

ON THE HIGH ROAD

Anton Chekhov

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EFIMOVNA. [To NAZAROVNA] Give the old man a nudge dear! Can't get any answer out of him.

NAZAROVNA. [Lifting the corner of a cloth covering off SAVVA'S face] Are you alive or are you dead, you holy man?

SAVVA. Why should I be dead? I'm alive, mother! [Raises himself on his elbow] Cover up my feet, there's a saint! That's it. A bit more on the right one. That's it, mother. God be good to us.

NAZAROVNA. [Wrapping up SAVVA'S feet] Sleep, little father.

SAVVA. What sleep can I have? If only I had the patience to endure this pain, mother; sleep's quite another matter. A sinner doesn't deserve to be given rest. What's that noise, pilgrim-woman?

NAZAROVNA. God is sending a storm. The wind is wailing, and the rain is pouring down, pouring down. All down the roof and into the windows like dried peas. Do you hear? The windows of heaven are opened . . . [Thunder] Holy, holy, holy . . .

FEDYA. And it roars and thunders, and rages, and there's no end to it! Hoooo . . . it's like the noise of a forest. . . . Hoooo. . . . The wind is wailing like a dog. . . . [Shrinking back] It's cold! My clothes are wet, it's all coming in through the open door . . . you might put me through a wringer. . . . [Plays softly] My concertina's damp, and so there's no music for you, my Orthodox brethren, or else I'd give you such a concert, my word! Something marvellous! You can have a quadrille, or a polka, if you like, or some Russian dance for two. . . . I can do them all. In the town, where I was an attendant at the Grand Hotel, I couldn't make any money, but I did wonders on my concertina. And I can play the guitar.

A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. A silly speech from a silly fool.

FEDYA. I can hear another of them. [Pause.]

NAZAROVNA. [To SAVVA] If you'd only lie where it was warm now, old man, and warm your feet. [Pause] Old man! Man of God! [Shakes SAVVA] Are you going to die?

FEDYA. You ought to drink a little vodka, grandfather. Drink, and it'll burn, burn in your stomach, and warm up your heart. Drink, do!

NAZAROVNA. Don't swank, young man! Perhaps the old man is giving back his soul to God, or repenting for his sins, and you talk like that, and play your concertina. . . . Put it down! You've no shame!

FEDYA. And what are you sticking to him for? He can't do anything and you . . . with your old women's talk . . . He can't say a word in reply, and you're glad, and happy because he's listening to your nonsense. . . . You go on sleeping, grandfather, never mind her! Let her talk, don't you take any notice of her. A woman's tongue is the devil's broom—it will sweep the good man and the clever man both out of the house. Don't you mind. . . . [Waves his hands] But it's thin you are, brother of mine! Terrible! Like a dead skeleton! No life in you! Are you really dying?

SAVVA. Why should I die? Save me, O Lord, from dying in vain. . . . I'll suffer a little, and then get up with God's help. . . . The Mother of God won't let me die in a strange land. . . . I'll die at home.

FEDYA. Are you from far off?

SAVVA. From Vologda. The town itself. . . . I live there.

FEDYA. And where is this Vologda?

TIHON. The other side of Moscow. . . .

FEDYA. Well, well, well. . . . You have come a long way, old man! On foot?

SAVVA. On foot, young man. I've been to Tihon of the Don, and I'm going to the Holy Hills.* . . . From there, if God wills it, to Odessa. . . . They say you can get to Jerusalem cheap from there, for twenty-one roubles, they

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say. . . .

*On the Donetz, south–east of Kharkov; a monastery containing a miraculous ikon.

FEDYA. And have you been to Moscow?

SAVVA. Rather! Five times. . . .

FEDYA. Is it a good town? [Smokes] Well–standing?

SAVVA. There are many holy places there, young man. . . . Where there are many holy places it's always a good town. . . .

BORTSOV. [Goes up to the counter, to TIHON] Once more, please! For the sake of Christ, give it to me!

FEDYA. The chief thing about a town is that it should be clean. If it's dusty, it must be watered; if it's dirty, it must be cleaned. There ought to be big houses . . . a theatre . . . police . . . cabs, which . . . I've lived in a town myself, I understand.

BORTSOV. Just a little glass. I'll pay you for it later.

TIHON. That's enough now.

BORTSOV. I ask you! Do be kind to me!

TIHON. Get away!

BORTSOV. You don't understand me. . . . Understand me, you fool, if there's a drop of brain in your peasant's wooden head, that it isn't I who am asking you, but my inside, using the words you understand, that's what's asking! My illness is what's asking! Understand!

TIHON. We don't understand anything. . . . Get back!

BORTSOV. Because if I don't have a drink at once, just you understand this, if I don't satisfy my needs, I may commit some crime. God only knows what I might do! In the time you've kept this place, you rascal, haven't you seen a lot of drunkards, and haven't you yet got to understand what they're like? They're diseased! You can do anything you like to them, but you must give them vodka! Well, now, I implore you! Please! I humbly ask you! God only knows how humbly!

TIHON. You can have the vodka if you pay for it.

BORTSOV. Where am I to get the money? I've drunk it all! Down to the ground! What can I give you? I've only got this coat, but I can't give you that. I've nothing on underneath. . . . Would you like my cap? [Takes it off and gives it to TIHON]

TIHON. [Looks it over] Hm. . . . There are all sorts of caps. . . . It might be a sieve from the holes in it. . . .

FEDYA. [Laughs] A gentleman's cap! You've got to take it off in front of the mam'selles. How do you do, good–bye! How are you?

TIHON. [Returns the cap to BORTSOV] I wouldn't give anything for it. It's muck.

BORTSOV. If you don't like it, then let me owe you for the drink! I'll bring in your five copecks on my way back from town. You can take it and choke yourself with it then! Choke yourself! I hope it sticks in your throat! [Coughs] I hate you!

TIHON. [Banging the bar–counter with his fist] Why do you keep on like that? What a man! What are you here for, you swindler?

BORTSOV. I want a drink! It's not I, it's my disease! Understand that!

TIHON. Don't you make me lose my temper, or you'll soon find yourself outside!

BORTSOV. What am I to do? [Retires from the bar–counter] What am I to do? [Is thoughtful.]

EFIMOVNA. It's the devil tormenting you. Don't you mind him, sir. The damned one keeps whispering, "Drink! Drink!" And you answer him, "I shan't drink! I shan't drink!" He'll go then.

FEDYA. It's drumming in his head. . . . His stomach's leading him on! [Laughs] Your honour's a happy man. Lie down and go to sleep! What's the use of standing like a scarecrow in the middle of the inn! This isn't an orchard!

BORTSOV. [Angrily] Shut up! Nobody spoke to you, you donkey.

FEDYA. Go on, go on! We've seen the like of you before! There's a lot like you tramping the high road! As to being a donkey, you wait till I've given you a clout on the ear and you'll howl worse than the wind. Donkey

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yourself! Fool! [Pause] Scum!

NAZAROVNA. The old man may be saying a prayer, or giving up his soul to God, and here are these unclean ones wrangling with one another and saying all sorts of . . . Have shame on yourselves!

FEDYA. Here, you cabbage–stalk, you keep quiet, even if you are in a public–house. Just you behave like everybody else.

BORTSOV. What am I to do? What will become of me? How can I make him understand? What else can I say to him? [To TIHON] The blood's boiling in my chest! Uncle Tihon! [Weeps] Uncle Tihon!

SAVVA. [Groans] I've got shooting–pains in my leg, like bullets of fire. . . . Little mother, pilgrim.

EFIMOVNA. What is it, little father?

SAVVA. Who's that crying?

EFIMOVNA. The gentleman.

SAVVA. Ask him to shed a tear for me, that I might die in Vologda. Tearful prayers are heard.

BORTSOV. I'm not praying, grandfather! These aren't tears! Just juice! My soul is crushed, and the juice is running. [Sits by SAVVA] Juice! But you wouldn't understand! You, with your darkened brain, wouldn't understand. You people are all in the dark.

SAVVA. Where will you find those who live in the light?

BORTSOV. They do exist, grandfather. . . . They would understand!

SAVVA. Yes, yes, dear friend. . . . The saints lived in the light. . . . They understood all our griefs. . . . You needn't even tell them . . . and they'll understand. Just by looking at your eyes. . . . And then you'll have such peace, as if you were never in grief at all—it will all go!

FEDYA. And have you ever seen any saints?

SAVVA. It has happened, young man. . . . There are many of all sorts on this earth. Sinners, and servants of God.

BORTSOV. I don't understand all this. . . . [Gets up quickly] What's the use of talking when you don't understand, and what sort of a brain have I now? I've only an instinct, a thirst! [Goes quickly to the counter] Tihon, take my coat! Understand? [Tries to take it off] My coat . . .

TIHON. And what is there under your coat? [Looks under it] Your naked body? Don't take it off, I shan't have it. . . . I'm not going to burden my soul with a sin.

Enter MERIK.

BORTSOV. Very well, I'll take the sin on myself! Do you agree?

MERIK. [In silence takes off his outer cloak and remains in a sleeveless jacket. He carries an axe in his belt] A vagrant may sweat where a bear will freeze. I am hot. [Puts his axe on the floor and takes off his jacket] You get rid of a pailful of sweat while you drag one leg out of the mud. And while you are dragging it out, the other one goes farther in.

EFIMOVNA. Yes, that's true . . . is the rain stopping, dear?

MERIK. [Glancing at EFIMOVNA] I don't talk to old women. [A pause.]

BORTSOV. [To TIHON] I'll take the sin on myself. Do you hear me or don't you?

TIHON. I don't want to hear you, get away!

MERIK. It's as dark as if the sky was painted with pitch. You can't see your own nose. And the rain beats into your face like a snowstorm! [Picks up his clothes and axe.]

FEDYA. It's a good thing for the likes of us thieves. When the cat's away the mice will play.

MERIK. Who says that?

FEDYA. Look and see . . . before you forget.

MERIK. We'll make a note of it. . . . [Goes up to TIHON] How do you do, you with the large face! Don't you remember me.

TIHON. If I'm to remember every one of you drunkards that walks the high road, I reckon I'd need ten holes in my forehead.

MERIK. Just look at me. . . . [A pause.]

TIHON. Oh, yes, I remember. I knew you by your eyes! [Gives him his hand] Andrey Polikarpov?

MERIK. I used to be Andrey Polikarpov, but now I am Egor Merik.

TIHON. Why's that?

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MERIK. I call myself after whatever passport God gives me. I've been Merik for two months. [Thunder] Rrrr. . . . Go on thundering, I'm not afraid! [Looks round] Any police here?

TIHON. What are you talking about, making mountains out of mole-hills? . . . The people here are all right. The police are fast asleep in their feather beds now. [Loudly] Orthodox brothers, mind your pockets and your clothes, or you'll have cause to regret it. The man's a rascal! He'll rob you!

MERIK. They can look out for their money, but as to their clothes—I shan't touch them. I've nowhere to take them.

TIHON. Where's the devil taking you to?

MERIK. To Kuban.

TIHON. My word!

FEDYA. To Kuban? Really? [Sitting up] It's a fine place. You wouldn't see such a country, brother, if you were to fall asleep and dream for three years. They say the birds there, and the beasts are—my God! The grass grows all the year round, the people are good, and they've so much land they don't know what to do with it! The authorities, they say . . . a soldier was telling me the other day . . . give a hundred dessiatins a head. There's happiness, God strike me!

MERIK. Happiness. . . . Happiness goes behind you. You don't see it. It's as near as your elbow is, but you can't bite it. It's all silly. . . . [Looking round at the benches and the people] Like a lot of prisoners. . . . A poor lot.

EFIMOVNA. [To MERIK] What great, angry eyes! There's an enemy in you, young man. . . . Don't you look at us!

MERIK. Yes, you're a poor lot here.

EFIMOVNA. Turn away! [Nudges SAVVA] Savva, darling, a wicked man is looking at us. He'll do us harm, dear. [To MERIK] Turn away, I tell you, you snake!

SAVVA. He won't touch us, mother, he won't touch us. . . . God won't let him.

MERIK. All right, Orthodox brothers! [Shrugs his shoulders] Be quiet! You aren't asleep, you bandy-legged fools! Why don't you say something?

EFIMOVNA. Take your great eyes away! Take away that devil's own pride!

MERIK. Be quiet, you crooked old woman! I didn't come with the devil's pride, but with kind words, wishing to honour your bitter lot! You're huddled together like flies because of the cold—I'd be sorry for you, speak kindly to you, pity your poverty, and here you go grumbling away! There's no need for that! [Goes up to FEDYA] Where are you from?

FEDYA. I live in these parts. I work at the Khamonyevsky brickworks.

MERIK. Get up.

FEDYA. [Raising himself] Well?

MERIK. Get up, right up. I'm going to lie down here.

FEDYA. What's that. . . . It isn't your place, is it?

MERIK. Yes, mine. Go and lie on the ground!

FEDYA. You get out of this, you tramp. I'm not afraid of you.

MERIK. You're very quick with your tongue. . . . Get up, and don't talk about it! You'll be sorry for it, you silly.

TIHON. [To FEDYA] Don't contradict him, young man. Never mind.

FEDYA. What right have you? You stick out your fishy eyes and think I'm afraid! [Picks up his belongings and stretches himself out on the ground] You devil! [Lies down and covers himself all over.]

MERIK. [Stretching himself out on the bench] I don't expect you've ever seen a devil or you wouldn't call me one. Devils aren't like that. [Lies down, putting his axe next to him] Lie down, little brother axe . . . let me cover you.

TIHON. Where did you get the axe from?

MERIK. Stole it. . . . Stole it, and now I've got to fuss over it like a child with a new toy; I don't like to throw it away, and I've nowhere to put it. Like a beastly wife. . . . Yes. . . . [Covering himself over] Devils aren't like that, brother.

FEDYA. [Uncovering his head] What are they like?

MERIK. Like steam, like air. . . . Just blow into the air. [Blows] They're like that, you can't see them.

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A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. You can see them if you sit under a harrow.

MERIK. I've tried, but I didn't see any. . . . Old women's tales, and silly old men's, too. . . . You won't see a devil or a ghost or a corpse. . . . Our eyes weren't made so that we could see everything. . . . When I was a boy, I used to walk in the woods at night on purpose to see the demon of the woods. . . . I'd shout and shout, and there might be some spirit, I'd call for the demon of the woods and not blink my eyes: I'd see all sorts of little things moving about, but no demon. I used to go and walk about churchyards at night, I wanted to see the ghosts—but the old women lie. I saw all sorts of animals, but anything awful—not a sign. Our eyes weren't

THE VOICE FROM THE CORNER. Never mind, it does happen that you do see. . . . In our village a man was gutting a wild boar . . . he was separating the tripe when . . . something jumped out at him!

SAVVA. [Raising himself] Little children, don't talk about these unclean things! It's a sin, dears!

MERIK. Aaa . . . greybeard! You skeleton! [Laughs] You needn't go to the churchyard to see ghosts, when they get up from under the floor to give advice to their relations. . . . A sin! . . . Don't you teach people your silly notions! You're an ignorant lot of people, living in darkness. . . . [Lights his pipe] My father was a peasant and used to be fond of teaching people. One night he stole a sack of apples from the village priest, and he brings them along and tells us, "Look, children, mind you don't eat any apples before Easter, it's a sin." You're like that. . . . You don't know what a devil is, but you go calling people devils. . . . Take this crooked old woman, for instance. [Points to EFIMOVNA] She sees an enemy in me, but in her time, for some woman's nonsense or other, she's given her soul to the devil five times.

EFIMOVNA. Hoo, hoo, hoo. . . . Gracious heavens! [Covers her face] Little Savva!

TIHON. What are you frightening them for? A great pleasure! [The door slams in the wind] Lord Jesus. . . . The wind, the wind!

MERIK. [Stretching himself] Eh, to show my strength! [The door slams again] If I could only measure myself against the wind! Shall I tear the door down, or suppose I tear up the inn by the roots! [Gets up and lies down again] How dull!

NAZAROVNA. You'd better pray, you heathen! Why are you so restless?

EFIMOVNA. Don't speak to him, leave him alone! He's looking at us again. [To MERIK] Don't look at us, evil man! Your eyes are like the eyes of a devil before cockcrow!

SAVVA. Let him look, pilgrims! You pray, and his eyes won't do you any harm.

BORTSOV. No, I can't. It's too much for my strength! [Goes up to the counter] Listen, Tihon, I ask you for the last time. . . . Just half a glass!

TIHON. [Shakes his head] The money!

BORTSOV. My God, haven't I told you! I've drunk it all! Where am I to get it? And you won't go broke even if you do let me have a drop of vodka on tick. A glass of it only costs you two copecks, and it will save me from suffering! I am suffering! Understand! I'm in misery, I'm suffering!

TIHON. Go and tell that to someone else, not to me. . . . Go and ask the Orthodox, perhaps they'll give you some for Christ's sake, if they feel like it, but I'll only give bread for Christ's sake.

BORTSOV. You can rob those wretches yourself, I shan't. . . . I won't do it! I won't! Understand? [Hits the bar-counter with his fist] I won't [A pause.] Hm . . . just wait. . . [Turns to the pilgrim women] It's an idea, all the same, Orthodox ones! Spare five copecks! My inside asks for it. I'm ill!

FEDYA. Oh, you swindler, with your "spare five copecks." Won't you have some water?

BORTSOV. How I am degrading myself! I don't want it! I don't want anything! I was joking!

MERIK. You won't get it out of him, sir. . . . He's a famous skinflint. . . . Wait, I've got a five-copeck piece somewhere. . . . We'll have a glass between us—half each. [Searches in his pockets] The devil . . . it's lost somewhere. . . . Thought I heard it tinkling just now in my pocket. . . . No, no, it isn't there, brother, it's your luck! [A pause.]

BORTSOV. But if I can't drink, I'll commit a crime or I'll kill myself. . . . What shall I do, my God! [Looks through the door] Shall I go out, then? Out into this darkness, wherever my feet take me. . . .

MERIK. Why don't you give him a sermon, you pilgrims? And you, Tihon, why don't you drive him out? He hasn't paid you for his night's accommodation. Chuck him out! Eh, the people are cruel nowadays. There's no gentleness or kindness in them. . . . A savage people! A man is drowning and they shout to him: "Hurry up and drown, we've got no time to look at you, we've got to go to work." As to throwing him a rope—there's no need to

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worry about that. . . . A rope would cost money.

SAVVA. Don't talk, kind man!

MERIK. Quiet, old wolf! You're a savage race! Herods! Sellers of your souls! [To TIHON] Come here, take off my boots! Look sharp now!

TIHON. Eh, he's let himself go! [Laughs] Awful, isn't it.

MERIK. Go on, do as you're told! Quick, now! [Pause] Do you hear me, or don't you? Am I talking to you or the wall? [Stands up.]

TIHON. Well . . . give over.

MERIK. I want you, you fleecer, to take the boots off me, a poor tramp.

TIHON. Well, well . . . don't get excited. Here, have a glass. . . . Have a drink, now!

MERIK. People, what do I want? Do I want him to stand me vodka, or to take off my boots? Didn't I say it properly? [To TIHON] Didn't you hear me rightly? I'll wait a moment, perhaps you'll hear me then.

There is excitement among the pilgrims and tramps, who half-raise themselves in order to look at TIHON and MERIK. They wait in silence.

TIHON. The devil brought you here! [Comes out from behind the bar] What a gentleman! Come on, now. [Takes off MERIK'S boots] You child of Cain . . .

MERIK. That's right. Put them side by side. . . . Like that . . . you can go now!

TIHON. [Returns to the bar-counter] You're too fond of being clever. You do it again and I'll turn you out of the inn! Yes! [To BORTSOV, who is approaching] You, again?

BORTSOV. Look here, suppose I give you something made of gold. . . . I will give it to you.

TIHON. What are you shaking for? Talk sense!

BORTSOV. It may be mean and wicked on my part, but what am I to do? I'm doing this wicked thing, not reckoning on what's to come. . . . If I was tried for it, they'd let me off. Take it, only on condition that you return it later, when I come back from town. I give it to you in front of these witnesses. You will be my witnesses! [Takes a gold medallion out from the breast of his coat] Here it is. . . . I ought to take the portrait out, but I've nowhere to put it; I'm wet all over. . . . Well, take the portrait, too! Only mind this . . . don't let your fingers touch that face. . . . Please . . . I was rude to you, my dear fellow, I was a fool, but forgive me and . . . don't touch it with your fingers. . . . Don't look at that face with your eyes. [Gives TIHON the medallion.]

TIHON. [Examining it] Stolen property. . . . All right, then, drink. . . . [Pours out vodka] Confound you.

BORTSOV. Only don't you touch it . . . with your fingers. [Drinks slowly, with feverish pauses]

TIHON. [Opens the medallion] Hm . . . a lady! . . . Where did you get hold of this?

MERIK. Let's have a look. [Goes to the bar] Let's see.

TIHON. [Pushes his hand away] Where are you going to? You look somewhere else!

FEDYA. [Gets up and comes to TIHON] I want to look, too!

Several of the tramps, etc., approach the bar and form a group. MERIK grips TIHON'S hand firmly with both his, looks at the portrait in the medallion in silence. A pause.

MERIK. A pretty she-devil. A real lady. . . .

FEDYA. A real lady. . . . Look at her cheeks, her eyes. . . . Open your hand, I can't see. Hair coming down to her waist. . . . It is lifelike! She might be going to say something. . . . [Pause.]

MERIK. It's destruction for a weak man. A woman like that gets a hold on one and . . . [Waves his hand] you're done for!

KUSMA'S voice is heard. "Trrr. . . . Stop, you brutes!" Enter KUSMA.

KUSMA. There stands an inn upon my way. Shall I drive or walk past it, say? You can pass your own father and not notice him, but you can see an inn in the dark a hundred versts away. Make way, if you believe in God! Hullo, there! [Planks a five-copeck piece down on the counter] A glass of real Madeira! Quick!

FEDYA. Oh, you devil!

TIHON. Don't wave your arms about, or you'll hit somebody.

KUSMA. God gave us arms to wave about. Poor sugary things, you're half-melted. You're frightened of the rain, poor delicate things. [Drinks.]

EFIMOVNA. You may well get frightened, good man, if you're caught on your way in a night like this. Now, thank God, it's all right, there are many villages and houses where you can shelter from the weather, but before

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that there weren't any. Oh, Lord, it was bad! You walk a hundred versts, and not only isn't there a village, or a house, but you don't even see a dry stick. So you sleep on the ground. . . .

KUSMA. Have you been long on this earth, old woman?

EFIMOVNA. Over seventy years, little father.

KUSMA. Over seventy years! You'll soon come to crows' years. [Looks at BORTSOV] And what sort of a raisin is this? [Staring at BORTSOV] Sir! [BORTSOV recognises KUSMA and retires in confusion to a corner of the room, where he sits on a bench] Semyon Sergeyeveitch! Is that you, or isn't it? Eh? What are you doing in this place? It's not the sort of place for you, is it?

BORTSOV. Be quiet!

MERIK. [To KUSMA] Who is it?

KUSMA. A miserable sufferer. [Paces irritably by the counter] Eh? In an inn, my goodness! Tattered! Drunk! I'm upset, brothers . . . upset. . . . [To MERIK, in an undertone] It's my master . . . our landlord. Semyon Sergeyeveitch and Mr. Bortsov. . . . Have you ever seen a man in such a state? What does he look like? Just. . . it's the drink that brought him to this. . . . Give me some more! [Drinks] I come from his village, Bortsovka; you may have heard of it, it's 200 versts from here, in the Ergovsky district. We used to be his father's serfs. . . . What a shame!

MERIK. Was he rich?

KUSMA. Very.

MERIK. Did he drink it all?

KUSMA. No, my friend, it was something else. . . . He used to be great and rich and sober. . . . [To TIHON] Why you yourself used to see him riding, as he used to, past this inn, on his way to the town. Such bold and noble horses! A carriage on springs, of the best quality! He used to own five troikas, brother. . . . Five years ago, I remember, he came here driving two horses from Mikishinsky, and he paid with a five-rouble piece. . . . I haven't the time, he says, to wait for the change. . . . There!

MERIK. His brain's gone, I suppose.

KUSMA. His brain's all right. . . . It all happened because of his cowardice! From too much fat. First of all, children, because of a woman. . . . He fell in love with a woman of the town, and it seemed to him that there wasn't any more beautiful thing in the wide world. A fool may love as much as a wise man. The girl's people were all right. . . . But she wasn't exactly loose, but just . . . giddy . . . always changing her mind! Always winking at one! Always laughing and laughing. No sense at all. The gentry like that, they think that's nice, but we moujiks would soon chuck her out. . . . Well, he fell in love, and his luck ran out. He began to keep company with her, one thing led to another . . . they used to go out in a boat all night, and play pianos. . . .

BORTSOV. Don't tell them, Kusma! Why should you? What has my life got to do with them?

KUSMA. Forgive me, your honour, I'm only telling them a little . . . what does it matter, anyway. . . . I'm shaking all over. Pour out some more. [Drinks.]

MERIK. [In a semitone] And did she love him?

KUSMA. [In a semitone which gradually becomes his ordinary voice] How shouldn't she? He was a man of means. . . . Of course you'll fall in love when the man has a thousand dessiatins and money to burn. . . . He was a solid, dignified, sober gentleman . . . always the same, like this . . . give me your hand [Takes MERIK'S hand] "How do you do and good-bye, do me the favour." Well, I was going one evening past his garden—and what a garden, brother, versts of it—I was going along quietly, and I look and see the two of them sitting on a seat and kissing each other. [Imitates the sound] He kisses her once, and the snake gives him back two. . . . He was holding her white, little hand, and she was all fiery and kept on getting closer and closer, too. . . . "I love you," she says. And he, like one of the damned, walks about from one place to another and brags, the coward, about his happiness. . . . Gives one man a rouble, and two to another. . . . Gives me money for a horse. Let off everybody's debts. . . .

BORTSOV. Oh, why tell them all about it? These people haven't any sympathy. . . . It hurts!

KUSMA. It's nothing, sir! They asked me! Why shouldn't I tell them? But if you are angry I won't . . . I won't. . . . What do I care for them. . . . [Post-bells are heard.]

FEDYA. Don't shout; tell us quietly. . . .

KUSMA. I'll tell you quietly. . . . He doesn't want me to, but it can't be helped. . . . But there's nothing more to

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tell. They got married, that's all. There was nothing else. Pour out another drop for Kusma the stony! [Drinks] I don't like people getting drunk! Why the time wedding took place, when the gentlefolk sat down to supper afterwards, she went off in a carriage . . . [whispers] To the town, to her lover, a lawyer. . . . Eh? What do you think of her now? Just at the very moment! She would be let off lightly if she were killed for it!

MERIK. [Thoughtfully] Well . . . what happened then?

KUSMA. He went mad. . . . As you see, he started with a fly, as they say, and now it's grown to a bumble-bee. It was a fly then, and now—it's a bumble-bee. . . . And he loves her. Look at him, he loves her! I expect he's walking now to the town to get a glimpse of her with one eye. . . . He'll get a glimpse of her, and go back. . . .

The post has driven up to the inn. The POSTMAN enters and has a drink.

TIHON. The post's late to-day!

The POSTMAN pays in silence and goes out. The post drives off, the bells ringing.

A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. One could rob the post in weather like this—easy as spitting.

MERIK. I've been alive thirty-five years and I haven't robbed the post once. . . . [Pause] It's gone now . . . too late, too late. . . .

KUSMA. Do you want to smell the inside of a prison?

MERIK. People rob and don't go to prison. And if I do go! [Suddenly] What else?

KUSMA. Do you mean that unfortunate?

MERIK. Who else?

KUSMA. The second reason, brothers, why he was ruined was because of his brother-in-law, his sister's husband. . . . He took it into his head to stand surety at the bank for 30,000 roubles for his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law's a thief. . . . The swindler knows which side his bread's buttered and won't budge an inch. . . . So he doesn't pay up. . . . So our man had to pay up the whole thirty thousand. [Sighs] The fool is suffering for his folly. His wife's got children now by the lawyer and the brother-in-law has bought an estate near Poltava, and our man goes round inns like a fool, and complains to the likes of us: "I've lost all faith, brothers! I can't believe in anybody now!" It's cowardly! Every man has his grief, a snake that sucks at his heart, and does that mean that he must drink? Take our village elder, for example. His wife plays about with the schoolmaster in broad daylight, and spends his money on drink, but the elder walks about smiling to himself. He's just a little thinner. . . .

TIHON. [Sighs] When God gives a man strength. . . .

KUSMA. There's all sorts of strength, that's true. . . . Well? How much does it come to? [Pays] Take your pound of flesh! Good-bye, children! Good-night and pleasant dreams! It's time I hurried off. I'm bringing my lady a midwife from the hospital. . . . She must be getting wet with waiting, poor thing. [Runs out. A pause.]

TIHON. Oh, you! Unhappy man, come and drink this! [Pours out.]

BORTSOV. [Comes up to the bar hesitatingly and drinks] That means I now owe you for two glasses.

TIHON. You don't owe me anything! Just drink and drown your sorrows!

FEDYA. Drink mine, too, sir! Oh! [Throws down a five-copeck piece] If you drink, you die; if you don't drink, you die. It's good not to drink vodka, but by God you're easier when you've got some! Vodka takes grief away. . . . It is hot!

BORTSOV. Foo! The heat!

MERIK. Give it here! [Takes the medallion from TIHON and examines her portrait] Hm. Ran off after the wedding. What a woman!

A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. Pour him out another glass, Tihon. Let him drink mine, too.

MERIK. [Dashes the medallion to the ground] Curse her! [Goes quickly to his place and lies down, face to the wall. General excitement.]

BORTSOV. Here, what's that? [Picks up the medallion] How dare you, you beast? What right have you? [Tearfully] Do you want me to kill you? You moujik! You boor!

TIHON. Don't be angry, sir. . . . It isn't glass, it isn't broken. . . . Have another drink and go to sleep. [Pours out] Here I've been listening to you all, and when I ought to have locked up long ago. [Goes and locks door leading out.]

BORTSOV. [Drinks] How dare he? The fool! [To MERIK] Do you understand? You're a fool, a donkey!

SAVVA. Children! If you please! Stop that talking! What's the good of making a noise? Let people go to sleep.

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TIHON. Lie down, lie down . . . be quiet! [Goes behind the counter and locks the till] It's time to sleep.

FEDYA. It's time! [Lies down] Pleasant dreams, brothers!

MERIK. [Gets up and spreads his short fur and coat on the bench] Come on, lie down, sir.

TIHON. And where will you sleep?

MERIK. Oh, anywhere. . . . The floor will do. . . . [Spreads a coat on the floor] It's all one to me. [Puts the axe by him] It would be torture for him to sleep on the floor. He's used to silk and down. . . .

TIHON. [To BORTSOV] Lie down, your honour! You've looked at that portrait long enough. [Puts out a candle] Throw it away!

BORTSOV. [Swaying about] Where can I lie down?

TIHON. In the tramp's place! Didn't you hear him giving it up to you?

BORTSOV. [Going up to the vacant place] I'm a bit drunk . . . after all that. . . . Is this it? . . . Do I lie down here? Eh?

TIHON. Yes, yes, lie down, don't be afraid. [Stretches himself out on the counter.]

BORTSOV. [Lying down] I'm . . . drunk. . . . Everything's going round. . . . [Opens the medallion] Haven't you a little candle? [Pause] You're a queer little woman Masha. . . . Looking at me out of the frame and laughing. . . . [Laughs] I'm drunk! And should you laugh at a man because he's drunk? You look out, as Schastlivtsev says, and . . . love the drunkard.

FEDYA. How the wind howls. It's dreary!

BORTSOV. [Laughs] What a woman. . . . Why do you keep on going round? I can't catch you!

MERIK. He's wandering. Looked too long at the portrait. [Laughs] What a business! Educated people go and invent all sorts of machines and medicines, but there hasn't yet been a man wise enough to invent a medicine against the female sex. . . . They try to cure every sort of disease, and it never occurs to them that more people die of women than of disease. . . . Sly, stingy, cruel, brainless. . . . The mother-in-law torments the bride and the bride makes things square by swindling the husband . . . and there's no end to it. . . .

TIHON. The women have ruffled his hair for him, and so he's bristly.

MERIK. It isn't only I. . . . From the beginning of the ages, since the world has been in existence, people have complained. . . . It's not for nothing that in the songs and stories, the devil and the woman are put side by side. . . . Not for nothing! It's half true, at any rate. [Pause] Here's the gentleman playing the fool, but I had more sense, didn't I, when I left my father and mother, and became a tramp?

FEDYA. Because of women?

MERIK. Just like the gentleman . . . I walked about like one of the damned, bewitched, blessing my stars . . . on fire day and night, until at last my eyes were opened. . . . It wasn't love, but just a fraud. . . .

FEDYA. What did you do to her?

MERIK. Never you mind. . . . [Pause] Do you think I killed her? . . . I wouldn't do it. . . . If you kill, you are sorry for it. . . . She can live and be happy! If only I'd never set eyes on you, or if I could only forget you, you viper's brood! [A knocking at the door.]

TIHON. Whom have the devils brought. . . . Who's there? [Knocking] Who knocks? [Gets up and goes to the door] Who knocks? Go away, we've locked up!

A VOICE. Please let me in, Tihon. The carriage-spring's broken! Be a father to me and help me! If I only had a little string to tie it round with, we'd get there somehow or other.

TIHON. Who are you?

THE VOICE. My lady is going to Varsonofyev from the town. . . . It's only five versts farther on. . . . Do be a good man and help!

TIHON. Go and tell the lady that if she pays ten roubles she can have her string and we'll mend the spring.

THE VOICE. Have you gone mad, or what? Ten roubles! You mad dog! Profiting by our misfortunes!

TIHON. Just as you like. . . . You needn't if you don't want to.

THE VOICE. Very well, wait a bit. [Pause] She says, all right.

TIHON. Pleased to hear it! [Opens door. The COACHMAN enters.]

COACHMAN. Good evening, Orthodox people! Well, give me the string! Quick! Who'll go and help us, children? There'll be something left over for your trouble!

TIHON. There won't be anything left over. . . . Let them sleep, the two of us can manage.

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COACHMAN. Foo, I am tired! It's cold, and there's not a dry spot in all the mud. . . . Another thing, dear. . . . Have you got a little room in here for the lady to warm herself in? The carriage is all on one side, she can't stay in it. . . .

TIHON. What does she want a room for? She can warm herself in here, if she's cold. . . . We'll find a place [Clears a space next to BORTSOV] Get up, get up! Just lie on the floor for an hour, and let the lady get warm. [To BORTSOV] Get up, your honour! Sit up! [BORTSOV sits up] Here's a place for you. [Exit COACHMAN.]

FEDYA. Here's a visitor for you, the devil's brought her! Now there'll be no sleep before daylight.

TIHON. I'm sorry I didn't ask for fifteen. . . . She'd have given them. . . . [Stands expectantly before the door] You're a delicate sort of people, I must say. [Enter MARIA EGOROVNA, followed by the COACHMAN. TIHON bows.] Please, your highness! Our room is very humble, full of blackbeetles! But don't disdain it!

MARIA EGOROVNA. I can't see anything. . . . Which way do I go?

TIHON. This way, your highness! [Leads her to the place next to BORTSOV] This way, please. [Blows on the place] I haven't any separate rooms, excuse me, but don't you be afraid, madam, the people here are good and quiet. . . .

MARIA EGOROVNA. [Sits next to BORTSOV] How awfully stuffy! Open the door, at any rate!

TIHON. Yes, madam. [Runs and opens the door wide.]

MERIK. We're freezing, and you open the door! [Gets up and slams it] Who are you to be giving orders? [Lies down]

TIHON. Excuse me, your highness, but we've a little fool here . . . a bit cracked. . . . But don't you be frightened, he won't do you any harm. . . . Only you must excuse me, madam, I can't do this for ten roubles. . . . Make it fifteen.

MARIA EGOROVNA. Very well, only be quick.

TIHON. This minute . . . this very instant. [Drags some string out from under the counter] This minute. [A pause.]

BORTSOV. [Looking at MARIA EGOROVNA] Marie . . . Masha . . .

MARIA EGOROVNA. [Looks at BORTSOV] What's this?

BORTSOV. Marie . . . is it you? Where do you come from? [MARIA EGOROVNA recognizes BORTSOV, screams and runs off into the centre of the floor. BORTSOV follows] Marie, it is I . . . I [Laughs loudly] My wife! Marie! Where am I? People, a light!

MARIA EGOROVNA. Get away from me! You lie, it isn't you! It can't be! [Covers her face with her hands] It's a lie, it's all nonsense!

BORTSOV. Her voice, her movements. . . . Marie, it is I! I'll stop in a moment. . . . I was drunk. . . . My head's going round. . . . My God! Stop, stop. . . . I can't understand anything. [Yells] My wife!

Falls at her feet and sobs. A group collects around the husband and wife.

MARIA EGOROVNA. Stand back! [To the COACHMAN] Denis, let's go! I can't stop here any longer!

MERIK. [Jumps up and looks her steadily in the face] The portrait! [Grasps her hand] It is she! Eh, people, she's the gentleman's wife!

MARIA EGOROVNA. Get away, fellow! [Tries to tear her hand away from him] Denis, why do you stand there staring? [DENIS and TIHON run up to her and get hold of MERIK'S arms] This thieves' kitchen! Let go my hand! I'm not afraid! . . . Get away from me!

MERIK.* Wait a bit, and I'll let go. . . . Just let me say one word to you. . . . One word, so that you may understand. . . . Just wait. . . . [Turns to TIHON and DENIS] Get away, you rogues, let go! I shan't let you go till I've had my say! Stop . . . one moment. [Strikes his forehead with his fist] No, God hasn't given me the wisdom! I can't think of the word for you!

* Throughout this speech, in the original, Merik uses the familiar second person singular.

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MARIA EGOROVNA. [Tears away her hand] Get away! Drunkards . . . let's go, Denis!

She tries to go out, but MERIK blocks the door.

MERIK. Just throw a glance at him, with only one eye if you like! Or say only just one kind little word to him! For God's own sake!

MARIA EGOROVNA. Take away this . . . fool.

MERIK. Then the devil take you, you accursed woman!

He swings his axe. General confusion. Everybody jumps up noisily and with cries of horror. SAVVA stands between MERIK and MARIA EGOROVNA. . . . DENIS forces MERIK to one side and carries out his mistress. After this all stand as if turned to stone. A prolonged pause. BORTSOV suddenly waves his hands in the air.

BORTSOV. Marie . . . where are you, Marie!

NAZAROVNA. My God, my God! You've torn up my soul, your murderers! What an accursed night!

MERIK. [Lowering his hand; he still holds the axe] Did I kill her or no?

TIHON. Thank God, your head is safe. . . .

MERIK. Then I didn't kill her. . . . [Totters to his bed] Fate hasn't sent me to my death because of a stolen axe. . . . [Falls down and sobs] Woe! Woe is me! Have pity on me, Orthodox people!

Curtain.