

# **A DESPERATE CHARACTER**

Ivan Turgenev

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# A DESPERATE CHARACTER

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## I

. . . WE were a party of eight in the room, and we were talking of contemporary affairs and men.

"I don't understand these men!" observed A.: "they're such desperate fellows. . . . Really desperate. . . . There has never been anything like it before."

"Yes, there has," put in P., a man getting on in years, with grey hair, born some time in the twenties of this century: "there were desperate characters in former days too, only they were not like the desperate fellows of to-day. Of the poet Yazikov some one has said that he had enthusiasm, but not applied to anything an enthusiasm without an object. So it was with those people their desperateness was without an object. But there, if you'll allow me, I'll tell you the story of my nephew, or rather cousin, Misha Poltyev. It may serve as an example of the desperate characters of those days."

He came into God's world, I remember, in 1828, at his father's native place and property, in one of the sleepest corners of a sleepy province of the steppes. Misha's father, Andrei Nikolaevitch Poltyev, I remember well to this day. He was a genuine old-world landowner, a God-fearing, sedate man, fairly for those days well educated, just a little cracked, to tell the truth and, moreover, he suffered from epilepsy. . . . That too is an old-world, gentlemanly complaint. . . . Andrei Nikolaevitch's fits were, however, slight, and generally ended in sleep and depression. He was good-hearted, and of an affable demeanour, not without a certain stateliness: I always pictured to myself the tsar Mihail Fedorovitch as like him. The whole life of Andrei Nikolaevitch was passed in the punctual fulfilment of every observance established from old days, in strict conformity with all the usages of

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the old orthodox holy Russian mode of life. He got up and went to bed, ate his meals, and went to his bath, rejoiced or was wroth (both very rarely, it is true), even smoked his pipe and played cards (two great innovations!), not after his own fancy, not in a way of his own, but according to the custom and ordinance of his fathers with due decorum and formality. He was tall, well built, and stout; his voice was soft and rather husky, as is so often the case with virtuous people in Russia; he was scrupulously neat in his dress and linen, and wore white cravats and full-skirted snuff-coloured coats, but his noble blood was nevertheless evident; no one could have taken him for a priest's son or a merchant! At all times, on all possible occasions, and in all possible contingencies, Andrei Nikolaevitch knew without fail what ought to be done, what was to be said, and precisely what expressions were to be used; he knew when he ought to take medicine, and just what he ought to take; what omens were to be believed and what might be disregarded . . . in fact, he knew everything that ought to be done. . . For as everything had been provided for and laid down by one's elders, one had only to be sure not to imagine anything of one's self. . . . And above all, without God's blessing not a step to be taken! It must be confessed that a deadly dulness reigned supreme in his house, in those low-pitched, warm, dark rooms, that so often resounded with the singing of liturgies and all-night services, and had the smell of incense and Lenten dishes almost always hanging about them!

Andrei Nikolaevitch no longer in his first youth married a young lady of a neighbouring family, without fortune, a very nervous and sickly person, who had had a boarding-school education. She played the piano fairly, spoke boarding-school French, was easily moved to enthusiasm, and still more easily to melancholy and even tears. . . . She was of unbalanced character, in fact. She regarded her life as wasted, could not care for her husband, who, "of course," did not understand her; but she respected him. . . . she put up with him; and being perfectly honest and perfectly cold, she never even dreamed of another "affection." Besides, she was always completely engrossed in the care, first, of her own really delicate health, secondly, of the health of her husband, whose fits always inspired in her something like superstitious horror, and lastly, of her only son, Misha, whom she brought up herself with great zeal. Andrei Nikolaevitch did not oppose his wife's looking after Misha, on the one condition of his education never over-stepping the lines laid down, once and for all, within which everything must move in his house! Thus, for instance, at Christmas-time, and at New Year, and St. Vassily's eve, it was permissible for Misha to dress up and masquerade with the servant boys and not only permissible, but even a binding duty. . . . But, at any other time, God forbid! and so on, and so on.

## II

I REMEMBER Misha at thirteen. He was a very pretty boy, with rosy little cheeks and soft lips (indeed he was soft and plump-looking all over), with prominent liquid eyes, carefully brushed and combed, caressing and modest a regular little girl! There was only one thing about him I did not like: he rarely laughed; but when he did laugh, his teeth large white teeth, pointed like an animal's showed disagreeably, and the laugh itself had an abrupt, even savage, almost animal sound, and there were unpleasant gleams in his eyes. His mother was always praising him for being so obedient and well behaved, and not caring to make friends with rude boys, but always preferring feminine society. "A mother's darling, a milksop," his father, Andrei Nikolaevitch, would call him; "but he's always ready to go into the house of God. . . . And that I am glad to see." Only one old neighbour, who had been a police captain, once said before me, speaking of Misha, "Mark my words, he'll be a rebel." And this saying, I remember, surprised me very much at the time. The old police captain, it is true, used to see rebels on all sides.

Just such an exemplary youth Misha continued to be till the eighteenth year of his age, up to the death of his parents, both of whom he lost almost on the same day. As I was all the while living constantly at Moscow, I heard nothing of my young kinsman. An acquaintance coming from his province did, it is true, inform me that Misha had sold the paternal estate for a trifling sum; but this piece of news struck me as too wildly improbable! And behold, all of a sudden, one autumn morning there flew into the courtyard of my house a carriage, with a pair of splendid trotting horses, and a coachman of monstrous size on the box; and in the carriage, wrapped in a cloak of military

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cut, with a beaver collar two yards deep, and with a foraging cap cocked on one side, *à la diable m'emporte, sat . . .* Misha! On catching sight of me (I was standing at the drawing-room window, gazing in astonishment at the flying equipage), he laughed his abrupt laugh, and jauntily flinging back his cloak, he jumped out of the carriage and ran into the house.

"Misha! Mihail Andreevitch!" I was beginning. . . . "Is it you?"

"Call me Misha," he interrupted me. "Yes, I. . . I, in my own person. . . I have come to Moscow . . . to see the world . . . and show myself. And here I am, come to see you. What do you say to my horses? . . . . Eh?" he laughed again.

Though it was seven years since I had seen Misha last, I recognised him at once. His face had remained just as youthful and as pretty as ever there was no moustache even visible; only his cheeks looked a little swollen under his eyes, and a smell of spirits came from his lips.

"Have you been long in Moscow?" I inquired. "I supposed you were at home in the country, looking after the place." . . .

"Eh! The country I threw up at once! As soon as my parents died may their souls rest in peace (Misha crossed himself scrupulously without a shade of mockery) at once, without a moment's delay. . . . *ein, zwei, drei! ha, ha! I let it go cheap, damn it! A rascally fellow turned up. But it's no matter! Anyway, I am living as I fancy, and amusing other people. But why are you staring at me like that? Was I, really, to go dragging on in the same old round, do you suppose? . . . My dear fellow, couldn't I have a glass of something?"*

Misha spoke fearfully quick and hurriedly, and, at the same time, as though he were only just waked up from sleep.

"Misha, upon my word!" I wailed; "have you no fear of God? What do you look like? What an attire! And you ask for a glass too! And to sell such a fine estate for next to nothing. . . ."

"God I fear always, and do not forget," he broke in. . . . "But He is good, you know God is. . . . He will forgive! And I am good too. . . . I have never yet hurt any one in my life. And drink is good too; and as for hurting. . . . it never hurt any one either. And my get-up is quite the most correct thing. . . . Uncle, would you like me to show you I can walk straight? Or to do a little dance?"

"Oh, spare me, please! A dance, indeed! You'd better sit down."

"As to that, I'll sit down with pleasure. . . . But why do you say nothing of my greys? Just look at them, they're perfect lions! I've got them on hire for the time, but I shall buy them for certain. . . . and the coachman too. . . . It's ever so much cheaper to have one's own horses. And I had the money, but I lost it yesterday at faro. It's no matter, I'll make it up to-morrow. Uncle. . . . how about that little glass?"

I was still unable to get over my amazement. "Really, Misha, how old are you? You ought not to be thinking about horses or cards. . . . but going into the university or the service."

Misha first laughed again, then gave vent to a prolonged whistle.

"Well, uncle, I see you're in a melancholy humour to-day. I'll come back another time. But I tell you what: you come in the evening to Sokolniki. I've a tent pitched there. The gypsies sing. . . . such goings-on. . . . And there's a streamer on the tent, and on the streamer, written in large letters: 'The Troupe of Poltyev's Gypsies.' The streamer coils like a snake, the letters are of gold, attractive for every one to read. A free entertainment whoever

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likes to come! . . . No refusal! I'm making the dust fly in Moscow . . . to my glory! . . . Eh? will you come? Ah, I've one girl there . . . a serpent! Black as your boot, spiteful as a dog, and eyes . . . like living coals! One can never tell what she's going to do kiss or bite! . . . Will you come, uncle? . . . Well, good-bye, till we meet!"

And with a sudden embrace, and a smacking kiss on my shoulder, Misha darted away into the courtyard, and into the carriage, waved his cap over his head, hallooed, the monstrous coachman leered at him over his beard, the greys dashed off, and all vanished!

The next day I like a sinner set off to Sokolniki, and did actually see the tent with the streamer and the inscription. The drapery of the tent was raised; from it came clamour, creaking, and shouting. Crowds of people were thronging round it. On a carpet spread on the ground sat gypsies, men and women, singing and beating drums, and in the midst of them, in a red silk shirt and velvet breeches, was Misha, holding a guitar, dancing a jig. "Gentlemen! honoured friends! walk in, please! the performance is just beginning! Free to all!" he was shouting in a high, cracked voice. "Hey! champagne! pop! a pop on the head! pop up to the ceiling! Ha! you rogue there, Paul de Kock!"

Luckily he did not see me, and I hastily made off.

I won't enlarge on my astonishment at the spectacle of this transformation. But, how was it actually possible for that quiet and modest boy to change all at once into a drunken buffoon? Could it all have been latent in him from childhood, and have come to the surface directly the yoke of his parents' control was removed? But that he had made the dust fly in Moscow, as he expressed it of that, certainly, there could be no doubt. I have seen something of riotous living in my day; but in this there was a sort of violence, a sort of frenzy of self-destruction, a sort of desperation!



FOR two months these diversions continued. . . . And once more I was standing at my drawing-room window, looking into the courtyard. . . . All of a sudden what could it mean? . . . there came slowly stepping in at the gate a pilgrim . . . a squash hat pulled down on his forehead, his hair combed out straight to right and left below it, a long gown, a leather belt. . . . Could it be Misha? He it was!

I went to meet him on the steps. . . . "What's this masquerade for?" I demanded.

"It's not a masquerade, uncle," Misha answered with a deep sigh: "since all I had I've squandered to the last farthing and a great repentance too has come upon me so I have resolved to go to the Sergiev monastery of the Holy Trinity to expiate my sins in prayer. For what refuge was left me? . . . And so I have come to you to say good-bye, uncle, like a prodigal son."

I looked intently at Misha. His face was just the same, rosy and fresh (indeed it remained almost unchanged to the end), and the eyes, liquid, affectionate, and languishing and the hands, as small and white. . . . But he smelt of spirits.

"Well," I pronounced at last, "it's a good thing to do since there's nothing else to be done. But why is it you smell of spirits?"

"A relic of the past," answered Misha, and he suddenly laughed, but immediately pulled himself up, and, making a straight, low bow a monk's bow he added: "Won't you help me on my way? I'm going, see, on foot to the monastery. . . ."

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"When?"

"To day... at once."

"Why be in such a hurry?"

"Uncle, my motto always was, 'Make haste, make haste!'"

"But what is your motto now?"

"It's the same now. . . . Only, make haste towards *good!*"

And so Misha went off, leaving me to ponder on the vicissitudes of human destiny.

But he soon reminded me of his existence. Two months after his visit, I got a letter from him, the first of those letters, of which later on he furnished me with so abundant a supply. And note a peculiar fact: I have seldom seen a neater, more legible handwriting than that unbalanced fellow's. And the wording of his letters was exceedingly correct, just a little flowery. Invariable entreaties for assistance, always attended with resolutions to reform, vows, and promises on his honour. . . . All of it seemed and perhaps was sincere. Misha's signature to his letters was always accompanied by peculiar strokes, flourishes, and stops, and he made great use of marks of exclamation. In this first letter Misha informed me of a new "turn in his fortune." (Later on he used to refer to these turns as plunges . . . and frequent were the plunges he took.) He was starting for the Caucasus on active service for his tsar and his country in the capacity of a cadet! And, though a certain benevolent aunt had entered into his impecunious position, and had sent him an inconsiderable sum, still he begged me to assist him in getting his equipment. I did what he asked, and for two years I heard nothing more of him.

I must own I had the gravest doubts as to his having gone to the Caucasus. But it turned out that he really had gone there, had, by favour, got into the T regiment as a cadet, and had been serving in it for those two years. A perfect series of legends had sprung up there about him. An officer of his regiment related them to me.

## IV

I LEARNED a great deal which I should never have expected of him. I was, of course, hardly surprised that as a military man, as an officer, he was not a success, that he was in fact worse than useless; but what I had not anticipated was that he was by no means conspicuous for much bravery; that in battle he had a downcast, woebegone air, seemed half-depressed, half-bewildered. Discipline of every sort worried him, and made him miserable; he was daring to the point of insanity when only his *own personal safety* was in question; no bet was too mad for him to accept; but do harm to others, kill, fight, he could not, possibly because his heart was too good or possibly because his "cottonwool" education (so he expressed it), had made him too soft. Himself he was quite ready to murder in any way at any moment. . . . But others no. "There's no making him out," his comrades said of him "he's a flabby creature, a poor stick and yet such a desperate fellow a perfect madman!" I chanced in later days to ask Misha what evil spirit drove him, forced him, to drink to excess, risk his life, and so on. He always had one answer "wretchedness."

"But why are you wretched?"

"Why! how can you ask? If one comes, anyway, to one's self, begins to feel, to think of the poverty, of the injustice, of Russia. . . . Well, it's all over with me! . . . one's so wretched at once one wants to put a bullet through one's head! One's forced to start drinking."

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"Why ever do you drag Russia in?"

"How can I help it? Can't be helped! That's why I'm afraid to think."

"It all comes, and your wretchedness too, from having nothing to do."

"But I don't know how to do anything, uncle! dear fellow! Take one's life, and stake it on a card that I can do! Come, you tell me what I ought to do, what to risk my life for? This instant . . . I'll . . ."

"But you must simply live. . . . Why risk your life?"

"I can't! You say I act thoughtlessly. . . . But what else can I do? . . . If one starts thinking good God, all that comes into one's head! It's only Germans who can think! . . ."

What use was it talking to him? He was a desperate man, and that's all one can say.

Of the Caucasus legends I have spoken about, I will tell you two or three. One day, in a party of officers, Misha began boasting of a sabre he had got by exchange "a genuine Persian blade!" The officers expressed doubts as to its genuineness. Misha began disputing. "Here then," he cried at last; "they say the man that knows most about sabres is Abdulka the one-eyed. I'll go to him, and ask." The officers wondered. "What Abdulka? Do you mean that lives in the mountains? The rebel never subdued? Abdul-khan?" "Yes, that's him." "Why, but he'll take you for a spy, will put you in a hole full of bugs, or else cut your head off with your own sabre. And, besides, how are you going to get to him? They'll catch you directly." "I'll go to him, though, all the same." "Bet you won't!" "Taken!" And Misha promptly saddled his horse and rode off to Abdulka. He disappeared for three days. All felt certain that the crazy fellow had come by his end. But, behold! he came back drunk, and with a sabre, not the one he had taken, but another. They began questioning him. "It was all right," said he; "Abdulka's a nice fellow. At first, it's true, he ordered them to put irons on my legs, and was even on the point of having me impaled. Only, I explained why I had come, and showed him the sabre. 'And you'd better not keep me,' said I; 'don't expect a ransom for me; I've not a farthing to bless myself with and I've no relations.' Abdulka was surprised; he looked at me with his solitary eye. 'Well,' said he, 'you are a bold one, you Russian; am I to believe you?' 'You may believe me,' said I; 'I never tell a lie.' (And this was true; Misha never lied.) Abdulka looked at me again. 'And do you know how to drink wine?' 'I do,' said I; 'give me as much as you will, I'll drink it.' Abdulka was surprised again; he called on Allah. And he told his daughter, I suppose such a pretty creature, only with an eye like a jackal's to bring a wine-skin. And I began to get to work on it. 'But your sabre,' said he, 'isn't genuine; here, take the real thing. And now we are pledged friends.' But you've lost your bet, gentlemen; pay up."

The second legend of Misha is of this nature. He was passionately fond of cards; but as he had no money, and could never pay his debts at cards (though he was never a card-sharper), no one at last would sit down to a game with him. So one day he began urgently begging one of his comrades among the officers to play with him! "But if you lose, you don't pay." "The money certainly I can't pay, but I'll put a shot through my left hand, see, with this pistol here!" "But whatever use will that be to me?" "No use, but still it will be curious." This conversation took place after a drinking bout in the presence of witnesses. Whether it was that Misha's proposition struck the officer as really curious anyway he agreed. Cards were brought, the game began. Misha was in luck; he won a hundred roubles. And thereupon his opponent struck his forehead with vexation. "What an ass I am!" he cried, "to be taken in like this! As if you'd have shot your hand if you had lost! a likely story! hold out your purse!" "That's a lie," retorted Misha: "I've won but I'll shoot my hand." He snatched up his pistol and bang, fired at his own hand. The bullet passed right through it . . . and in a week the wound had completely healed.

Another time, Misha was riding with his comrades along a road at night . . . and they saw close to the roadside a narrow ravine like a deep cleft, dark so dark you couldn't see the bottom. "Look," said one of the officers, "Misha may be a desperate fellow, but he wouldn't leap into that ravine." "Yes, I'd leap in!" "No, you wouldn't, for I dare



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say it's seventy feet deep, and you might break your neck." His friend knew his weak point vanity. . . . There was a great deal of it in Misha. "But I'll leap in anyway! Would you like to bet on it? Ten roubles." "Good!" And the officer had hardly uttered the word, when Misha and his horse were off into the ravine and crashing down over the stones. All were simply petrified. . . . A full minute passed, and they heard Misha's voice, dimly, as it were rising up out of the bowels of the earth: "All right! fell on the sand . . . but it was a long flight! Ten roubles you've lost!" "Climb out!" shouted his comrades. "Climb out, I dare say!" echoed Misha. "A likely story! I should like to see you climb out. You'll have to go for torches and ropes now. And, meanwhile, to keep up my spirits while I wait, fling down a flask. . . ."

And so Misha had to stay five hours at the bottom of the ravine; and when they dragged him out, it turned out that his shoulder was dislocated. But that in no way troubled him. The next day a bone-setter, one of the blacksmiths, set his shoulder, and he used it as though nothing had been the matter.

His health in general was marvellous, incredible. I have already mentioned that up to the time of his death he kept his almost childishly fresh complexion. Illness was a thing unknown to him, in spite of his excesses; the strength of his constitution never once showed signs of giving way. When any other man would infallibly have been seriously ill, or even have died, he merely shook himself, like a duck in the water, and was more blooming than ever. Once, also in the Caucasus . . . *this* legend is really incredible, but one may judge from it what Misha was thought to be capable of. . . . Well, once, in the Caucasus, in a state of drunkenness, he fell down with the lower half of his body in a stream of water; his head and arms were on the bank, out of water. It was winter-time, there was a hard frost, and when he was found next morning, his legs and body were pulled out from under a thick layer of ice, which had formed over them in the night and he didn't even catch cold! Another time this was in Russia (near Orel, and also in a time of severe frost) he was in a tavern outside the town in company with seven young seminarists (or theological students), and these seminarists were celebrating their final examination, but had invited Misha, as a delightful person, a man of "inspiration," as the phrase was then. A very great deal was drunk, and when at last the festive party got ready to depart, Misha, dead drunk, was in an unconscious condition. All the seven seminarists together had but one three-horse sledge with a high back; where were they to stow the unresisting body? Then one of the young men, inspired by classical reminiscences, proposed tying Misha by his feet to the back of the sledge, as Hector was tied to the chariot of Achilles! The proposal met with approval . . . and jolting up and down over the holes, sliding sideways down the slopes, with his legs torn and flayed, and his head rolling in the snow, poor Misha travelled on his back for the mile and a half from the tavern to the town, and hadn't as much as a cough afterwards, hadn't turned a hair! Such heroic health had nature bestowed upon him!

## V

FROM the Caucasus he came again to Moscow, in a Circassian dress, a dagger in his sash, a high-peaked cap on his head. This costume he retained to the end, though he was no longer in the army, from which he had been discharged for outstaying his leave. He stayed with me, borrowed a little money . . . and forthwith began his "plunges," his wanderings, or, as he expressed it, "his peregrinations from pillar to post," then came the sudden disappearances and returns, and the showers of beautifully written letters addressed to people of every possible description, from an archbishop down to stable-boys and mid-wives! Then came calls upon persons known and unknown! And this is worth noticing: when he made these calls, he was never abject and cringing, he never worried people by begging, but on the contrary behaved with propriety, and had positively a cheerful and pleasant air, though the inveterate smell of spirits accompanied him everywhere, and his Oriental costume gradually changed into rags. "Give, and God will reward you, though I don't deserve it," he would say, with a bright smile and a candid blush; "if you don't give, you'll be perfectly right, and I shan't blame you for it. I shall find food to eat, God will provide! And there are people poorer than I, and much more deserving of help plenty, plenty!" Misha was particularly successful with women: he knew how to appeal to their sympathy. But don't suppose that he was or fancied himself a Lovelace. . . . Oh, no! in that way he was very modest. Whether it was that he had inherited a cool temperament from his parents, or whether indeed this too is to be set down to his dislike for doing

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any one harm as, according to his notions, relations with a woman meant inevitably doing a woman harm I won't undertake to decide; only in all his behaviour with the fair sex he was extremely delicate. Women felt this, and were the more ready to sympathise with him and help him, until at last he revolted them by his drunkenness and debauchery, by the desperateness of which I have spoken already. . . . I can think of no other word for it.

But in other relations he had by that time lost every sort of delicacy, and was gradually sinking to the lowest depths of degradation. He once, in the public assembly at T , got as far as setting on the table a jug with a notice: "Any one, to whom it may seem agreeable to give the high-born nobleman Poltyev (authentic documents in proof of his pedigree are herewith exposed) a flip on the nose, may satisfy this inclination on putting a rouble into this jug." And I am told there were persons found willing to pay for the privilege of flipping a nobleman's nose! It is true that one such person, who put in only one rouble and gave him two flips, he first almost strangled, and then forced to apologise; it is true, too, that part of the money gained in this fashion he promptly distributed among other poor devils . . . but still, think what a disgrace!

In the course of his "peregrinations from pillar to post," he made his way, too, to his ancestral home, which he had sold for next to nothing to a speculator and money-lender well known in those days. The money-lender was at home, and hearing of the presence in the neighbourhood of the former owner, now reduced to vagrancy, he gave orders not to admit him into the house, and even, in case of necessity, to drive him away. Misha announced that he would not for his part consent to enter the house, polluted by the presence of so repulsive a person; that he would permit no one to drive him away, but was going to the churchyard to pay his devotions at the grave of his parents. So in fact he did.

In the churchyard he was joined by an old house-serf, who had once been his nurse. The money-lender had deprived this old man of his monthly allowance, and driven him off the estate; since then his refuge had been a corner in a peasant's hut. Misha had been too short a time in possession of his estate to have left behind him a particularly favourable memory; still the old servant could not resist running to the churchyard as soon as he heard of his young master's being there. He found Misha sitting on the ground between the tombstones, asked for his hand to kiss, as in old times, and even shed tears on seeing the rags which clothed the limbs of his once pampered young charge.

Misha gazed long and silently at the old man. "Timofay!" he said at last; Timofay started.

"What do you desire?"

"Have you a spade?"

"I can get one. . . . But what do you want with a spade, Mihailo Andreitch, sir?"

"I want to dig myself a grave, Timofay, and to lie here for time everlasting between my father and mother. There's only this spot left me in the world. Get a spade!"

"Yes, sir," said Timofay; he went and got it. And Misha began at once digging in the ground, while Timofay stood by, his chin propped in his hand, repeating: "It's all that's left for you and me, master!"

Misha dug and dug, from time to time observing: "Life's not worth living, is it, Timofay?"

"It's not indeed, master."

The hole was already of a good depth. People saw what Misha was about, and ran to tell the new owner about it. The money-lender was at first very angry, wanted to send for the police: "This is sacrilege," said he. But afterwards, probably reflecting that it was inconvenient anyway to have to do with such a madman, and that it

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might lead to a scandal, he went in his own person to the churchyard, and approaching Misha, still toiling, made him a polite bow. He went on with his digging as though he had not noticed his successor. "Mihail Andreitch," began the money-lender, "allow me to ask what you are doing here?"

"You can see I am digging myself a grave."

"Why are you doing so?"

"Because I don't want to live any longer."

The money-lender fairly threw up his hands in amazement. "You don't want to live?"

Misha glanced menacingly at the money-lender. "That surprises you? Aren't you the cause of it all? . . . You? . . . You? . . . Wasn't it you, Judas, who robbed me, taking advantage of my childishness? Aren't you flaying the peasants' skins off their backs? Haven't you taken from this poor old man his crust of dry bread? Wasn't it you? . . . O God! everywhere nothing but injustice, and oppression, and evil-doing. . . . Everything must go to ruin then, and me too! I don't care for life, I don't care for life in Russia!" And the spade moved faster than ever in Misha's hands.

"Here's a devil of a business!" thought the money-lender; "he's positively burying himself alive." "Mihail Andreevitch," he began again: "listen. I've been behaving badly to you, indeed; they told me falsely of you."

Misha went on digging.

"But why be desperate?"

Misha still went on digging, and kept throwing the earth at the money-lender's feet, as though to say, "Here you are, land-grabber."

"Really, you're wrong in this. Won't you be pleased to come in to have some lunch, and rest a bit?"

Misha raised his head. "So that's it now! And anything to drink?"

The money-lender was delighted. "Why, of course . . . I should think so."

"You invite Timofay too?"

"Well. . . . yes, him too."

Misha pondered. "Only, mind . . . you made me a beggar, you know. . . . Don't think you can get off with one bottle!"

"Set your mind at rest . . . there shall be all you can want."

Misha got up and flung down the spade. . . . "Well, Timosha," said he to his old nurse; "let's do honour to our host. . . . Come along."

"Yes, sir," answered the old man.

And all three started off to the house together. The money-lender knew the man he had to deal with. At the first start Misha, it is true, exacted a promise from him to "grant all sorts of immunities" to the peasants; but an hour

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later, this same Misha, together with Timofay, both drunk, were dancing a galop in the big apartments, which still seemed pervaded by the God-fearing shade of Andrei Nikolaevitch; and an hour later still, Misha in a dead sleep (he had a very weak head for spirits), laid in a cart with his high cap and dagger, was being driven off to the town, more than twenty miles away, and there was flung under a hedge. . . . As for Timofay, who could still keep on his legs, and only hiccupped him, of course, they kicked out of the house; since they couldn't get at the master, they had to be content with the old servant.

### VI

SOME time passed again, and I heard nothing of Misha. . . . God knows what he was doing. But one day, as I sat over the samovar at a posting-station on the T highroad, waiting for horses, I suddenly heard under the open window of the station room a hoarse voice, uttering in French the words: "*Monsieur . . . monsieur . . . prenez pitié d'un pauvre gentilhomme ruiné.*" . . . I lifted my head, glanced. . . . *The mangy-looking fur cap, the broken ornaments on the ragged Circassian dress, the dagger in the cracked sheath, the swollen, but still rosy face, the dishevelled, but still thick crop of hair.* . . . *Mercy on us! Misha! He had come then to begging alms on the highroads. I could not help crying out. He recognised me, started, turned away, and was about to move away from the window. I stopped him . . . but what could I say to him? Give him a lecture? . . . In silence I held out a five-rouble note; he, also in silence, took it in his still white and plump, though shaking and dirty hand, and vanished round the corner of the house.*

It was a good while before they gave me horses, and I had time to give myself up to gloomy reflections on my unexpected meeting with Misha; I felt ashamed of having let him go so unsympathetically.

At last I set off on my way, and half a mile from the station I observed ahead of me, in the road, a crowd of people moving along with a curious, as it seemed rhythmic, step. I overtook this crowd and what did I see?

Some dozen or so beggars, with sacks over their shoulders, were walking two by two, singing and leaping about, while in front of them danced Misha, stamping time with his feet, and shouting, "Natchiki-tchikaldy, tchuk, tchuk, tchuk! . . . Natchiki-tchikaldy, tchuk, tchuk, tchuk!" Directly my carriage caught them up, and he saw me, he began at once shouting, "Hurrah! Stand in position! right about face, guard of the roadside!"

The beggars took up his shout, and halted; while he, with his peculiar laugh, jumped on to the carriage step, and again yelled: Hurrah!

"What's the meaning of this?" I asked with involuntary astonishment.

"This? This is my company, my army all beggars, God's people, friends of my heart. Every one of them, thanks to you, has had a glass; and now we are all rejoicing and making merry! . . . Uncle! Do you know it's only with beggars, God's people, that one can live in the world . . . by God, it is!"

I made him no answer . . . but at that moment he struck me as such a kind good creature, his face expressed such childlike simple-heartedness. . . . A light seemed suddenly as it were to dawn upon me, and I felt a pang in my heart. . . . "Get into the carriage," I said to him. He was taken aback. . . .

"What? Into the carriage?"

"Yes, get in, get in," I repeated; "I want to make you a suggestion. Sit down. . . . Come along with me."

"Well, as you will." He sat down. "Well, and you, my honoured friends, my dear comrades," he added, addressing the beggars, "farewell, till we meet again." Misha took off his high cap, and bowed low. The beggars all seemed

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overawed. . . . I told the coachman to whip up the horses, and the carriage rolled off.

The suggestion I wanted to make Misha was this: the idea suddenly occurred to me to take him with me to my home in the country, about five-and-twenty miles from that station, to rescue him, or at least to make an effort to rescue him. "Listen, Misha," I said; "will you come along and live with me? . . . You shall have everything provided you; you shall have clothes and linen made you; you shall be properly fitted out, and you shall have money to spend on tobacco, and so on, only on one condition, that you give up drink. . . . Do you agree?"

Misha was positively aghast with delight; he opened his eyes wide, flushed crimson, and suddenly falling on my shoulder, began kissing me, and repeating in a broken voice, "Uncle . . . benefactor . . . God reward you." . . . He burst into tears at last, and taking off his cap fell to wiping his eyes, his nose, his lips with it.

"Mind," I observed; "remember the condition, not to touch strong drink."

"Damnation to it!" he cried, with a wave of both arms, and with this impetuous movement, I was more than ever conscious of the strong smell of spirits with which he seemed always saturated. . . . "Uncle, if you knew what my life has been. . . . If it hadn't been for sorrow, a cruel fate. . . . But now I swear, I swear, I will mend my ways, I will show you. . . . Uncle, I've never told a lie you can ask whom you like. . . . I'm honest, but I'm an unlucky fellow, uncle; I've known no kindness from any one. . . ."

Here he broke down finally into sobs. I tried to soothe him, and succeeded so far that when we reached home Misha had long been lost in a heavy sleep, with his head on my knees.

## VII

HE was at once assigned a room for himself, and at once, first thing, taken to the bath, which was absolutely essential. All his clothes, and his dagger and cap and torn boots, were carefully put away in a loft; he was dressed in clean linen, slippers, and some clothes of mine, which, as is always the way with poor relations, at once seemed to adapt themselves to his size and figure. When he came to table, washed, clean, and fresh, he seemed so touched and happy, he beamed all over with such joyful gratitude, that I too felt moved and joyful. . . . His face was completely transformed. . . . Boys of twelve have faces like that on Easter Sundays, after the communion, when, thickly pomaded, in new jacket and starched collars, they come to exchange Easter greetings with their parents. Misha was continually with a sort of cautious incredulity feeling himself and repeating: "What does it mean? . . . Am I in heaven?" The next day he announced that he had not slept all night, he had been in such ecstasy.

I had living in my house at that time an old aunt with her niece; both of them were extremely disturbed when they heard of Misha's presence; they could not comprehend how I could have asked him into my house! There were very ugly rumours about him. But in the first place, I knew he was always very courteous with ladies; and, secondly, I counted on his promises of amendment. And, in fact, for the first two days of his stay under my roof Misha not merely justified my expectations but surpassed them, while the ladies of the household were simply enchanted with him. He played piquet with the old lady, helped her to wind her worsted, showed her two new games of patience; for the niece, who had a small voice, he played accompaniments on the piano, and read Russian and French poetry. He told both the ladies lively but discreet anecdotes; in fact, he showed them every attention, so that they repeatedly expressed their surprise to me, and the old lady even observed how unjust people sometimes were. . . . The things the things they had said of him . . . and he such a quiet fellow, and so polite . . . poor Misha! It is true that at table "poor Misha" licked his lips in a rather peculiar, hurried way, if he simply glanced at the bottle. But I had only to shake my finger at him, and he would turn his eyes upwards, and lay his hand on his heart . . . as if to say, I have sworn. . . . "I am regenerated now," he assured me. . . . "Well, God grant it be so," was my thought. . . . But this regeneration did not last long.

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The first two days he was very talkative and cheerful. But even on the third day he seemed somehow subdued, though he remained, as before, with the ladies and tried to entertain them. A half mournful, half dreamy expression flitted now and then over his face, and the face itself was paler and looked thinner. "Are you unwell?" I asked him.

"Yes," he answered; "my head aches a little." On the fourth day he was completely silent; for the most part he sat in a corner, hanging his head disconsolately, and his dejected appearance worked upon the compassionate sympathies of the two ladies, who now, in their turn, tried to amuse him. At table he ate nothing, stared at his plate, and rolled up pellets of bread. On the fifth day the feeling of compassion in the ladies began to be replaced by other emotions uneasiness and even alarm. Misha was so strange, he held aloof from people, and kept moving along close to the walls, as though trying to steal by unnoticed, and suddenly looking round as though some one had called him. And what had become of his rosy colour? It seemed covered over by a layer of earth. "Are you still unwell?" I asked him.

"No, I'm all right," he answered abruptly.

"Are you dull?"

"Why should I be dull?" But he turned away and would not look me in the face.

"Or is it that wretchedness come over you again?" To this he made no reply. So passed another twenty-four hours.

Next day my aunt ran into my room in a state of great excitement, declaring that she would leave the house with her niece, if Misha was to remain in it.

"Why so?"

"Why, we are dreadfully scared with him. . . . He's not a man, he's a wolf, nothing better than a wolf. He keeps moving and moving about, and doesn't speak and looks so wild. . . . He almost gnashes his teeth at me. My Katia, you know, is so nervous. . . . She was so struck with him the first day. . . . I'm in terror for her, and indeed for myself too." . . . I didn't know what to say to my aunt. I couldn't, anyway, turn Misha out, after inviting him.

He relieved me himself from my difficult position. The same day, I was still sitting in my own room, suddenly I heard behind me a husky and angry voice Nikolai Nikolaitch, Nikolai Nikolaitch!" I looked round; Misha was standing in the doorway with a face that was fearful, black-looking and distorted. "Nikolai Nikolaitch!" he repeated . . . (not "uncle" now).

"What do you want?"

"Let me go . . . at once!"

"Why?"

"Let me go, or I shall do mischief, I shall set the house on fire or cut some one's throat." Misha suddenly began trembling. "Tell them to give me back my clothes, and let a cart take me to the highroad, and let me have some money, however little!"

"Are you displeased, then, at anything?"

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"I can't live like this!" he shrieked at the top of his voice. "I can't live in your respectable, thrice—accursed house! It makes me sick, and ashamed to live so quietly! . . . How *you* manage to endure it!"

"That is," I interrupted in my turn, "you mean you can't live without drink...."

"Well, yes! yes!" he shrieked again: "only let me go to my brethren, my friends, to the beggars! . . . Away from your respectable, loathsome species!"

I was about to remind him of his sworn promises, but Misha's frenzied look his breaking voice, the convulsive tremor in his limbs, it was all so awful, that I made haste to get rid of him; I said that his clothes should be given him at once, and a cart got ready; and taking a note for twenty—five roubles out of a drawer, I laid it on the table. Misha had begun to advance in a menacing way towards me, but on this, suddenly he stopped, his face worked, flushed, he struck himself on the breast, the tears rushed from his eyes, and muttering, "Uncle! angel! I know I'm a ruined man! thanks! thanks!" he snatched up the note and ran away.

An hour later he was sitting in the cart dressed once more in his Circassian costume, again rosy and cheerful; and when the horses started, he yelled, tore off the peaked cap, and, waving it over his head, made bow after bow. Just as he was going off, he had given me a long and warm embrace, and whispered, "Benefactor, benefactor . . . there's no saving me!" He even ran to the ladies and kissed their hands, fell on his knees, called upon God, and begged their forgiveness! Katia I found afterwards in tears.

The coachman, with whom Misha had set off, on coming home informed me that he had driven him to the first tavern on the highroad and that there "his honour had stuck," had begun treating every one indiscriminately and had quickly sunk into unconsciousness.

From that day I never came across Misha again, but his ultimate fate I learned in the following manner.

## VIII

THREE years later, I was again at home in the country; all of a sudden a servant came in and announced that Madame Poltyev was asking to see me. I knew no Madame Poltyev, and the servant, who made this announcement, for some unknown reason smiled sarcastically. To my glance of inquiry, he responded that the lady asking for me was young, poorly dressed, and had come in a peasant's cart with one horse, which she was driving herself! I told him to ask Madame Poltyev up to my room.

I saw a woman of five—and—twenty, in the dress of the small tradesman class, with a large kerchief on her head. Her face was simple, roundish, not without charm; she looked dejected and gloomy, and was shy and awkward in her movements.

"You are Madame Poltyev?" I inquired, and I asked her to sit down.

"Yes," she answered in a subdued voice, and she did not sit down. "I am the widow of your nephew, Mihail Andreevitch Poltyev."

"Is Mihail Andreevitch dead? Has he been dead long? But sit down, I beg."

She sank into a chair.

"It's two months."

## A DESPERATE CHARACTER

"And had you been married to him long?"

"I had been a year with him."

"Where have you come from now?"

"From out Tula way. . . . There's a village there, Znamenskoe–Glushkovo perhaps you may know it. I am the daughter of the deacon there. Mihail Andreitch and I lived there. .

. . He lived in my father's house. We were a whole year together."

The young woman's lips twitched a little, and she put her hand up to them. She seemed to be on the point of tears, but she controlled herself, and cleared her throat.

"Mihail Andreitch," she went on: "before his death enjoined upon me to go to you; 'You must be sure to go,' said he! And he told me to thank you for all your goodness, and to give you . . . this . . . see, this little thing (she took a small packet out of her pocket) which he always had about him. . . . And Mihail Andreitch said, if you would be pleased to accept it in memory of him, if you would not disdain it. . . . 'There's nothing else,' said he, 'I can give him ' . . . that is, you. . . .'"

In the packet there was a little silver cup with the monogram of Misha's mother. This cup I had often seen in Misha's hands, and once he had even said to me, speaking of some poor fellow, that he really was destitute, since he had neither cup nor bowl, "while I, see, have this anyway."

I thanked her, took the cup, and asked: "Of what complaint had Misha died? No doubt . . . ."

Then I bit my tongue . . . but the young woman understood my unuttered hint. . . . She took a swift glance at me, then looked down again, smiled mournfully, and said at once: "Oh no! he had quite given that up, ever since he got to know me . . . . But he had no health at all! . . . It was shattered quite. As soon as he gave up drink, he fell into ill health directly. He became so steady; he always wanted to help father in his land or in the garden. . . . or any other work there might be . . . in spite of his being of noble birth. But how could he get the strength? . . . At writing, too, he tried to work; as you know, he could do that work capitably, but his hands shook, and he couldn't hold the pen properly. . . . He was always finding fault with himself; 'I'm a white-handed poor creature,' he would say; 'I've never done any good to anybody, never helped, never laboured!' He worried himself very much about that. . . . He used to say that our people labour, but what use are we? . . . Ah, Nikolai Nikolaitch, he was a good man and he was fond of me . . . and I . . . Ah, pardon me. . . ."

Here the young woman wept outright. I would have consoled her, but I did not know how.

"Have you a child left you?" I asked at last.

She sighed. "No, no child. . . . Is it likely?" And her tears flowed faster than ever.

"And so that was how Misha's troubled wanderings had ended," the old man P. wound up his narrative. "You will agree with me, I am sure, that I'm right in calling him a desperate character; but you will most likely agree too that he was not like the desperate characters of to-day; still, a philosopher, you must admit, would find a family likeness between him and them. In him and in them there's the thirst for self-destruction, the wretchedness, the dissatisfaction. . . . And what it all comes from, I leave the philosopher to decide."



## A DESPERATE CHARACTER

BOUGIVALLE, November 1881.