

ACT II

Same hut. Morning

Martha and Akulina. Michael is asleep

MARTHA [takes hatchet] I must go and chop some firewood.

AKULÍNA [with a pail] He'd have beaten you black and blue yesterday, had it not been for that fellow. I don't see him. Has he gone? I suppose he has. [Exit one after the other].

MICHAEL [climbs down from the top of the oven] Just look, the sun's already quite high. [Puts on his boots] She must have gone to fetch water with mother. How my head aches! I won't do it again; the devil take it! [Crosses himself before the icon, prays, and then washes his hands and face] I'll go and harness.

Enter Martha with firewood.

MARTHA. And yesterday's beggar? Has he gone?

MICHAEL. Must have gone. Can't see him.

MARTHA. Oh well, let him go. He seemed a clever chap though.

MICHAEL. He took your part!

MARTHA. What of that!

Michael puts on his coat.

MARTHA. And the tea and sugar? Did you put them away last night, eh?

MICHAEL. I thought you did.

Enter Akulína with a pail of water.

MARTHA [to Akulína] Mother, have you taken the parcel?

AKULÍNA. No, I know nothing about it. I haven't seen it.

MARTHA. Last night, I put it on the window-sill.

AKULÍNA. Yes, I saw it there.

MARTHA. Where can it be? [They look for it].

AKULÍNA. Dear me, what a shame!

Enter Neighbour.

NEIGHBOUR. Well Michael Tikhónych, are we to go for the wood?

MICHAEL. Yes, of course. I'm just going to harness; but you see we've lost something.

NEIGHBOUR. Dear me! What is it?

MARTHA. Why, you see, my old man brought a parcel from town yesterday, with tea and sugar in it, and I put it down here on the window-sill and didn't remember to put it away; and now it's gone.

MICHAEL. And we're committing the sin of suspecting a tramp who spent the night here.

NEIGHBOUR. What sort of tramp?

MARTHA. Well, he's rather thin and has no beard.

MICHAEL. His coat's all in rags.

NEIGHBOUR. Curly hair and rather hooked nose?

MICHAEL. Yes, yes!

NEIGHBOUR. I've just met him, and wondered why he was stepping out so

fast.

MICHAEL. It must be him. Where was he?

NEIGHBOUR. I don't think he can have crossed the bridge yet.

MICHAEL [snatches up his cap and goes out quickly, followed by the Neighbour] I'll catch the knave. It's him.

MARTHA. Oh, what a shame, what a shame! It's surely him.

AKULÍNA. And suppose it's not. It happened once, some twenty years ago, that they accused a man of having stolen a horse. A crowd collected. One says: "I myself saw him catching it." Another says he saw him leading it. It was a big piebald horse, easily noticed. All the people began searching for it, and in the forest they found the lad. "It's you," they say. He protests and swears it was not him. They say: "What's the good of listening to him; the women said quite certainly it's him." Then he said something rude. George Lapúshkin (he's dead now) was a hot-tempered man. He dashed at him slap bang, and struck him on the mouth. "It was you," said he, and hit out at him. Then all the others fell on him and began beating him with sticks and fists till they killed him. And what do you think!... Next day the real thief was found. The lad they killed had only gone into the forest to choose a tree to cut down.

MARTHA. Yes, of course, we may be sinning against him. He has come down

very low, but seemed a good fellow.

AKULÍNA. Yes, he has sunk very low. One can't expect much from the likes of him.

MARTHA. They're shouting. I expect they're bringing him back.

Enter Michael, Neighbour, an old man and a lad, pushing the Tramp before them.

MICHAEL [with the parcel in his hands, excitedly to his wife] It was found on him. [To Tramp] You thief! You dog!

AKULÍNA [to Martha] It's him, poor soul. See how he hangs his head.

MARTHA. It seems it was himself he spoke about yesterday that grabs anything that's handy when he's had some drink.

TRAMP. I'm not a thief; I'm an expropriator. I am a worker and must live. You can't understand it. Do what you like with me.

NEIGHBOUR. Take him to the village Elder or straight to the police!

TRAMP. I tell you, do whatever you like. I am not afraid, and am ready to suffer for my convictions. If you were educated you would understand.

MARTHA [to her husband] Suppose we let him go, in God's name. We've got the parcel back. Let him go and let's not commit another sin.

MICHAEL [repeating] "Another sin!" Taken to teaching? One wouldn't know what to do without you, eh?

MARTHA. Why not let him go?

MICHAEL. "Let him go!" One knows what to do without you, you fool. "Let him go!" Go he may, but he must hear a word or two so that he should feel. [To Tramp] Well then, listen, you sir, to what I have to say to you. Though you are in a very low state, still you have done very wrong--very wrong. Another man would have caved your ribs in, and have taken you to the police; but I will only say this. You've done wrong, as wrong as may be; only you are in a very bad way and I don't want to hurt you. [Pauses. Everyone is silent. Then he continues solemnly] Go, and God be with you, and do not do it again. [Looks at his wife] And you want to teach me!

NEIGHBOUR. You shouldn't, Michael; oh, you should not. You're encouraging that sort of thing.

MICHAEL [the parcel still in his hand] Whether I should or not is my business. [To his wife] And you tried to teach me! [Stops, looks at the parcel, then at his wife, and gives it to the Tramp with decision] Take it, you can drink it on the way. [To wife] And you wanted to teach me!

[To Tramp] Go, you've been told to go. Then go, and no palavering.

TRAMP [takes parcel. Silence] You think I don't understand. [His voice trembles] I fully understand. Had you beaten me like a dog, it would have felt less hard. Don't I understand what I am? I am a rascal, a degenerate, I mean. Forgive me for the Lord's sake. [Sobs, throws the parcel on the table, and goes out hurriedly].

MARTHA. A good thing he didn't take the tea, or we should have had none to drink.

MICHAEL [to wife] And you wanted to teach me!

NEIGHBOUR. How he cried, poor soul.

AKULÍNA. He too was a man.