CLASSICS TO GO

THE VILLAGE

IVAN ALEKSEEVICH BUNIN

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Ivan Alekseevich Bunin

PART ONE

I

THE great-grandfather of the Krasoffs, known by the manor-house servants under the nickname of “The Gipsy,” was hunted with wolf-hounds by Cavalry Captain Durnovo. The Gipsy had lured his lord-and-master’s mistress away from him. Durnovo gave orders that The Gipsy should be taken out into the fields and placed on a hillock. Then he himself went out there with a pack of hounds and shouted “Tallyho! Go for him!” The Gipsy, who was sitting there in a state of stupor, started to run. But there is no use in running away from wolf-hounds.

The grandfather of the Krasoffs, for some reason or other, was given a letter of enfranchisement. He went off with his family to the town—and soon distinguished himself by becoming a famous thief. He hired a tiny hovel in the Black Suburb for his wife and set her to weaving lace for sale, while he, in company with a petty burgher named Byelokopytoff, roamed about the province robbing churches. At the end of a couple of years he was caught. But at his trial he bore himself in such fashion that his replies to the judges were current for a long time thereafter. He stood before them, it appears, in a velveteen kaftan, with a silver watch and goat-hide boots, making insolent play with his cheek-bones and his eyes and, in the most respectful manner, confessing every one of his innumerable crimes, even the most insignificant: “Yes, sir. Just so, sir.”

The father of the Krasoffs was a petty huckster. He roved about the county, lived for a time in Durnovka, set up a pot-house and a little shop, failed, took to drink, returned to the

town, and soon died. After serving for a while in shops his sons, Tikhon and Kuzma, who were almost of an age, also took to peddling. They drove about in a peasant cart which had a carved front and a roofed, shop-like arrangement in the middle, and shouted in doleful tones: “Wo-omen, here’s merchandise! Wo-omen, here’s merchandise!”

The merchandise consisted of small mirrors, cheap soap, rings, thread, kerchiefs, needles, cracknels—these in the covered shop. The open-body cart contained everything they gathered in: dead cats, eggs, heavy linen, crash, rags. But one day, after having thus travelled about for the space of several years, the brothers came near cutting each other’s throats—in a dispute over the division of the profits, rumour averred—and separated to avoid a catastrophe. Kuzma hired himself to a drover. Tikhon took over a small posting-house on the metalled highway of Vorgol, five versts[1] from Durnovka, and opened a dram-shop and a tiny “popular” shop.—“I deal in small wears tea shugar tubako sigars and so furth.”

II

BY the time Tikhon Hitch was about forty years of age his beard resembled silver with patterns of black enamel. But he was handsome and tall, with a fine figure, as before. He was austere and swarthy of face, slightly pock-marked, with broad, lean shoulders; authoritative and abrupt of speech, quick and supple in his movements. Only—his eyebrows had begun to come closer together and his eyes to flash more frequently and more sharply than before. Business demanded it!

Indefatigably he followed up the rural police on those dull autumnal days when taxes are collected and forced sale follows forced sale. Unweariedly he bought standing grain on the stalk from the landed proprietors and took land from them and from the peasants, in small parcels, not scorning even half a meadow. He lived for a long time with his dumb cook—“A dumb woman can’t betray anything with her chatter!”—and had by her one child, whom she overlay and crushed in her sleep, after which he married an elderly waiting-maid of old Princess Schakhovoy. And on marrying and receiving the dowry he “finished off” the last scion of the impoverished Durnovo family, a fat, affable young nobleman, bald at twenty-five, but possessed of a magnificent chestnut beard. And the peasants fairly grunted with pride when Tikhon took possession of the Durnovo estate—for almost the whole of Durnovka consisted of Krasoffs!

They *sh*-ed and *oh*-ed, also, over the way in which he had cunningly contrived not to ruin himself. He bargained and bought, went to the estate almost every day, kept watch with the eye of a vulture over every hand’s breadth of the land. They uttered admiring exclamations and said: “Yes, there’s nothing to be done with us devils by kindness, you

know! There’s a master for you! You couldn’t have one more just!”

And Tikhon Ilitch dealt with them in the same spirit. When he was in an amiable mood he read them their lesson thus: “It’s all right to live—but not to squander. I shall pluck you if I get the chance! I shall bring you back. But I shall be just. I’m a Russian man, brother.” When in an evil mood, he would say curtly, with eyes blazing: “Pigs! There is not a juster man in the world than I am!” “Pigs, all right—but that’s not me,” the peasant would think, averting his eyes from that gaze. And he would mumble submissively: “Oh, Lord, don’t we know it?” “Yes, you know it, but you have forgotten. I don’t want your property gratis, but bear this in mind: I won’t give you a scrap of what’s mine! There’s that brother of mine: he’s a rascal, a toper, but I would help him if he came and implored me. I call God as my witness that I would help him! But coddle him—! No, take note of that: I do no coddling. I’m no brainless Little Russian, brother!”

And Nastasya Petrovna, who walked like a duck, with her toes turned inward, and waddled, thanks to her incessant pregnancies which always ended up with dead girl-babies—Nastasya Petrovna, a yellow, puffy woman with scanty whitish-blond hair, would groan and back him up: “Okh, you are a simpleton, in my opinion! Why do you bother with him, with that stupid man? Is he a fit associate for you? You just knock some sense into him; ’twill do him no harm. Look at the way he’s straddling with his legs—as if he were a bokhar of emir!”[2] She was “terribly fond” of pigs and fowls, and Tikhon Ilitch began to fatten sucking pigs, turkey chicks, hens, and geese. But his ruling passion was amassing grain. In autumn, alongside his house, which stood with one side turned toward the highway and the other toward the posting-station, the creaking of wheels arose in a groan; the wagon trains turned in from above and below. And in the farmyard horse-traders, peddlers, chicken-vendors, cracknel

peddlers, scythe-vendors, and pilgrims passed the night. Every moment a pulley was squeaking—now on the door of the dram-shop, where Nastasya Petrovna bustled about; now on the approach to the shop, a dark, dirty place, reeking of soap, herrings, rank tobacco, gingerbread flavoured with peppermint, horse-collars, and kerosene. And incessantly there rang out in the dram-shop:

“U-ukh! Your vodka is strong, Petrovna! It has knocked me in the head, devil take it!”

“’Twill make your mouth water, my dear man!”

“Is there snuff in your vodka?”

“Well, now, you fool yourself!”

In the shop the crowd was even more dense.

“Ilitch, weigh me out a pound of ham.”

“This year, brother, I’m so well stocked with ham—so well stocked, thank God!”

“What’s the price?”

“’Tis cheap!”

“Hey, proprietor, have you good tar?”

“Better tar than your grandfather had at his wedding, my good man!”[3]

“What’s the price?”

And it seemed as if, at the Krasoffs’, there were never any other conversation than that about the prices of things: What’s the price of ham, what’s the price of boards, what’s the price of groats, what’s the price of tar?

III

THE abandonment of his hope of having children and the closing of the dram-shops by the government were great events. Tikhon visibly aged when there no longer remained any doubt that he was not to become a father. At first he jested about it: “No sir, I’ll get my way. Without children a man is not a man. He’s only so-so—a sort of spot missed in the sowing.” But later on he was assailed by terror. What did it mean? one overlay her child, the other bore only dead children.

And the period of Nastasya Petrovna’s last pregnancy had been a difficult time. Tikhon Ilitch suffered and raged: Nastasya Petrovna prayed in secret, wept in secret, and was a pitiful sight when, of a night by the light of the shrine-lamp, she slipped out of bed, assuming that her husband was asleep, and began with difficulty to kneel down, touch her brow to the floor as she whispered her prayers, gaze with anguish at the holy pictures, and rise from her knees painfully, like an old woman. Hitherto, before going to bed, she had donned slippers and dressing-gown, said her prayers indifferently, and, as she prayed, taken pleasure in running over the list of her acquaintances and abusing them. Now there stood before the holy picture a simple peasant woman in a short cotton petticoat, white woolen stockings, and a chemise which did not cover her neck and arms, fat like those of an old person.

Tikhon Ilitch had never, from his childhood, liked shrine-lamps, although he had never been willing to confess it, even to himself; nor did he like their uncertain churchly light. All his life there had remained impressed upon his mind that November night when, in the tiny lop-sided hut in the Black Suburb, a shrine-lamp had also burned, peaceful and sweetly-sad, the shadows of its chains barely moving,

while everything around was deathly silent; and on the bench below the holy pictures his father lay motionless with eyes closed, his sharp nose raised, his big purplish-waxen hands crossed on his breast; while by his side, just beyond the tiny window curtained with its red rag, the conscripts marched past with wildly mournful songs and shouts, their accordions squealing discordantly.—Now the shrine-lamp burned uninterruptedly, and Tikhon Ilitch felt as if Nastasya Petrovna were carrying on some sort of secret affair with uncanny powers.

A number of book-hawkers from the Vladimir government halted by the posting-house to bait their horses—with the result that there made its appearance in the house a “New Complete Oracle and Magician, which foretells the future in answer to questions; with Supplement setting forth the easiest methods of telling fortunes by cards, beans, and coffee.” And of an evening Nastasya Petrovna would put on her spectacles, mould a little ball of wax, and set to rolling it over the circles of the “Oracle.” And Tikhon Ilitch would look on, with sidelong glances. But all the answers turned out to be either insulting, menacing, or senseless.

“Does my husband love me?” Nastasya Petrovna would inquire.

And the “Oracle” replied: “He loves you as a dog loves a stick.”

“How many children shall I have?”

“You are fated to die: the field must be cleared of weeds.”

Then Tikhon Ilitch would say: “Give it here. I’11 have a try.” And he would propound the question: “Ought I to start a law-suit with a person whose name I won’t mention?”

But he, likewise, got nonsense for an answer: “Count the teeth in your mouth.”

One day Tikhon Ilitch, when he glanced into the kitchen, saw his wife beside the cradle in which lay the cook's baby. A speckled chicken which was wandering along the window ledge, pecking and catching flies, tapped the glass with its beak; but she sat there on the sleeping-board and, while she rocked the cradle, sang in a pitiful quaver:

"Where lieth my little child?
Where is his tiny bed?
He is in the lofty chamber,
In the painted cradle gay.

Let no one come there to us,
Or knock at the chamber door!
He hath fallen asleep, he resteth
Beneath the canopy dark,
Covered with flowered silk...."

And Tikhon Ilitch's face underwent such a change at that moment that Nastasya Petrovna, as she glanced at him, experienced no confusion, felt no fear, but only fell a-weeping and, brushing away her tears, said softly: "Take me away, for Christ's dear sake, to the Holy Man."

And Tikhon Ilitch took her to Zadonsk. But as he went he was thinking in his heart that God would certainly chastise him because, in the bustle and cares of life, he went to church only for the service on Easter Day, and otherwise lived as if he were a Tatar. Sacrilegious thoughts also wormed their way into his head. He kept comparing himself to the parents of the Saints, who likewise had long remained childless. This was not clever—but he had long since come to perceive that there dwelt within him some one who was more stupid than himself. Before his departure he had received a letter from Mount Athos: "Most God-loving Benefactor, Tikhon Ilitch! Peace be unto you, and salvation,

the blessing of the Lord and the honourable Protection of the All-Sung Mother of God, from her earthly portion, the holy Mount Athos! I have had the happiness of hearing about your good works, and that with love you apportion your mite for the building and adornment of God’s temples and monastic cells. With the years my hovel has reached such a dilapidated condition....” And Tikhon Ilitch sent a ten-ruble banknote to be used for repairing the hovel. The time was long past when he had believed, with ingenuous pride, that rumours concerning him had actually reached as far as Mount Athos, and he knew well enough that far too many hovels on Mount Athos had become dilapidated. Nevertheless, he sent the money.

But even that proved of no avail.

The government monopoly of the liquor trade acted as salt on a raw wound. When the hope of children failed him utterly, the thought occurred ever more frequently to Tikhon Ilitch: “What’s the object of all this convict hard labour, anyway? devil take it!” And his hands began to tremble with rage, his brows to contract and arch themselves, his upper lip to quiver—especially when he uttered the phrase which was incessantly in his mouth: “Bear in mind—!” He continued, as before, to affect youthfulness—wore dandyfied soft boots and an embroidered shirt fastened at one side, Russian style, under a double-breasted short coat. But his beard grew ever whiter, more sparse, more tangled.

And that summer, as if with malicious intent, turned out to be hot and dry. The rye was absolutely ruined. It became a pleasure to whine to the buyers. “I’m closing down my business—shutting up shop!” Tikhon Ilitch said with satisfaction, referring to his liquor trade. He enunciated every word clearly. “The Minister has a fancy for going into trade on his own account, to be sure!”

“Okh, just look at you!” groaned Nastasya Petrovna. “You’re calling down bad luck. You’ll be chased off to a place so far that even the crows don’t drag their bones there!”

“Don’t you worry, ma’am,” Tikhon Ilitch interrupted her brusquely, with a frown. “No, ma’am! You can’t gag every mouth with a kerchief!” And again, enunciating even more sharply, he addressed the customer: “And the rye, sir, is a joy to behold! Bear that in mind—a joy to everybody! By night, sir, if you’ll believe it—by night, sir, even then it can be seen. You step out on the threshold and gaze at the fields by the light of the moon: it’s as sparse as the hair on a bald head. You go out and stare: the fields are shining-naked!”

IV

DURING the Fast of St. Peter Tikhon Ilitch spent four days in the town at the Fair and got still more out of tune, thanks to his worries, the heat, and sleepless nights. Ordinarily he set out for the Fair with great gusto. At twilight the carts were greased and heaped with hay. Behind one, that in which the manager of his farm rode, were hitched the horses or cows destined for sale; in the other, in which the master himself was to ride, were placed cushions and a peasant overcoat. Making a late start, they journeyed squeaking all night long until daybreak. First of all they indulged in friendly discussion and smoking. The men told each other frightful old tales of merchants murdered on the road and at halting places for the night. Then Tikhon Ilitch disposed himself for sleep; and it was extremely pleasant to hear through his dreams the voices of those whom they met, to feel the vigorous swaying of the cart, as if it were constantly descending a hill, and his cheeks slipping deep into a pillow while his cap fell off and the night chill cooled his head. It was agreeable, too, to wake up before sunrise in the rosy, dewy morning, in the midst of the dull-green grain, and to see, far away in the blue lowlands, the town shining as a cheerful white spot, and the gleam of its churches; to yawn mightily, cross himself at the faint sound of the bells, and take the reins from the hands of the half-slumbering old man, who sat relaxed like a child in the morning chill and was as white as chalk in the light of the dawn.

But on this occasion Tikhon Ilitch sent off the carts with his head man and drove himself in a runabout. The night was warm and bright; there was a rosy tone in the moonlight. He drove fast, but became extremely weary. The lights on the Fair buildings, the jail and the hospital, were visible from the steppe at a distance of ten versts as one approached the

town, and it seemed as if one would never reach them—those distant, sleepy lights. And at the posting-house on the Ststchepnoy Square it was so hot, and the fleas bit so viciously, and voices rang out so frequently at the entrance-gate, and the carts rattled so as they drove into the stone-paved courtyard, and the cocks began to screech and the pigeons to start their rumbling coo so early, and the sky to grow white beyond the open windows, that he never closed an eye. He slept little the second night, too, which he tried to pass at the Fair in his cart. The horses neighed, lights blazed in the stalls, people walked and talked all around him; and at dawn, when his eyelids were fairly sticking together with sleep, the bells on the jail and the hospital began to ring. And right over his head the horrible bellow of a cow boomed out. “Might as well be a criminal condemned to hard labour in prison!” was a thought which recurred incessantly during those days and nights. “Struggling—getting all snarled up—and going to destruction over trifles, absurdities!”

The Fair, scattered over the town pasture land for a whole verst, was, as usual, noisy and muddled. Brooms, scythes, wooden tubs with handles, shovels, wheels lay about in heaps. A dull, discordant roar hung over it all—the neighing of horses, the shrilling of children’s whistles, the polkas and marches thundered out by the orchestrions of the merry-go-rounds. An idle, chattering throng of peasant men and women surged about in waves from morning till night on the dusty, dung-strewn alleyways among the carts and stalls, the horses and the cows, the amusement sheds and the eating booths, whence were wafted fetid odours of frying grease. As always, there was a huge throng of horse-dealers, who injected a terrible irritability into all discussion and barter. Blind men and paupers, beggars, cripples on crutches and in carts, filed past in endless bands, chanting their snuffling ballads. The troika team of the rural police

chief moved slowly through the crowd, its bells jingling, restrained by a coachman in a sleeveless velveteen coat and a hat adorned with peacock feathers.

Tikhon Ilitch had many customers. But nothing beyond empty chaffer resulted. Gipsies came, blue-black of face; Jews from the south-west, grey of countenance, red-haired, covered with dust, in long, wide coats of canvas and boots down at the heel; sun-browned members of the gentry class of small estates, in sleeveless peasant over-jackets and caps; the commissary of rural police and the village policeman; the wealthy merchant Safonoff, an old man wearing a sort of overcoat affected by the lower classes, fat, clean-shaven, and smoking a cigar. The handsome hussar officer, Prince Bakhtin, came also, accompanied by his wife in an English walking suit, and Khvostoff, the decrepit hero of the Sevastopol campaign, tall, bony, with large features and a dark, wrinkled face, wearing a long uniform coat, sagging trousers, broad-toed boots, and a big uniform cap with a yellow band beneath which his dyed locks, of a dead dark-brown shade, were combed forward on his temples.

All these people gave themselves the air of being expert judges, talked fluently about colours, paces, discoursed about the horses they owned. The petty landed gentry lied and boasted. Bakhtin did not condescend to speak to Tikhon Ilitch, although the latter rose respectfully at his approach and said: “’Tis a suitable horse for Your Illustrious Highness, sir.” Bakhtin merely fell back a pace as he inspected the horse, smiled gravely into his moustache, which he wore with side-supplements, and exchanged brief suggestions with his wife as he wriggled his leg in his cherry-coloured cavalry breeches.

But Khvostoff, shuffling up to the horse and casting a sidelong fiery glance at it, came to a halt in such a posture that it seemed as if he were on the point of falling down,

elevated his crutch, and for the tenth time demanded in a dull, absolutely expressionless voice: “How much do you ask for him?”

And Tikhon Ilitch was obliged to answer them all. Out of sheer boredom he bought a little book entitled “Oï, Schmul and Rivke: Collection of fashionable farces, puns, and stories, from the wanderings of our worthy Hebrews”—and, as he sat in his cart, he dipped into it frequently. But no sooner did he begin to read: “Iveryboady knows, zhentelmen, zat vee, ze Zhews, iss ferightfully foand of beezness,” than some one hailed him. And Tikhon Ilitch raised his eyes and answered, although with an effort and with clenched jaws.

He grew extremely thin, sunburned, yet pallid, flew into bad tempers, and was conscious of being bored to death and of feeling weak all over. He got his stomach so badly out of order that he had cramps. He was compelled to resort to the hospital; and there he waited two hours for his turn, seated in a resounding corridor, inhaling the repulsive odour of carbolic acid and feeling as if he were not Tikhon Ilitch and a person of consequence, but rather as if he were waiting humbly in the ante-room of his master or of some official. And when the doctor—who resembled a deacon, a red-faced, bright-eyed man in a bob-tailed coat, redolent of soap, with a sniff—applied his cold ear to his chest, he made haste to say that his belly-ache was almost gone, and did not refuse a dose of castor oil simply because he was too timid to do so. When he returned to the Fair ground he gulped down a glass of vodka flavoured with pepper and salt, and began once more to eat sausage, sour black rye bread made of second-rate flour, and to drink tea, raw vodka, and sour cabbage soup—and he was still unable to quench his thirst. His acquaintances advised him to refresh himself with beer, and he went for some. The lame kvas-dealer shouted: “Here’s your fine kvas, the sort that makes

your nose sting! A kopek a glass—prime lemonade!” And Tikhon Ilitch bade the kvas-peddler halt. “He-ere’s your ices!” chanted in a tenor voice a bald, perspiring vendor, a paunch-bellied old man in a red shirt. And Tikhon Ilitch ate, with the little bone spoon, ices which were hardly more than snow, and which made his head ache cruelly.

Dusty, ground to powder by feet, wheels, and hoofs, littered and covered with dung, the pasture was already being deserted—the Fair was dispersing. But Tikhon Ilitch, as if with deliberate intent to spite some one or other, persisted in keeping his unsold horses there in the heat, and sat on and on in his cart. It seemed as if he were overwhelmed not so much by illness as by the spectacle of the great poverty, the vast wretchedness which, from time immemorial, had reigned over this town and its whole county. Lord God, what a country! Black-loam soil over three feet deep! But—what of that? Never did five years pass without a famine. The town was famous throughout all Russia as a grain mart—but not more than a hundred persons in the whole town ate their fill of the grain. And the Fair? Beggars, idiots, blind men, cripples—a whole regiment of them—and such monstrosities as it made one frightened and sick at the stomach to behold!

V

ON a hot, sunny morning Tikhon Ilitch started homeward through the big Old Town. First he drove through the town and the bazaar, past the cathedral, across the shallow little river, which reeked with the sourly fetid odour of the tanyards, and beyond the river, up the hill, through the Black Suburb. In the bazaar he and his brother had once worked in Matorin's shop. Now every one in the bazaar bowed low before him. In the Black Suburb his childhood had been passed. There, halfway up the hill, among the mud huts embedded in the ground, with their black and decaying roofs, in the midst of dung which lay drying in the sun for use as fuel, amid litter, ashes, and rags, it had been his great delight to race, with shrill shouting and whistling, after the poverty-stricken teacher of the county school—a malicious, depraved old man, long since expelled from his post, who wore felt boots summer and winter, under-drawers, and a short overcoat with a beaver collar which was peeling off. He had been known to the town by the peculiar nickname of "the Dog's Pistol."

Not a trace was now left of that mud hut in which Tikhon Ilitch had been born and had grown up. On its site stood a small new house of planking, with a rusty sign over the entrance: "Ecclesiastical Tailor Soboleff." Everything else in the Suburb was precisely as it had always been—pigs and hens in the narrow alleys; tall poles at the gateways, and on each pole a ram's horn; the big pallid faces of the lace-makers peering forth from behind the pots of flowers in the tiny windows; bare-legged little urchins with one suspender over a shoulder, launching a paper snake with a tail of bast fibre; quiet flaxen-haired little girls engaged in their favourite play, burying a doll, beside the mound of earth encircling the house.

On the plain at the crest of the hill, he crossed himself before the cemetery, behind the fence of which, among the trees, was the grave which had once been such a source of terror to him—that of the rich miser Zykoff, which had caved in at the very moment when they were filling it. And, after a moment's reflection, he turned the horse in at the gate of the cemetery.

By the side of that large white gate had been wont to sit uninterruptedly, jingling a little bell to which were attached a handle and a small bag, a squint-eyed monk garbed in a black cassock and boots red with age—an extremely powerful, shaggy, and fierce fellow, to judge by appearances; a drunkard, with a remarkable command of abusive language. No monk was there now. In his place sat an old woman, busy knitting a stocking. She looked like the ancient crone of a fairy tale, with spectacles, a beak, and sunken lips. She was one of the widows who lived in the asylum by the cemetery.

"'Morning, my good woman!" Tikhon Ilitch called out pleasantly, as he hitched his horse to a post near the gate. "Can you look after my horse?"

The old woman rose to her feet, made a deep reverence, and mumbled: "Yes, batiushka."[4]

Tikhon Ilitch removed his cap, crossed himself once more, rolling his eyes upward as he did so before the holy picture of the Assumption of the Mother of God over the gateway, and added: "Are there many of you nowadays?"

"Twelve old women in all, batiushka."

"Well, and do you squabble often?"

"Yes, often, batiushka."

Tikhon Ilitch walked at a leisurely pace among the trees and the crosses along the alley leading to the ancient wooden

church, once painted in ochre. During the Fair he had had his hair cut close and his beard trimmed and shortened, and he was looking much younger. His leanness and sunburn also contributed to the youthfulness of his appearance. The delicate skin shone white on the recently clipped triangles on his temples. The memories of his childhood and youth made him younger; so did his new peaked canvas cap. His face was thoughtful. He glanced from side to side. How brief, how devoid of meaning, was life! And what peace, what repose, was round about, in that sunny stillness within the enclosure of the ancient churchyard! A hot breeze drifted across the crests of the bright trees which pierced the cloudless sky, their foliage made scanty before its season by the torrid heat, their light, transparent shadows cast in waves athwart the stones and monuments. And when it died away the sun once more heated up the flowers and the grass; birds warbled sweetly in the languor; sumptuously-hued butterflies sank motionless upon the hot paths. On one cross Tikhon Ilitch read:

“What terrible quit-rents
Doth Death collect from men!”

But there was nothing awful about the spot. He strolled on, even noticing with considerable satisfaction that the cemetery was growing; that many new and excellent mausoleums had made their appearance among those ancient stones in the shapes of coffins on legs, heavy cast-iron plates, and huge rough crosses, already in process of decay, which now filled it. “Died in the year 1819, on November 7, at five o’clock in the morning”—it was painful to read such inscriptions: death was repulsive at dawn of a stormy autumnal day, in that old county town! But alongside it a marble angel gleamed white through the trees, as he stood there with eyes fixed upon the blue sky; and beneath it, on the mirror-smooth black granite, were cut in gold letters the words: “Blessed are the dead who die in

the Lord.” On the iron monument of some Collegiate Assessor, tinted in rainbow hues by foul weather and the hand of time, one could decipher the verses:

“His Tsar he honourably served,
His neighbour cordially loved,
And was revered of men.”

And these verses struck Tikhon Ilitch as hypocritical. But in this place even a lie was touching. For—where is truth? Yonder in the bushes lies a human jawbone, neglected, looking as if it were made of dirty wax—all that remains of a man. But is it all? Flowers, ribbons, crosses, coffins, and bones in the earth decay—all is death and corruption. But Tikhon Ilitch walked on further and read: “Thus it is in the resurrection of the dead; it is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption.”—“Our darling son, thy memory will never die in our hearts to all eternity!”

His brow furrowed even more severely; he removed his cap and made the sign of the cross. He was pale, and still weak from his illness. He recalled his childhood—his youth—Kuzma. He walked to the far corner of the cemetery where all his relatives were buried—father, mother, the sister who had died when a little girl. The inscriptions spoke touchingly and peacefully of rest, repose; of tenderness towards fathers, mothers, husbands and wives; of a love which, apparently, does not exist and never will exist on this earth; of that devotion to one another and submission to God, that fervent faith in a future life, that meeting once more in another and blessed land, in which one believes only here; and of that equality which death alone confers—of those moments when folk bestow the last kiss upon the lips of the dead beggar as on a brother’s, compare him with kings and prelates, say over him the loftiest and most solemn words.

And there in a distant corner of the enclosure, among bushes of elder which dozed in the parching heat—there

where formerly had been graves, but now were only mounds and hollows, overgrown with grass and white flowers—Tikhon Ilitch saw a fresh little grave, the grave of a child, and on the cross a couplet:

“Softly, leaves: do not rustle,
Do not wake my Kostya dear.”

And as he recalled his own child, crushed in its sleep by the dumb cook, he began to blink back the welling tears.

VI

NO one ever drove on the highway which ran past the cemetery and lost itself among the rolling fields. Now and then some light-footed tramp straggled along it—some young fellow in a faded pink shirt and drawers of parti-coloured patches. But people drove on the country road alongside. Along that country road drove Tikhon Ilitch also. His first encounter was with a dilapidated public carriage which approached at racing speed—provincial cabmen drive wildly!—and in which sat a huntsman, an official of the bank. At his feet lay a spotted setter dog; on his knees rested a gun in its cover; his legs were encased in tall wading-boots, though there had never been any marshes in the county. Next, diving across the dusty hummocks, came a young postman mounted on a bicycle of an ancient model, with an enormous front wheel and a tiny rear one. He frightened the horse, and Tikhon Ilitch gritted his teeth with rage; the rascal ought to be degraded to the ranks of the workingmen! The mid-day sun scorched; a hot breeze was blowing; the cloudless sky became slate-coloured. And, as he meditated upon the brevity and senselessness of life, Tikhon Ilitch turned away with ever-increasing irritation from the dust which whirled along the road, and with ever-increasing anxiety cast sidelong glances at the spindling, prematurely drying stalks of the grain.

Throngs of pilgrims armed with long staffs, tortured by fatigue and the heat, tramped on at a peaceful gait. They made low, meek reverences to Tikhon Ilitch; but their obeisances struck him as shams. “Those fellows meek! I’ll bet they fight among themselves like cats and dogs at their halting-places!” he muttered. Drunken peasants returning from the Fair—red-headed, black-haired, flaxen-haired, but all alike hideous and tattered, and with about ten crowded

into each cart—raised clouds of dust as they whipped up their wretched little horses. As he overtook their rattling carts Tikhon Ilitch shook his head. “Ugh, you roving beggars, may the devil fly away with you.”

One of them, in a print shirt torn to ribbons, lay fast asleep and was bumped about like a corpse, stretched supine with his head thrown back, his beard blood-stained, his nose swollen and clotted with dried blood. Another stumbled as he ran after his cap, which had been blown off by the wind; and Tikhon Ilitch, with malicious delight, lashed him with his whip. Then came a cart filled with sieves, shovels, and peasant women. They sat with their backs to the horses, rattling and bumping about. One had a new child’s cap on her head, worn wrong side before; another was singing with her mouth full of bread; a third flourished her arms and, laughing, shouted after Tikhon Ilitch: “Hey there, uncle, you’ve lost your linch-pin!” And Tikhon Ilitch reined in his horse, let them catch up with him, and lashed this woman, too, with his whip.

Beyond the toll-gate, where the highway turned off to one side, and where the rattling peasant carts fell to the rear, and silence, the wide space and sultriness of the steppe reigned, he felt once more that, in spite of everything, the chief item in the world was Business. He thought with supreme scorn of the landed proprietors, putting on swagger at the Fair—they, with their wretched troika teams! Ekh, and the poverty on every side! The peasants were utterly ruined, with not a scrap left on their impoverished little farms scattered about the country. A master was needed here—a master!

“But you’re not the right master, my good fellow!” he announced to himself with a spiteful grin. “You’re a poor, crazy, landless stick yourself!”