

MIRE

I

GRACEFULLY swaying in the saddle, a young man wearing the snow-white tunic of an officer rode into the great yard of the vodka distillery belonging to the heirs of M. E. Rothstein. The sun smiled carelessly on the lieutenant's little stars, on the white trunks of the birch-trees, on the heaps of broken glass scattered here and there in the yard. The radiant, vigorous beauty of a summer day lay over everything, and nothing hindered the snappy young green leaves from dancing gaily and winking at the clear blue sky. Even the dirty and soot-begrimed appearance of the bricksheds and the stifling fumes of the distillery did not spoil the general good impression. The lieutenant sprang gaily out of the saddle, handed over his horse to a man who ran up, and stroking with his finger his delicate black moustaches, went in at the front door. On the top step of the old but light and softly carpeted staircase he was met by a maidservant with a haughty, not very youthful face. The lieutenant gave her his card without speaking.

As she went through the rooms with the card, the maid could see on it the name "Alexandr Grigoryevitch Sokolsky." A minute later she came back and told the lieutenant that her mistress could not see him, as she was not feeling quite well. Sokolsky looked at the ceiling and thrust out his lower lip.

"How vexatious!" he said. "Listen, my dear," he said eagerly. "Go and tell Susanna Moiseyevna, that it is very necessary for me to speak to her -- very. I will only keep her one minute. Ask her to excuse me."

The maid shrugged one shoulder and went off languidly to her mistress.

"Very well!" she sighed, returning after a brief interval. "Please walk in!"

The lieutenant went with her through five or six large, luxuriously furnished rooms and a corridor, and finally found himself in a large and lofty square room, in which from the first step he was impressed by the abundance of flowers and plants and the sweet, almost revoltingly heavy fragrance of jasmine. Flowers were trained to trellis-work along the walls, screening the windows, hung from the ceiling, and were wreathed over the corners, so that the room was more like a greenhouse than a place to live in. Tits, canaries, and goldfinches chirruped among the green leaves and fluttered against the window-panes.

"Forgive me for receiving you here," the lieutenant heard in a mellow feminine voice with a burr on the letters which was not without charm. "Yesterday I had a sick headache, and I'm trying to keep still to prevent its coming on again. What do you want?"

Exactly opposite the entrance, he saw sitting in a big low chair, such as old men use, a woman in an expensive Chinese dressing-gown, with her head wrapped up, leaning back on a pillow. Nothing could be seen behind the woollen shawl in which she was muffled but a pale, long, pointed, somewhat aquiline nose, and one large dark eye. Her ample dressing-gown concealed her figure, but judging from her beautiful hand, from her voice, her nose, and her eye, she might be twenty-six or twenty-eight.

"Forgive me for being so persistent . . ." began the lieutenant, clinking his spurs. "Allow me to introduce myself: Sokolsky! I come with a message from my cousin, your neighbour, Alexey Ivanovitch Kryukov, who . . ."

"I know!" interposed Susanna Moiseyevna. "I know Kryukov. Sit down; I don't like anything big standing before me."

"My cousin charges me to ask you a favour," the lieutenant went on, clinking his spurs once more and sitting down. "The fact is, your late father made a purchase of oats from my cousin last winter, and a small sum was left owing. The payment only becomes due next week, but my cousin begs you most particularly to pay him -- if possible, to-day."

As the lieutenant talked, he stole side-glances about him.

"Surely I'm not in her bedroom?" he thought.

In one corner of the room, where the foliage was thickest and tallest, under a pink awning like a funeral canopy, stood a bed not yet made, with the bed-clothes still in disorder. Close by on two arm-chairs lay heaps of crumpled feminine garments. Petticoats and sleeves with rumpled lace and flounces were trailing on the carpet, on which here and there lay bits of white tape, cigarette-ends, and the papers of caramels. . . . Under the bed the toes, pointed and square, of slippers of all kinds peeped out in a long row. And it seemed to the lieutenant that the scent of the jasmine came not from the flowers, but from the bed and the slippers.

"And what is the sum owing?" asked Susanna Moiseyevna.

"Two thousand three hundred."

"Oho!" said the Jewess, showing another large black eye. "And you call that -- a small sum! However, it's just the same paying it to-day or paying it in a week, but I've had so many payments to make in the last two months since my father's death. . . . Such a lot of stupid business, it makes my head go round! A nice idea! I want to go abroad, and they keep forcing me to attend to these silly things. Vodka, oats . . ." she muttered, half closing her eyes, "oats, bills, percentages, or, as my head-clerk says, 'percentage.' . . . It's awful. Yesterday I simply turned the excise officer out. He pesters me with his Tralles. I said to him: 'Go to the devil with your Tralles! I can't see any one!' He kissed my hand and went away. I tell you what: can't your cousin wait two or three months?"

"A cruel question!" laughed the lieutenant. "My cousin can wait a year, but it's I who cannot wait! You see, it's on my own account I'm acting, I ought to tell you. At all costs I must have money, and by ill-luck my cousin hasn't a rouble to spare. I'm forced to ride about and collect debts. I've just been to see a peasant, our tenant; here I'm now calling on you; from here I shall go on to somewhere else, and keep on like that until I get together five thousand roubles. I need money awfully!"

"Nonsense! What does a young man want with money? Whims, mischief. Why, have you been going in for dissipation? Or losing at cards? Or are you getting married?"

"You've guessed!" laughed the lieutenant, and rising slightly from his seat, he clinked his spurs. "I really am going to be married."

Susanna Moiseyevna looked intently at her visitor, made a wry face, and sighed.

"I can't make out what possesses people to get married!" she said, looking about her for her pocket-handkerchief. "Life is so short, one has so little freedom, and they must put chains on themselves!"

"Every one has his own way of looking at things. . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course; every one has his own way of looking at things. . . . But, I say, are you really going to marry some one poor? Are you passionately in love? And why must you have five thousand? Why won't four do, or three?"

"What a tongue she has!" thought the lieutenant, and answered: "The difficulty is that an officer is not allowed by law to marry till he is twenty-eight; if you choose to marry, you have to leave the Service or else pay a deposit of five thousand."

"Ah, now I understand. Listen. You said just now that every one has his own way of looking at things. . . . Perhaps your fiancée is some one special and remarkable, but . . . but I am utterly unable to understand how any decent man can live with a woman. I can't for the life of me understand it. I have lived, thank the Lord, twenty-seven years, and I have never yet seen an endurable woman. They're all affected minxes, immoral, liars. . . . The only ones I can put up with are cooks and house-maids, but so-called ladies I won't let come within shooting distance of me. But, thank God, they hate me and don't force themselves on me! If one of them wants money she sends her husband, but nothing will induce her to come herself, not from pride -- no, but from cowardice; she's afraid of my making a scene. Oh, I understand their hatred very well! Rather! I openly display what they do their very utmost to conceal from God and man. How can they help hating me? No doubt you've heard bushels of scandal about me already. . . ."

"I only arrived here so lately . . ."

"Tut, tut, tut! . . . I see from your eyes! But your brother's wife, surely she primed you for this expedition? Think of letting a young man come to see such an awful woman without warning him -- how could she? Ha, ha! . . . But tell me, how is your brother? He's a fine fellow, such a handsome man! . . . I've seen him several times at mass. Why do you look at me like that? I very often go to church! We all have the same God. To an educated person externals matter less than the idea. . . . That's so, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course . . ." smiled the lieutenant.

"Yes, the idea. . . . But you are not a bit like your brother. You are handsome, too, but your brother is a great deal better-looking. There's wonderfully little likeness!"

"That's quite natural; he's not my brother, but my cousin."

"Ah, to be sure! So you must have the money to-day? Why to-day?"

"My furlough is over in a few days."

"Well, what's to be done with you!" sighed Susanna Moiseyevna. "So be it. I'll give you the money, though I know you'll abuse me for it afterwards. You'll quarrel with your wife after you are married, and say: 'If that mangy Jewess hadn't given me the money, I should perhaps have been as free as a bird to-day!'" Is your fiancée pretty?"

"Oh yes. . . ."

"H'm! . . . Anyway, better something, if it's only beauty, than nothing. Though however beautiful a woman is, it can never make up to her husband for her silliness."

"That's original!" laughed the lieutenant. "You are a woman yourself, and such a woman-hater!"

"A woman . . ." smiled Susanna. "It's not my fault that God has cast me into this mould, is it? I'm no more to blame for it than you are for having moustaches. The violin is not responsible for the choice of its case. I am very fond of myself, but when any one reminds me that I am a woman, I begin to hate myself. Well, you can go away, and I'll dress. Wait for me in the drawing-room."

The lieutenant went out, and the first thing he did was to draw a deep breath, to get rid of the heavy scent of jasmine, which had begun to irritate his throat and to make him feel giddy.

"What a strange woman!" he thought, looking about him. "She talks fluently, but . . . far too much, and too freely. She must be neurotic."

The drawing-room, in which he was standing now, was richly furnished, and had pretensions to luxury and style. There were dark bronze dishes with patterns in relief, views of Nice and the Rhine on the tables, old-fashioned sconces, Japanese statuettes, but all this striving after luxury and style only emphasised the lack of taste which was glaringly apparent in the gilt cornices, the gaudy wall-paper, the bright velvet table-cloths, the common oleographs in heavy frames. The bad taste of the general effect was the more complete from the lack of finish and the overcrowding of the room, which gave one a feeling that something was lacking, and that a great deal should have been thrown away. It was evident that the furniture had not been bought all at once, but had been picked up at auctions and other favourable opportunities.

Heaven knows what taste the lieutenant could boast of, but even he noticed one characteristic peculiarity about the whole place, which no luxury or style could efface -- a complete absence of all trace of womanly, careful hands, which, as we all know, give a warmth, poetry, and snugness to the furnishing of a room. There was a chilliness about it such as one finds in waiting-rooms at stations, in clubs, and foyers at the theatres.

There was scarcely anything in the room definitely Jewish, except, perhaps, a big picture of the meeting of Jacob and Esau. The lieutenant looked round about him, and, shrugging his shoulders, thought of his strange, new acquaintance, of her free-and-easy manners, and her way of talking. But then the door opened, and in the doorway appeared the lady herself, in a long black dress, so slim and tightly laced that her figure looked as though it had been turned in a lathe. Now the lieutenant saw not only the nose and eyes, but also a thin white face, a head black and as curly as lamb's-wool. She did not attract him, though she did not strike him as ugly. He had a prejudice against un-Russian faces in general, and he considered, too, that the lady's white face, the whiteness of which for some reason suggested the cloying scent of jasmine, did not go well with her little black curls and thick eyebrows; that her nose and ears were astoundingly white, as though they belonged to a corpse, or had been moulded out of transparent wax. When she smiled she showed pale gums as well as her teeth, and he did not like that either.

"Anæmic debility . . ." he thought; "she's probably as nervous as a turkey."

"Here I am! Come along!" she said, going on rapidly ahead of him and pulling off the yellow leaves from the plants as she passed.

"I'll give you the money directly, and if you like I'll give you some lunch. Two thousand three hundred roubles! After such a good stroke of business you'll have an appetite for your lunch. Do you like my rooms? The ladies about here declare that my rooms always smell of garlic. With that culinary gibe their stock of wit is exhausted. I hasten to assure you that I've no garlic even in the cellar. And one day when a doctor came to see me who smelt of garlic, I asked him to take his hat and go and spread his fragrance elsewhere. There is no smell of garlic here, but the place does smell of drugs. My father lay paralyzed for

a year and a half, and the whole house smelt of medicine. A year and a half! I was sorry to lose him, but I'm glad he's dead: he suffered so!"

She led the officer through two rooms similar to the drawing-room, through a large reception hall, and came to a stop in her study, where there was a lady's writing-table covered with little knick-knacks. On the carpet near it several books lay strewn about, opened and folded back. Through a small door leading from the study he saw a table laid for lunch.

Still chatting, Susanna took out of her pocket a bunch of little keys and unlocked an ingeniously made cupboard with a curved, sloping lid. When the lid was raised the cupboard emitted a plaintive note which made the lieutenant think of an Æolian harp. Susanna picked out another key and clicked another lock.

"I have underground passages here and secret doors," she said, taking out a small morocco portfolio. "It's a funny cupboard, isn't it? And in this portfolio I have a quarter of my fortune. Look how podgy it is! You won't strangle me, will you?"

Susanna raised her eyes to the lieutenant and laughed good-naturedly. The lieutenant laughed too.

"She's rather jolly," he thought, watching the keys flashing between her fingers.

"Here it is," she said, picking out the key of the portfolio. "Now, Mr. Creditor, trot out the IOU. What a silly thing money is really! How paltry it is, and yet how women love it! I am a Jewess, you know, to the marrow of my bones. I am passionately fond of Shmuls and Yankels, but how I loathe that passion for gain in our Semitic blood. They hoard and they don't know what they are hoarding for. One ought to live and enjoy oneself, but they're afraid of spending an extra farthing. In that way I am more like a hussar than a Shmul. I don't like money to be kept long in one place. And altogether I fancy I'm not much like a Jewess. Does my accent give me away much, eh?"

"What shall I say?" mumbled the lieutenant. "You speak good Russian, but you do roll yourr s."

Susanna laughed and put the little key in the lock of the portfolio. The lieutenant took out of his pocket a little roll of IOUs and laid them with a notebook on the table.

"Nothing betrays a Jew as much as his accent," Susanna went on, looking gaily at the lieutenant. "However much he twists himself into a Russian or a Frenchman, ask him to say 'feather' and he will say 'fedder' . . . but I pronounce it correctly: 'Feather! feather! feather!'"

Both laughed.

"By Jove, she's very jolly!" thought Sokolsky.

Susanna put the portfolio on a chair, took a step towards the lieutenant, and bringing her face close to his, went on gaily:

"Next to the Jews I love no people so much as the Russian and the French. I did not do much at school and I know no history, but it seems to me that the fate of the world lies in the hands of those two nations. I lived a long time abroad. . . . I spent six months in Madrid. . . . I've gazed my fill at the public, and the conclusion I've come to is that there are no decent peoples except the Russian and the French. Take the languages, for instance. . . . The German language is like the neighing of horses; as for the English . . . you can't imagine anything stupider. Fight -- feet -- foot! Italian is only pleasant when they speak it slowly. If you listen to Italians gabbling, you get the effect of the Jewish jargon. And the Poles? Mercy on us!

There's no language so disgusting! 'Nie pieprz, Pietrze, pieprzem wieprza bo možeo&z przy-pieprzyé wieprza pieprzem.' That means: 'Don't pepper a sucking pig with pepper, Pyotr, or perhaps you'll over-pepper the sucking pig with pepper.' Ha, ha, ha!"

Susanna Moiseyevna rolled her eyes and broke into such a pleasant, infectious laugh that the lieutenant, looking at her, went off into a loud and merry peal of laughter. She took the visitor by the button, and went on:

"You don't like Jews, of course . . . they've many faults, like all nations. I don't dispute that. But are the Jews to blame for it? No, it's not the Jews who are to blame, but the Jewish women! They are narrow-minded, greedy; there's no sort of poetry about them, they're dull. . . . You have never lived with a Jewess, so you don't know how charming it is!" Susanna Moiseyevna pronounced the last words with deliberate emphasis and with no eagerness or laughter. She paused as though frightened at her own openness, and her face was suddenly distorted in a strange, unaccountable way. Her eyes stared at the lieutenant without blinking, her lips parted and showed clenched teeth. Her whole face, her throat, and even her bosom, seemed quivering with a spiteful, catlike expression. Still keeping her eyes fixed on her visitor, she rapidly bent to one side, and swiftly, like a cat, snatched something from the table. All this was the work of a few seconds. Watching her movements, the lieutenant saw five fingers crumple up his IOUs and caught a glimpse of the white rustling paper as it disappeared in her clenched fist. Such an extraordinary transition from good-natured laughter to crime so appalled him that he turned pale and stepped back. . . .

And she, still keeping her frightened, searching eyes upon him, felt along her hip with her clenched fist for her pocket. Her fist struggled convulsively for the pocket, like a fish in the net, and could not find the opening. In another moment the IOUs would have vanished in the recesses of her feminine garments, but at that point the lieutenant uttered a faint cry, and, moved more by instinct than reflection, seized the Jewess by her arm above the clenched fist. Showing her teeth more than ever, she struggled with all her might and pulled her hand away. Then Sokolsky put his right arm firmly round her waist, and the other round her chest and a struggle followed. Afraid of outraging her sex or hurting her, he tried only to prevent her moving, and to get hold of the fist with the IOUs; but she wriggled like an eel in his arms with her supple, flexible body, struck him in the chest with her elbows, and scratched him, so that he could not help touching her all over, and was forced to hurt her and disregard her modesty.

"How unusual this is! How strange! he thought, utterly amazed, hardly able to believe his senses, and feeling rather sick from the scent of jasmine.

In silence, breathing heavily, stumbling against the furniture, they moved about the room. Susanna was carried away by the struggle. She flushed, closed her eyes, and forgetting herself, once even pressed her face against the face of the lieutenant, so that there was a sweetish taste left on his lips. At last he caught hold of her clenched hand. . . . Forcing it open, and not finding the papers in it, he let go the Jewess. With flushed faces and dishevelled hair, they looked at one another, breathing hard. The spiteful, catlike expression on the Jewess's face was gradually replaced by a good-natured smile. She burst out laughing, and turning on one foot, went towards the room where lunch was ready. The lieutenant moved slowly after her. She sat down to the table, and, still flushed and breathing hard, tossed off half a glass of port.

"Listen" -- the lieutenant broke the silence -- "I hope you are joking?"

"Not a bit of it," she answered, thrusting a piece of bread into her mouth.

"H'm! . . . How do you wish me to take all this?"

"As you choose. Sit down and have lunch!"

"But . . . it's dishonest!"

"Perhaps. But don't trouble to give me a sermon; I have my own way of looking at things."

"Won't you give them back?"

"Of course not! If you were a poor unfortunate man, with nothing to eat, then it would be a different matter. But -- he wants to get married!"

"It's not my money, you know; it's my cousin's!"

"And what does your cousin want with money? To get fashionable clothes for his wife? But I really don't care whether yourbelle-sœur has dresses or not."

The lieutenant had ceased to remember that he was in a strange house with an unknown lady, and did not trouble himself with decorum. He strode up and down the room, scowled and nervously fingered his waistcoat. The fact that the Jewess had lowered herself in his eyes by her dishonest action, made him feel bolder and more free-and-easy.

"The devil knows what to make of it!" he muttered. "Listen. I shan't go away from here until I get the IOUs."

"Ah, so much the better," laughed Susanna. "If you stay here for good, it will make it livelier for me."

Excited by the struggle, the lieutenant looked at Susanna's laughing, insolent face, at her munching mouth, at her heaving bosom, and grew bolder and more audacious. Instead of thinking about the IOU he began for some reason recalling with a sort of relish his cousin's stories of the Jewess's romantic adventures, of her free way of life, and these reminiscences only provoked him to greater audacity. Impulsively he sat down beside the Jewess and thinking no more of the IOUs began to eat. . . .

"Will you have vodka or wine?" Susanna asked with a laugh. "So you will stay till you get the IOUs? Poor fellow! How many days and nights you will have to spend with me, waiting for those IOUs! Won't your fiancée have something to say about it?"

II

Five hours had passed. The lieutenant's cousin, Alexey Ivanovitch Kryukov was walking about the rooms of his country-house in his dressing-gown and slippers, and looking impatiently out of window. He was a tall, sturdy man, with a large black beard and a manly face; and as the Jewess had truly said, he was handsome, though he had reached the age when men are apt to grow too stout, puffy, and bald. By mind and temperament he was one of those natures in which the Russian intellectual classes are so rich: warm-hearted, good-natured, well-bred, having some knowledge of the arts and sciences, some faith, and the most chivalrous notions about honour, but indolent and lacking in depth. He was fond of good eating and drinking, was an ideal whist-player, was a connoisseur in women and horses, but in other things he was apathetic and sluggish as a seal, and to rouse him from his lethargy something extraordinary and quite revolting was needed, and then he would forget everything in the world and display intense activity; he would fume and talk of a duel, write a petition of seven pages to a Minister, gallop at

breakneck speed about the district, call some one publicly "a scoundrel," would go to law, and so on.

"How is it our Sasha's not back yet?" he kept asking his wife, glancing out of window. "Why, it's dinner-time!"

After waiting for the lieutenant till six o'clock, they sat down to dinner. When supper-time came, however, Alexey Ivanovitch was listening to every footstep, to every sound of the door, and kept shrugging his shoulders.

"Strange!" he said. "The rascally dandy must have stayed on at the tenant's."

As he went to bed after supper, Kryukov made up his mind that the lieutenant was being entertained at the tenant's, where after a festive evening he was staying the night.

Alexandr Grigoryevitch only returned next morning. He looked extremely crumpled and confused.

"I want to speak to you alone . . ." he said mysteriously to his cousin.

They went into the study. The lieutenant shut the door, and he paced for a long time up and down before he began to speak.

"Something's happened, my dear fellow," he began, "that I don't know how to tell you about. You wouldn't believe it . . ."

And blushing, faltering, not looking at his cousin, he told what had happened with the IOUs. Kryukov, standing with his feet wide apart and his head bent, listened and frowned.

"Are you joking?" he asked.

"How the devil could I be joking? It's no joking matter!"

"I don't understand!" muttered Kryukov, turning crimson and flinging up his hands. "It's positively . . . immoral on your part. Before your very eyes a hussy is up to the devil knows what, a serious crime, plays a nasty trick, and you go and kiss her!"

"But I can't understand myself how it happened!" whispered the lieutenant, blinking guiltily. "Upon my honour, I don't understand it! It's the first time in my life I've come across such a monster! It's not her beauty that does for you, not her mind, but that . . . you understand . . . insolence, cynicism. . . ."

"Insolence, cynicism . . . it's unclean! If you've such a longing for insolence and cynicism, you might have picked a sow out of the mire and have devoured her alive. It would have been cheaper, anyway! Instead of two thousand three hundred!"

"You do express yourself elegantly!" said the lieutenant, frowning. "I'll pay you back the two thousand three hundred!"

"I know you'll pay it back, but it's not a question of money! Damn the money! What revolts me is your being such a limp rag . . . such filthy feebleness! And engaged! With a fiancée!"

"Don't speak of it . . ." said the lieutenant, blushing. "I loathe myself as it is. I should like to sink into the earth. It's sickening and vexatious that I shall have to bother my aunt for that five thousand. . . ."

Kryukov continued for some time longer expressing his indignation and grumbling, then, as he grew calmer, he sat down on the sofa and began to jeer at his cousin.

"You young officers!" he said with contemptuous irony. "Nice bridegrooms."

Suddenly he leapt up as though he had been stung, stamped his foot, and ran about the study.

"No, I'm not going to leave it like that!" he said, shaking his fist. "I will have those IOUs, I will! I'll give it her! One doesn't beat women, but I'll break every bone in her body. . . . I'll pound her to a jelly! I'm not a lieutenant! You won't touch me with insolence or cynicism! No-o-o, damn her! Mishka!" he shouted, "run and tell them to get the racing droshky out for me!"

Kryukov dressed rapidly, and, without heeding the agitated lieutenant, got into the droshky, and with a wave of his hand resolutely raced off to Susanna Moiseyevna. For a long time the lieutenant gazed out of window at the clouds of dust that rolled after his cousin's droshky, stretched, yawned, and went to his own room. A quarter of an hour later he was sound asleep.

At six o'clock he was waked up and summoned to dinner.

"How nice this is of Alexey!" his cousin's wife greeted him in the dining-room. "He keeps us waiting for dinner."

"Do you mean to say he's not come back yet?" yawned the lieutenant. "H'm! . . . he's probably gone round to see the tenant."

But Alexey Ivanovitch was not back by supper either. His wife and Sokolsky decided that he was playing cards at the tenant's and would most likely stay the night there. What had happened was not what they had supposed, however.

Kryukov returned next morning, and without greeting any one, without a word, dashed into his study.

"Well?" whispered the lieutenant, gazing at him round-eyed.

Kryukov waved his hand and gave a snort.

"Why, what's the matter? What are you laughing at?"

Kryukov flopped on the sofa, thrust his head in the pillow, and shook with suppressed laughter. A minute later he got up, and looking at the surprised lieutenant, with his eyes full of tears from laughing, said:

"Close the door. Well . . . she is a fe-e-male, I beg to inform you!"

"Did you get the IOUs?"

Kryukov waved his hand and went off into a peal of laughter again.

"Well! she is a female!" he went on. "Merci for the acquaintance, my boy! She's a devil in petticoats. I arrived; I walked in like such an avenging Jove, you know, that I felt almost afraid of myself. . . . I frowned, I scowled, even clenched my fists to be more awe-inspiring. . . . 'Jokes don't pay with me,

madam!" said I, and more in that style. And I threatened her with the law and with the Governor. To begin with she burst into tears, said she'd been joking with you, and even took me to the cupboard to give me the money. Then she began arguing that the future of Europe lies in the hands of the French, and the Russians, swore at women. . . . Like you, I listened, fascinated, as that I was. . . . She kept singing the praises of my beauty, patted me on the arm near the shoulder, to see how strong I was, and . . . and as you see, I've only just got away from her! Ha, ha! She's enthusiastic about you!"

"You're a nice fellow!" laughed the lieutenant. "A married man! highly respected. . . . Well, aren't you ashamed? Disgusted? Joking apart though, old man, you've got your Queen Tamara in your own neighbourhood. . . ."

"In my own neighbourhood! Why, you wouldn't find another such chameleon in the whole of Russia! I've never seen anything like it in my life, though I know a good bit about women, too. I have known regular devils in my time, but I never met anything like this. It is, as you say, by insolence and cynicism she gets over you. What is so attractive in her is the diabolical suddenness, the quick transitions, the swift shifting hues. . . . Brrr! And the IOU -- phew! Write it off for lost. We are both great sinners, we'll go halves in our sin. I shall put down to you not two thousand three hundred, but half of it. Mind, tell my wife I was at the tenant's."

Kryukov and the lieutenant buried their heads in the pillows, and broke into laughter; they raised their heads, glanced at one another, and again subsided into their pillows.

"Engaged! A lieutenant!" Kryukov jeered.

"Married!" retorted Sokolsky. "Highly respected! Father of a family!"

At dinner they talked in veiled allusions, winked at one another, and, to the surprise of the others, were continually gushing with laughter into their dinner-napkins. After dinner, still in the best of spirits, they dressed up as Turks, and, running after one another with guns, played at soldiers with the children. In the evening they had a long argument. The lieutenant maintained that it was mean and contemptible to accept a dowry with your wife, even when there was passionate love on both sides. Kryukov thumped the table with his fists and declared that this was absurd, and that a husband who did not like his wife to have property of her own was an egoist and a despot. Both shouted, boiled over, did not understand each other, drank a good deal, and in the end, picking up the skirts of their dressing-gowns, went to their bedrooms. They soon fell asleep and slept soundly.

Life went on as before, even, sluggish and free from sorrow. The shadows lay on the earth, thunder pealed from the clouds, from time to time the wind moaned plaintively, as though to prove that nature, too, could lament, but nothing troubled the habitual tranquillity of these people. Of Susanna Moiseyevna and the IOUs they said nothing. Both of them felt, somehow, ashamed to speak of the incident aloud. Yet they remembered it and thought of it with pleasure, as of a curious farce, which life had unexpectedly and casually played upon them, and which it would be pleasant to recall in old age.

On the sixth or seventh day after his visit to the Jewess, Kryukov was sitting in his study in the morning writing a congratulatory letter to his aunt. Alexandr Grigoryevitch was walking to and fro near the table in silence. The lieutenant had slept badly that night; he woke up depressed, and now he felt bored. He paced up and down, thinking of the end of his furlough, of his fiancée, who was expecting him, of how people could live all their lives in the country without feeling bored. Standing at the window, for a long time he stared at the trees, smoked three cigarettes one after another, and suddenly turned to his cousin.

"I have a favour to ask you, Alyosha," he said. "Let me have a saddle-horse for the day. . . ."

Kryukov looked searchingly at him and continued his writing with a frown.

"You will, then?" asked the lieutenant.

Kryukov looked at him again, then deliberately drew out a drawer in the table, and taking out a thick roll of notes, gave it to his cousin.

"Here's five thousand . . ." he said. "Though it's not my money, yet, God bless you, it's all the same. I advise you to send for post-horses at once and go away. Yes, really!"

The lieutenant in his turn looked searchingly at Kryukov and laughed.

"You've guessed right, Alyosha," he said, reddening. "It was to her I meant to ride. Yesterday evening when the washerwoman gave me that damned tunic, the one I was wearing then, and it smelt of jasmine, why . . . I felt I must go!"

"You must go away."

"Yes, certainly. And my furlough's just over. I really will go to-day! Yes, by Jove! However long one stays, one has to go in the end. . . . I'm going!"

The post-horses were brought after dinner the same day; the lieutenant said good-bye to the Kryukovs and set off, followed by their good wishes.

Another week passed. It was a dull but hot and heavy day. From early morning Kryukov walked aimlessly about the house, looking out of window, or turning over the leaves of albums, though he was sick of the sight of them already. When he came across his wife or children, he began grumbling crossly. It seemed to him, for some reason that day, that his children's manners were revolting, that his wife did not know how to look after the servants, that their expenditure was quite disproportionate to their income. All this meant that "the master" was out of humour.

After dinner, Kryukov, feeling dissatisfied with the soup and the roast meat he had eaten, ordered out his racing droshky. He drove slowly out of the courtyard, drove at a walking pace for a quarter of a mile, and stopped.

"Shall I . . . drive to her . . . that devil?" he thought, looking at the leaden sky.

And Kryukov positively laughed, as though it were the first time that day he had asked himself that question. At once the load of boredom was lifted from his heart, and there rose a gleam of pleasure in his lazy eyes. He lashed the horse. . . .

All the way his imagination was picturing how surprised the Jewess would be to see him, how he would laugh and chat, and come home feeling refreshed. . . .

"Once a month one needs something to brighten one up . . . something out of the common round," he thought, "something that would give the stagnant organism a good shaking up, a reaction . . . whether it's a drinking bout, or . . . Susanna. One can't get on without it."

It was getting dark when he drove into the yard of the vodka distillery. From the open windows of the owner's house came sounds of laughter and singing:

"Brighter than lightning, more burning than flame. . . ." sang a powerful, mellow, bass voice.

"Aha! she has visitors," thought Kryukov.

And he was annoyed that she had visitors.

"Shall I go back?" he thought with his hand on the bell, but he rang all the same, and went up the familiar staircase. From the entry he glanced into the reception hall. There were about five men there -- all landowners and officials of his acquaintance; one, a tall, thin gentleman, was sitting at the piano, singing, and striking the keys with his long, thin fingers. The others were listening and grinning with enjoyment. Kryukov looked himself up and down in the looking-glass, and was about to go into the hall, when Susanna Moiseyevna herself darted into the entry, in high spirits and wearing the same black dress. . . . Seeing Kryukov, she was petrified for an instant, then she uttered a little scream and beamed with delight.

"Is it you?" she said, clutching his hand. "What a surprise!"

"Here she is!" smiled Kryukov, putting his arm round her waist. "Well! Does the destiny of Europe still lie in the hands of the French and the Russians?"

"I'm so glad," laughed the Jewess, cautiously removing his arm. "Come, go into the hall; they're all friends there. . . . I'll go and tell them to bring you some tea. Your name's Alexey, isn't it? Well, go in, I'll come directly. . . ."

She blew him a kiss and ran out of the entry, leaving behind her the same sickly smell of jasmine. Kryukov raised his head and walked into the hall. He was on terms of friendly intimacy with all the men in the room, but scarcely nodded to them; they, too, scarcely responded, as though the places in which they met were not quite decent, and as though they were in tacit agreement with one another that it was more suitable for them not to recognise one another.

From the hall Kryukov walked into the drawing-room, and from it into a second drawing-room. On the way he met three or four other guests, also men whom he knew, though they barely recognised him. Their faces were flushed with drink and merriment. Alexey Ivanovitch glanced furtively at them and marvelled that these men, respectable heads of families, who had known sorrow and privation, could demean themselves to such pitiful, cheap gaiety! He shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and walked on.

"There are places," he reflected, "where a sober man feels sick, and a drunken man rejoices. I remember I never could go to the operetta or the gipsies when I was sober: wine makes a man more good-natured and reconciles him with vice. . . ."

Suddenly he stood still, petrified, and caught hold of the door-post with both hands. At the writing-table in Susanna's study was sitting Lieutenant Alexandr Grigoryevitch. He was discussing something in an undertone with a fat, flabby-looking Jew, and seeing his cousin, flushed crimson and looked down at an album.

The sense of decency was stirred in Kryukov and the blood rushed to his head. Overwhelmed with amazement, shame, and anger, he walked up to the table without a word. Sokolsky's head sank lower than ever. His face worked with an expression of agonising shame.

"Ah, it's you, Alyosha!" he articulated, making a desperate effort to raise his eyes and to smile. "I called here to say good-bye, and, as you see. . . . But to-morrow I am certainly going."

"What can I say to him? What?" thought Alexey Ivanovitch. "How can I judge him since I'm here myself?"

And clearing his throat without uttering a word, he went out slowly.

"Call her not heavenly, and leave her on earth. . . ."

The bass was singing in the hall. A little while after, Kryukov's racing droshky was bumping along the dusty road.

1886

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