little while, and then turned over on his back on the ground. Meteor was biting cucumbers. He took a cucumber in his hand without looking at it, put nearly half of it into his mouth, and bit it with his yellow teeth, so that the juice spurted out in all directions and ran over his cheeks. He did not seem to want to eat, but this process pleased him. Martyanoff sat motionless on the ground, like a statue, and looked in a dull manner at the half−vedro bottle, already getting empty. Abyedok lay on his belly and coughed, shaking all over his small body. The rest of the dark, silent figures sat and lay around in all sorts of positions, and their tatters made them look like untidy animals, created by some strange, uncouth deity to make a mockery of man.

"There once lived a lady in Suzdale, A strange lady, She fell into hysterics, Most unpleasantly!"

sang the Deacon in low tones embracing Aleksei Maksimovitch, who was smiling kindly into his face.

Paltara Taras giggled voluptuously.

The night was approaching. High up in the sky the stars were shining . . . and on the mountain and in the town the lights of the lamps were appearing. The whistles of the steamers were heard all over the river, and the doors of Vaviloff's eating−house opened noisily. Two dark figures entered the courtyard, and one of them asked in a hoarse voice:

"Are you drinking?" And the other said in a jealous aside:

"Just see what devils they are!"

Then a hand stretched over the Deacon's head and took away the bottle, and the characteristic sound of vodki being poured into a glass was heard. Then they all protested loudly.

"Oh this is sad!" shouted the Deacon. "Krivoi, let us remember the ancients! Let us sing 'On the Banks of the Babylonian Rivers.'"

"But can he?" asked Simtsoff.

"He? He was a chorister in the Bishop's choir. Now then, Krivoi! . . . "On the r−i−v−e−r−s−−" The Deacon's voice was loud and hoarse and cracked, but his friend sang in a shrill falsetto.

The dirty building loomed large in the darkness and seemed to be coming nearer, threatening the singers, who were arousing its dull echoes. The heavy, pompous clouds were floating in the sky over their heads. One of the "creatures that once were men" was snoring; the rest, not yet so drunk, ate and drank quietly or spoke to each other at long intervals. It was unusual for them to be in such low spirits during such a feast, with so much vodki. Somehow the drink tonight did not seem to have its usual exhilarating effect.

"Stop howling, you dogs!" . . . said the Captain to the singers, raising his head from the ground to listen. "Some one is passing . . . in a droshky. . . ."

A droshky at such a time in the main street could not but attract general attention. Who would risk crossing the ditches between it and the town, and why? They all raised their heads and listened. In the silence of the night the wheels were distinctly heard. They came gradually nearer. A voice was heard asking roughly:

"Well, where then?"

Someone answered, "It must be there, that house."

"I shall not go any further."

"They are coming here!" shouted the Captain.

"The police!" someone whispered in great alarm.

"In a droshky! Fool!" said Martyanoff, quietly.

Kuvalda got up and went to the entrance.

"Is this a lodging−house?" asked someone, in a trembling voice.

"Yes. Belonging to Aristid Kuvalda . . ." said the Captain, roughly.

"Oh! Did a reporter, one Titoff, live here?"

"Aha! Have you brought him?"

"Yes . . ."

"Drunk?"

"Ill."

"That means he is very drunk. Ay, teacher! Now, then, get up!"

"Wait, I will help you . . . He is very ill . . . he has been with me for the last two days . . . Take him under the arms . . . The doctor has seen him. He is very bad."

Tyapa got up and walked to the entrance, but Abyedok laughed, and took another drink.

"Strike a light, there!" shouted the Captain.

Meteor went into the house and lighted the lamp. Then a thin line of light streamed out over the courtyard, and the Captain and another man managed to get the teacher into the dosshouse. His head was hanging on his breast, his feet trailed on the ground, and his arms hung limply as if broken. With Tyapa's help they placed him on a wide board. He was shivering all over. "We worked on the same paper . . . he is very unlucky. . . . I said, 'Stay in my house, you are not in my way,' . . . but he begged me to send him 'home.' He was so excited about it that I brought him here, thinking it might do him good. . . Home! This is it, isn't it?"

"Do you suppose he has a home anywhere else?" asked Kuvalda, roughly, looking at his friend. "Tyapa, fetch me some cold water."

"I fancy I am of no more use," remarked the man in some confusion. The Captain looked at him critically. His clothes were rather shiny, and tightly buttoned up to his chin. His trousers were frayed, his hat almost yellow with age and crumpled like his lean and hungry face.

"No, you are not necessary! We have plenty like you here," said the Captain, turning away.

"Then, good−bye!" The man went to the door, and said quietly from there, "If anything happens . . . let me know in the publishing office. . . My name is Rijoff. I might write a short obituary. . . You see he was an active member of the Press."

"H'm, an obituary, you say? Twenty lines forty kopecks? I will do more than that. When he dies I will cut off one of his legs and send it to you. That will be much more profitable than an obituary. It will last you for three days. . . His legs are fat. You devoured him when he was alive. You may as well continue to do so after he is dead . . ."

The man sniffed strangely and disappeared. The Captain sat down on the wooden board beside the teacher, felt his forehead and breast with his hands and called "Philip!"

The sound re−echoed from the dirty walls of the dosshouse and died away.

"This is absurd, brother," said the Captain, quietly arranging the teacher's untidy hair with his hand. Then the Captain listened to his breathing, which was rapid and uneven, and looked at his sunken grey face. He sighed and looked upon him, knitting his eyebrows. The lamp was a bad one. . . The light was fitful, and dark shadows flickered on the dosshouse walls. The Captain watched them, scratching his beard. Tyapa returned bringing a vedro of water, and placing it by the teacher's head, he took his arm as if to raise him up.

"The water is not necessary," and the Captain shook his head.

"But we must try to revive him," said the old ragcollector.

"Nothing is needed," said the Captain, decidedly.

They sat silently looking at the teacher.

"Let us go and drink, old devil!"

"But he?"

"Can you do him any good?"

Tyapa turned his back on the teacher, and both went out into the courtyard to their companions.

"What is it?" asked Abyedok, turning his sharp nose to the old man. The snoring of those who were asleep, and the tinkling sound of pouring vodki was heard. . . The Deacon was murmuring something. The clouds swam low, so low that it seemed as if they would touch the roof of the house and knock it over on the group of men.

"Ah! One feels sad when someone near at hand is dying," faltered the Captain, with his head down. No one answered him.

"He was the best among you . . . the cleverest, the most respectable. . . I mourn for him."

"Re−s−t with the Saints. . . Sing, you crooked hunchback!" roared the Deacon, digging his friend in the ribs.

"Be quiet!" shouted Abyedok, jumping vengefully to his feet.

"I will give him one on the head," proposed Martyanoff, raising his head from the ground.

"You are not asleep?" Aristid Fomich asked him very softly. "Have you heard about our teacher?"

Martyanoff lazily got up from the ground, looked at the line of light coming out of the dosshouse, shook his head and silently sat down beside the Captain.

"Nothing particular. . . The man is dying . . ." remarked the Captain, shortly.

"Have they been beating him?" asked Abyedok, with great interest.

The Captain gave no answer. He was drinking vodki at the moment.

"They must have known we had something in which to commemorate him after his death!" continued Abyedok, lighting a cigarette. Someone laughed, someone sighed. Generally speaking, the conversation of Abyedok and the Captain did not interest them, and they hated having to think at all. They had always felt the teacher to be an uncommon man, but now many of them were drunk and the others sad and silent. Only the Deacon suddenly drew himself up straight and howled wildly:

"And may the righteous r−−e−−s−−t!"

"You idiot!" hissed Abyedok. "What are you howling for?"

"Fool!" said Tyapa's hoarse voice "When a man is dying one must be quiet . . . so that he may have peace."

Silence reigned once more. The cloudy sky threatened thunder, and the earth was covered with the thick darkness of an autumn night.

"Let us go on drinking!" proposed Kuvalda, filling up the glasses.

"I will go and see if he wants anything," said Tyapa.

"He wants a coffin!" jeered the Captain.

"Don't speak about that," begged Abyedok in a low voice.

Meteor rose and followed Tyapa. The Deacon tried to get up, but fell and swore loudly.

When Tyapa had gone the Captain touched Martyanoff's shoulder and said in low tones:

"Well, Martyanoff . . . You must feel it more than the others. You were . . . But let that go to the Devil . . . Don't you pity Philip?"

"No," said the ex−jailer, quietly, "I do not feel things of this sort, brother . . . I have learned better . . . this life is disgusting after all. I speak seriously when I say that I should like to kill someone."

"Do you?" said the Captain, indistinctly. "Well . . . let's have another drink . . . It's not a long job ours, a little drink and then . . ."

The others began to wake up, and Simtsoff shouted in a blissful voice: "Brothers! One of you pour out a glass for the old man!"

They poured out a glass and gave it to him. Having drunk it he tumbled down again, knocking against another man as he fell. Two or three minutes' silence ensued, dark as the autumn night.

"What do you say?"

"I say that he was a good man . . . a quiet and good man," whispered a low voice.

"Yes, and he had money, too . . . and he never refused it to a friend . . ." Again silence ensued.

"He is dying!" said Tyapa, hoarsely, from behind the Captain's head. Aristid Fomich got up, and went with firm steps into the dosshouse.

"Don't go!" Tyapa stopped him. "Don't go! You are drunk! It is not right." The Captain stopped and thought.

"And what is right on this earth? Go to the Devil!" And he pushed Tyapa aside.

On the walls of the dosshouse the shadows were creeping, seeming to chase each other. The teacher lay on the board at full length and snored. His eyes were wide open, his naked breast rose and fell heavily, the corners of his mouth foamed, and on his face was an expression as if he wished to say something very important, but found it difficult to do so. The Captain stood with his hands behind him, and looked at him in silence. He then began in a silly way:

"Philip! Say something to me . . . a word of comfort to a friend . . . come. . . . I love you, brother! . . . All men are beasts. . . . You were the only man for me . . . though you were a drunkard. Ah! how you did drink vodki, Philip! That was the ruin of you! You ought to have listened to me, and controlled yourself. . . . Did I not once say to you . . . ?"

The mysterious, all−destroying reaper, called Death, made up his mind to finish the terrible work quickly, as if insulted by the presence of this drunken man at the dark and solemn struggle. The teacher sighed deeply, and quivered all over, stretched himself out, and died. The Captain stood shaking to and fro, and continued to talk to him.

"Do you want me to bring you vodki? But it is better that you should not drink, Philip . . . control yourself or else drink! Why should you really control yourself? For what reason, Philip? For what reason?"

He took him by the foot and drew him closer to himself.

"Are you dozing, Philip? Well, then, sleep. . . . Good−night. . . . To−morrow I shall explain all this to you, and you will understand that it is not really necessary to deny yourself anything. . . . But go on sleeping now . . . if you are not dead."

He went out to his friends, followed by the deep silence, and informed them:

"Whether he is sleeping or dead, I do not know. . . . I am a little drunk."

Tyapa bent further forward than usual and crossed himself respectfully. Martyanoff dropped to the ground and lay there. Abyedok moved quietly, and said in a low and wicked tone:

"May you all go to the Devil! Dead? What of that? Why should I care? Why should I speak about it? It will be time enough when I come to die myself. . . . I am not worse than other people."

"That is true," said the Captain, loudly, and fell to the ground.

"The time will come when we shall all die like others. . . . Ha! ha! How shall we live? . . . That is nothing. . . . But we shall die like every one else, and this is the whole end of life, take my word for it. A man lives only to die, and he dies . . . and if this be so what does it matter how or where he died or how he lived? Am I right, Martyanoff? Let us therefore drink . . . whilst we still have life!"

The rain began to fall. Thick, close darkness covered the figures that lay scattered over the ground, half drunk, half asleep. The light in the windows of the dosshouse flickered, paled, and suddenly disappeared. Probably the wind blew it out or else the oil was exhausted. The drops of rain sounded strangely on the iron roof of the dosshouse. Above the mountain where the town lay the ringing of bells was heard, rung by the watchers in the churches. The brazen sound coming from the belfry rang out into the dark and died away, and before its last indistinct note was drowned another stroke was heard and the monotonous silence was again broken by the melancholy clang of bells.

* * * * *

The next morning Tyapa was the first to wake up. Lying on his back he looked up into the sky. Only in such a position did his deformed neck permit him to see the clouds above his head.

This morning the sky was of a uniform grey. Up there hung the damp, cold mist of dawn, almost extinguishing the sun, hiding the unknown vastness behind and pouring despondency over the earth. Tyapa crossed himself, and leaning on his elbow, looked round to see whether there was any vodki left. The bottle was there, but it was empty. Crossing over his companions he looked into the glasses from which they had drunk, found one of them almost full, emptied it, wiped his lips with his sleeve, and began to shake the Captain.

The Captain raised his head and looked at him with sad eyes.

"We must inform the police. . . Get up!"

"Of what?" asked the Captain, sleepily and angrily.

"What, is he not dead? . . ."

"Who?"

"The learned one. . . ."

"Philip? Ye−es!"

"Did you forget? . . . Alas!" said Tyapa, hoarsely. The Captain rose to his feet, yawned and stretched himself till all his bones cracked.

"Well, then! Go and give information. . ."

"I will not go . . . I do not like them," said the Captain, morosely.

"Well, then, wake up the Deacon. . . I shall go, at any rate."

"All right! . . . Deacon, get up!"

The Captain entered the dosshouse, and stood at the teacher's feet. The dead man lay at full length, his left hand on his breast, the right hand held as if ready to strike some one.

The Captain thought that if the teacher got up now, he would be as tall as Paltara Taras. Then he sat by the side of the dead man and sighed, as he remembered that they had lived together for the last three years. Tyapa entered holding his head like a goat which is ready to butt.

He sat down quietly and seriously on the opposite side of the teacher's body, looked into the dark, silent face, and began to sob.

"So . . . he is dead . . . I too shall die soon. . ."

"It is quite time for that!" said the Captain, gloomily.

"It is," Tyapa agreed. "You ought to die too. . . Anything is better than this. . . "

"But perhaps death might be worse? How do you know?"

"It could not be worse. When you die you have only God to deal with . . . but here you have to deal with men . . . and men−−what are they?"

"Enough! . . . Be quiet!" interrupted Kuvalda, angrily.

And in the dawn, which filled the dosshouse, a solemn stillness reigned over all. Long and silently they sat at the feet of their dead companion, seldom looking at him, and both plunged in thought. Then Tyapa asked:

"Will you bury him?"

"I? No, let the police bury him!"

"You took money from Vaviloff for this petition . . . and I will give you some if you have not enough." . . .

"Though I have his money . . . still I shall not bury him."

"That is not right. You are robbing the dead. I will tell them all that you want to keep his money. . . ." Tyapa threatened him.

"You are a fool, you old devil!" said Kuvalda, contemptuously.

"I am not a fool . . . but it is not right nor friendly."

"Enough! Be off!"

"How much money is there?"

"Twenty−five roubles, . . ." said Kuvalda, absently.

"So! . . . You might gain a five−rouble note. . . ."

"You old scoundrel! . . ." And looking into Tyapa's face the Captain swore.

"Well, what? Give . . ."

"Go to the Devil! . . . I am going to spend this money in erecting a monument to him."

"What does he want that for?"

"I will buy a stone and an anchor. I shall place the stone on the grass, and attach the anchor to it with a very heavy chain."

"Why? You are playing tricks . . ."

"Well . . . It is no business of yours."

"Look out! I shall tell . . ." again threatened Tyapa.

Aristid Fomich looked at him sullenly and said nothing. Again they sat there in that silence which, in the presence of the dead, is so full of mystery.

"Listen . . . They are coming!" Tyapa got up and went out of the dosshouse.

Then there appeared at the door the Doctor, the Police Inspector of the district, and the examining Magistrate or Coroner. All three came in turn, looked at the dead teacher, and then went out, throwing suspicious glances at Kuvalda. He sat there, without taking any notice of them, until the Police Inspector asked him:

"Of what did he die?"

"Ask him. . . I think his evil life hastened his end."

"What?" asked the Coroner.

"I say that he died of a disease to which he had not been accustomed . . ."

"H'm, yes. Had he been ill long?"

"Bring him over here, I cannot see him properly," said the Doctor in a melancholy tone. "Probably there are signs of . . ."

"Now, then, ask someone here to carry him out!" the Police Inspector ordered Kuvalda.

"Go and ask them yourself! He is not in my way here . . ." the Captain replied, indifferently.

"Well! . . ." shouted the Inspector, making a ferocious face.

"Phew!" answered Kuvalda, without moving from his place and gnashing his teeth restlessly.

"The Devil take it!" shouted the Inspector, so madly that the blood rushed to his face. "I'll make you pay for this! I'll−−"

"Good morning, gentlemen!" said the merchant Petunikoff, with a sweet smile, making his appearance in the doorway.

He looked round, trembled, took off his cap and crossed himself. Then a pompous, wicked smile crossed his face, and, looking at the Captain, he inquired respectfully:

"What has happened? Has there been a murder here?"

"Yes, something of that sort," replied the Coroner.

Petunikoff sighed deeply, crossed himself again, and spoke in an angry tone.

"By God! It is just as I feared. It always ends in your having to come here. . . Ay, ay, ay! God save everyone. Times without number have I refused to lease this house to this man, and he has always won me over, and I was afraid. You know. . . They are such awful people . . . better give it them, I thought, or else . . ."

He covered his face with his hands, tugged at his beard, and sighed again.

"They are very dangerous men, and this man here is their leader . . . the attaman of the robbers."

"But we will make him smart!" promised the Inspector, looking at the Captain with revengeful eyes.

"Yes, brother, we are old friends of yours . . ." said Kuvalda in a familiar tone. "How many times have I paid you to be quiet?"

"Gentlemen!" shouted the Inspector, "did you hear him? I want you to bear witness to this. Aha, I shall make short work of you, my friend, remember!"

"Don't count your chickens before they are hatched . . . my friend," said Aristid Fomich.

The Doctor, a young man with eye−glasses, looked at him curiously, the Coroner with an attention that boded him no good, Petunikoff with triumph, while the Inspector could hardly restrain himself from throwing himself upon him.

The dark figure of Martyanoff appeared at the door of the dosshouse. He entered quietly, and stood behind Petunikoff, so that his chin was on a level with the merchant's head. Behind him stood the Deacon, opening his small, swollen, red eyes.

"Let us be doing something, gentlemen," suggested the Doctor. Martyanoff made an awful grimace, and suddenly sneezed on Petunikoff's head. The latter gave a yell, sat down hurriedly, and then jumped aside, almost knocking down the Inspector, into whose open arms he fell.

"Do you see," said the frightened merchant, pointing to Martyanoff, "do you see what kind of men they are?"

Kuvalda burst out laughing. The Doctor and the Coroner smiled too, and at the door of the dosshouse the group of figures was increasing . . . sleepy figures, with swollen faces, red, inflamed eyes, and dishevelled hair, staring rudely at the Doctor, the Coroner, and the Inspector.

"Where are you going?" said the policeman on guard at the door, catching hold of their tatters and pushing them aside. But he was one against many, and, without taking any notice, they all entered and stood there, reeking of vodki, silent and evil−looking.

Kuvalda glanced at them, then at the authorities, who were angry at the intrusion of these ragamuffins, and said, smilingly, "Gentlemen, perhaps you would like to make the acquaintance of my lodgers and friends? Would you? But, whether you wish it or not, you will have to make their acquaintance sooner or later in the course of your duties."

The Doctor smiled in an embarrassed way. The Coroner pressed his lips together, and the Inspector saw that it was time to go. Therefore, he shouted:

"Sideroff! Whistle! Tell them to bring a cart here."

"I will go," said Petunikoff, coming forward from a corner. "You had better take it away to−day, sir, I want to pull down this hole. Go away! or else I shall apply to the police!"

The policeman's whistle echoed through the courtyard. At the door of the dosshouse its inhabitants stood in a group, yawning, and scratching themselves.

"And so you do not wish to be introduced? That is rude of you!" laughed Aristid Fomich.

Petunikoff took his purse from his pocket, took out two five−kopeck pieces, put them at the feet of the dead man, and crossed himself.

"God have mercy . . . on the burial of the sinful . . ."

"What!" yelled the Captain, "you give for the burial? Take them away, I say, you scoundrel! How dare you give your stolen kopecks for the burial of an honest man? I will tear you limb from limb!"

"Your Honour!" cried the terrified merchant to the Inspector, seizing him by the elbow. The Doctor and the Coroner jumped aside. The Inspector shouted:

"Sideroff, come here!"

"The creatures that once were men" stood along the wall, looking and listening with an interest, which put new life into their broken−down bodies.

Kuvalda, shaking his fist at Petunikoff's head, roared and rolled his eyes like a wild beast.

"Scoundrel and thief! Take back your money! Dirty worm! Take it back, I say . . . or else I shall cram it down your throat. . . . Take your five−kopeck pieces!"

Petunikoff put out his trembling hand towards his mite, and protecting his head from Kuvalda's fist with the other hand, said:

"You are my witnesses, Sir Inspector, and you good people!"

"We are not good people, merchant!" said the voice of Abyedok, trembling with anger.

The Inspector whistled impatiently, with his other hand protecting Petunikoff, who was stooping in front of him as if trying to enter his belly.

"You dirty toad! I shall compel you to kiss the feet of the dead man. How would you like that?" And catching Petunikoff by the neck, Kuvalda hurled him against the door, as if he had been a cat.

The "creatures that once were men" sprang aside quickly to let the merchant fall. And down he fell at their feet, crying wildly:

"Murder! Help! Murder!"

Martyanoff slowly raised his foot, and brought it down heavily on the merchant's head. Abyedok spat in his face with a grin. The merchant, creeping on all−fours, threw himself into the courtyard, at which everyone laughed. But by this time the two policemen had arrived, and pointing to Kuvalda, the Inspector said, pompously:

"Arrest him, and bind him hand and foot!"

"You dare not! . . . I shall not run away. . . I will go wherever you wish, . ." said Kuvalda, freeing himself from the policemen at his side.

The "creatures that once were men" disappeared one after the other. A cart entered the yard. Some ragged wretches brought out the dead man's body.

"I'll teach you! You just wait!" thundered the Inspector at Kuvalda.

"How now, attaman?" asked Petunikoff, maliciously, excited and pleased at the sight of his enemy in bonds. "What, you fell into the trap? Eh? You just wait . . ."

But Kuvalda was quiet now. He stood strangely straight and silent between the two policemen, watching the teacher's body being placed in the cart. The man who was holding the head of the corpse was very short, and could not manage to place it on the cart at the same time as the legs. For a moment the body hung as if it would fall to the ground, and hide itself beneath the earth, away from these foolish and wicked disturbers of its peace.

"Take him away!" ordered the Inspector, pointing to the Captain.

Kuvalda silently moved forward without protestation, passing the cart on which was the teacher's body. He bowed his head before it without looking. Martyanoff, with his strong face, followed him. The courtyard of the merchant Petunikoff emptied quickly.

"Now then, go on!" called the driver, striking the horses with the whip. The cart moved off over the rough surface of the courtyard. The teacher was covered with a heap of rags, and his belly projected from beneath them. It seemed as if he were laughing quietly at the prospect of leaving the dosshouse, never, never to return. Petunikoff, who was following him with his eyes, crossed himself, and then began to shake the dust and rubbish off his clothes, and the more he shook himself the more pleased and self satisfied did he feel. He saw the tall figure of Aristid Fomich Kuvalda, in a grey cap with a red band, with his arms bound behind his back, being led away.

Petunikoff smiled the smile of the conqueror, and went back into the dosshouse, but suddenly he stopped and trembled. At the door facing him stood an old man with a stick in his hand and a large bag on his back, a horrible old man in rags and tatters, which covered his bony figure. He bent under the weight of his burden, and lowered his head on his breast, as if he wished to attack the merchant.

"What are you? Who are you?" shouted Petunikoff.

"A man . . ." he answered in a hoarse voice. This hoarseness pleased and tranquillised Petunikoff, he even smiled.

"A man! And are there really men like you?" Stepping aside he let the old man pass. He went, saying slowly:

"Men are of various kinds . . . as God wills. . . There are worse than me . . . still worse . . . Yes . . ."

The cloudy sky hung silently over the dirty yard and over the cleanly−dressed man with the pointed beard, who was walking about there, measuring distances with his steps and with his sharp eyes. On the roof of the old house a crow perched and croaked, thrusting its head now backwards, now forwards. In the lowering grey clouds, which hid the sky, there was something hard and merciless, as if they had gathered together to wash all the dirt off the face of this unfortunate, suffering, and sorrowful earth.