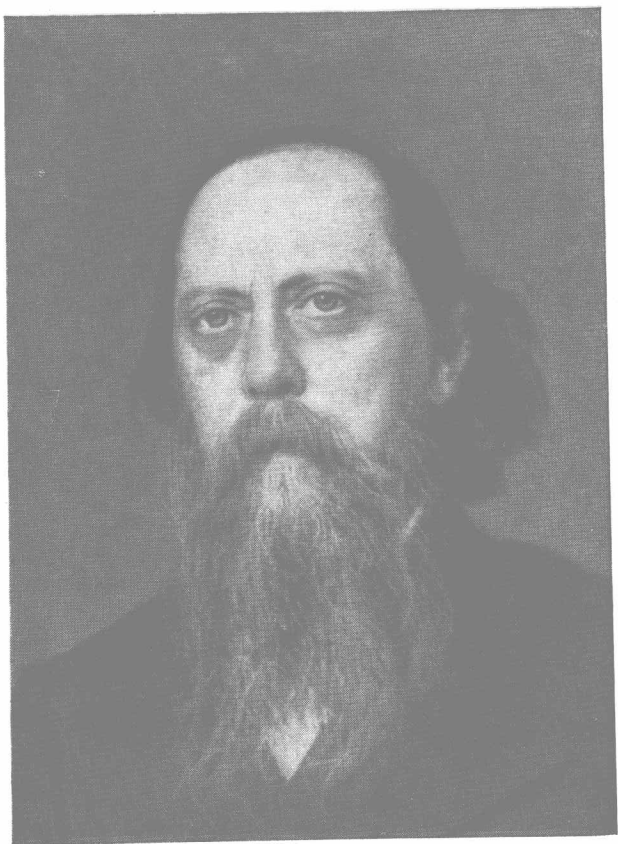


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Golovlyov*

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow



Handwritten signature

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THE FAMILY COURT OF JUSTICE

Anton Vasilyev, the bailiff of a distant estate, was making a report to his lady, Arina Petrovna Golovlyova, about his trip to Moscow where he had gone to collect taxes from her serfs living there. When he had finished and had been given leave to go, he suddenly hesitated with an air of mystery as though he had something else to report, something he was in two minds about putting into words.

Arina Petrovna, who could read her people's inmost thoughts, to say nothing of their slightest gestures, at once scented trouble.

"What else is there?" she asked, staring hard at the bailiff.

"That's all," Anton Vasilyev tried to prevaricate.

"Don't lie—there's something else! I can see it from your eyes!"

Anton Vasilyev, however, could not bring himself to speak, and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Now, what is it?" Arina Petrovna cried peremptorily. "Speak! Don't wriggle ... you turncoat!"

Arina Petrovna liked to give nicknames to members of her domestic and administrative staff. She called Anton Vasilyev a turncoat not because he had ever been caught in some act of perfidy, but because he had a weakness for chatter. The estate he managed had as its centre a big trading village with a number of taverns in it. Anton Vasilyev was fond of drinking a pot of tea there and bragging of his lady's omnipotence—and in doing so said more than he meant to. And as Arina Petrovna was usually engaged in various lawsuits, her bailiff's chatter often disclosed the lady's stratagems before they could be put to the test.

"There is something, that's true ..." Anton Vasilyev muttered at last.

"What? What is it?" Arina Petrovna asked nervously.

Being a woman of imperious character and one endowed with a vivid imagination, she instantly drew up a picture of all sorts of contradictions and oppositions, and she saw it so clearly that she turned pale and jumped up from her chair.

"Stepan Vladimirovich has sold the house in Moscow ..." the bailiff said haltingly.

"Well!"

"He's sold it."

"Why? How? Don't mumble, speak up!"

"Debts, I expect! They don't sell one up for good deeds, that's a fact."

"So it was the police sold it, the court?"

"Must be so. They say the house went for eight thousand at the auction."

Arina Petrovna sank heavily into her chair, her eyes staring at the window. For the first minute she seemed stunned by the news. Had she been told that Stepan Vladimirovich had committed murder, or that the Golovlyov

peasants had rebelled and refused to work for her, or that serfdom was toppling, she would have been less impressed. Her lips moved, her eyes looked into the distance but saw nothing. She did not even see the girl Dunyashka make a dash past the window, covering something with her apron, then whirl round, on suddenly seeing her mistress, and slowly walk back (at another time such behaviour would have led to a regular investigation). At last, however, Arina Petrovna recovered and said:

"That's a nice thing to do!"

Several more minutes of ominous silence followed.

"And so you say the police sold the house for eight thousand?"

"That's right."

"Selling his mother's blessing—the scoundrell!"

Arina Petrovna felt that the news she had just heard required some immediate decision on her part, but she could think of nothing because her mind was a tangle of controversial thoughts. On the one hand, she thought: "The police sold it! But they could not have sold it in a minute! They must have taken an inventory, made a valuation, announced the auction. They sold it for eight thousand, while two years ago she had with her own hands given twelve thousand rubles in hard cash for that very house! Had she known, she might have bought it herself for eight thousand at the auction!" On the other hand, she kept thinking: "The police sold it for eight thousand! His mother's blessing! The scoundrell! To let his mother's blessing go for eight thousand!"

"Who told you?" she asked at last, finally concentrating on the thought that the house had already been sold, and that any hope of acquiring it cheaply was lost to her for ever.

"Ivan Mikhailich, the innkeeper."

"And why didn't he let me know in time?"

"Must have been afraid."

"Afraid! I'll teach him to be afraid! Call him back from Moscow, and the minute he comes—off to the recruiting office to be made a soldier.* Afraid, indeed!"

Serfdom still existed, though the end of it was in sight. Anton Vasilyev had often received the most peculiar orders from his mistress, but the present one was so unexpected that even he felt rather uncomfortable. He could not help thinking of his nickname of "Turncoat." Ivan Mikhailich was a steady, prosperous peasant, and no one could ever imagine him getting into trouble. Besides, he was his bosom friend and kinsman—and now, suddenly, he was to be sent for a recruit simply because he, Anton Vasilyev, like the turncoat that he was, could not hold his tongue.

"Forgive . . . Ivan Mikhailich, please!" he tried to intercede.

"Out with you . . . you conniver!" Arina Petrovna shouted at him in such a voice that he did not think of persisting in his defence of Ivan Mikhailich.

But before I go on with my story I will ask the reader to make a closer acquaintance of Arina Petrovna and her family.

Arina Petrovna was a woman of about sixty, but still vigorous and used to having her own way. Her manner was formidable; she managed the vast Golovlyov estates autocratically, giving account to no one; she lived quietly and economically, almost stingily, making no friends with her neighbours, maintaining good relations with the local authorities, and demanding of her children such obedience that they should ask themselves at every step

* During the time described in this novel soldiers recruited into the army had to serve for a period of 25 years.—*Ed.*

they took, "And what would Mamma say?" Altogether she had an independent, indomitable, and rather shrewish character, these qualities being to a considerable extent fostered by the utter lack of opposition from any member of the Golovlyov family. Her husband was a frivolous man, given to drink (Arina Petrovna liked saying of herself that she was neither a wife nor a widow); some of her children were in government service in Petersburg, others had taken after their father and, being in disfavour, were not allowed to take any part in family decisions. Owing to this state of affairs Arina Petrovna had come to feel lonely early in life, and had indeed completely lost the habit of family life, though the word "family" was always on her lips and ostensibly the only motive for her actions was the anxiety to provide for it.

The head of the family, Vladimir Mikhailich Golovlyov, had been known from his youth up for a shiftless and frolicsome man, and Arina Petrovna, an exceptionally serious-minded and business-like woman, had never found anything likeable in him. He led an idle and useless life, and spent most of his time shut up in his study, imitating the singing of starlings, the crowing of cocks, etc., and composing so-called "libertine verses." In moments of confidence he boasted that he had been a friend of Barkov* and that the latter had actually given him his deathbed blessing. Arina Petrovna took an instant dislike to her husband's poetry, calling it "filthy buffoonery"; and since Vladimir Mikhailich had married chiefly to have a ready audience for his verses, dissensions were, naturally, not long in coming. As time went on they grew in bitterness and intensity, ending on the part of the wife in a complete and contemptuous in-

* I. S. Barkov (1732-1768)—poet and translator, author of pornographic verses and poems circulated in written form.—*Ed.*

difference to her buffoon of a husband, and on the part of the husband in a heartfelt hatred for the wife—a hatred in which, however, there was a considerable element of fear. The husband called the wife “a witch” and “a devil,” and the wife called the husband “a windmill” and “a stringless balalaika.” On these terms they lived together for forty odd years, and it never occurred to either of them that there was anything unnatural in a life such as this.

With the years the mischievousness in Vladimir Mikhailich did not moderate, but on the contrary became even more provoking. In addition to his poetical exercises in Barkov’s style he took to drinking and waylaying housemaids in the corridor. At first Arina Petrovna was disgusted and even upset by her husband’s new diversion (though she suffered more from the affront to her authority than from jealousy as such), but afterwards she dismissed it from her mind and merely watched that the hussies should not bring any vodka to the master. Having said to herself once and for all that her husband was no help to her, she devoted all her energies to one object—enlarging her estate, and, indeed, in the forty years of her married life she succeeded in increasing it tenfold. With amazing patience and shrewdness she watched the estates far and near, ascertained, on the quiet, how their owners stood with the Trustees’ Council,* and always descended upon auction sales like a bolt from the blue. In the whirl of this fanatic pursuit of acquisition Vladimir Mikhailich retreated further and further into the background and at last became quite a recluse. At the time when our story begins he was a decrepit old man who hardly ever left his bed, and on

* *Trustees’ Council*—a body caring for orphans and widows of noble birth. It had its own loan-bank which lent money against estates and other property. In case of failure to return the loan on the due date, the property was sold by auction.—*Ed.*

the rare occasions when he did so it was solely in order to thrust his head through the half-open door of his wife's room and shout, "You devil!"—and disappear again.

Arina Petrovna was scarcely luckier in her children. Her nature was too independent, she was too much of a bachelor, so to speak, to regard children as anything but a burden. She only breathed freely when she was alone with her accounts and plans of acquisition, when no one interrupted her business conversations with bailiffs, village elders, housekeepers, etc. Children were to her merely a part of the preordained framework of life, against which she did not think she had the right to rebel though they did not stir a single chord of her inner being, which was entirely taken up with the numberless details of practical life. She had four children: three sons and a daughter. Of her eldest son and of her daughter she did not even like to speak; she was more or less indifferent to her youngest son, and only for the second, Porphyry, she had some feeling, though it was more akin to fear than affection.

Her eldest son, Stepan Vladimirovich, with whom the present story is chiefly concerned, was known in his family under the names of Styopka the blockhead and Styopka the rascal. He had very early fallen into disfavour, and had from a child been something between a pariah and a clown in the family. Unfortunately he was a gifted boy who absorbed quickly and too readily the impressions of his environment. He inherited from his father his inexhaustible mischievousness, and from his mother the faculty of quickly detecting people's weak points. Owing to his first characteristic feature he soon became his father's favourite—which made his mother dislike him all the more. Often, while Arina Petrovna was away on business, the father and the growing son would withdraw to the study adorned with a portrait of

Barkov, read libertine verses and gossip, the "witch," i.e., Arina Petrovna, being the chief subject of their abuse. But the "witch" seemed to scent what they were up to: she would quietly drive up to the house, tiptoe to the study door and listen to the lively talk. Styopka the blockhead would be severely whipped there and then, but it had no effect; he was insensitive both to beatings and to admonitions, and in half an hour's time was at his pranks again. He would either cut the maid Anyutka's kerchief to pieces or put some flies into sleeping Vasyutka's mouth, or would steal into the kitchen and there pinch a pie (Arina Petrovna kept her children half-starved for the sake of economy), which, it is true, he would immediately share with his brothers.

"You ought to be killed!" Arina Petrovna repeated to him constantly. "I'll kill you and won't have to answer for it! The tsar himself wouldn't punish me for it!"

This constant humiliation could not but have its effect on the boy's soft, easy-going nature. Instead of making him embittered or rebellious, it developed a servile character, one given to clowning, with a complete lack of prudence or of any sense of proportion. Such people fall easy prey to any influence, and may become anything: drunkards, beggars, clowns, and even criminals.

At the age of twenty Stepan Golovlyov finished the course of studies in one of the Moscow gymnasiums and entered the University. But his student days were bitter. In the first place, his mother allowed him just enough money not to starve to death; secondly, he had not the slightest inclination to work, but instead he had in him a cursed giftedness which expressed itself chiefly in a talent for mimicking; thirdly, he suffered from a constant craving for company, and could not bear to be by himself for a moment. And so he took up the easy part of a hanger-on and *piqueassiette*; and his readiness to fall in with every prank soon made him popular with