

THE SINGERS

By Ivan Turgenev (translated by Constance Garnett)

THE SMALL village of Kolotovka once belonged to a lady known in the neighbourhood by the nickname of Skinflint, in allusion to her keen business habits (her real name is lost in oblivion), but has of late years been the property of a German from Petersburg. The village lies on the slope of a barren hill, which is cut in half from top to bottom by a tremendous ravine. It is a yawning chasm, with shelving sides hollowed out by the action of rain and snow, and it winds along the very centre of the village street; it separates the two sides of the unlucky hamlet far more than a river would do, for a river could, at least, be crossed by a bridge. A few gaunt willows creep timorously down its sandy sides; at the very bottom, which is dry and yellow as copper, lie huge slabs of argillaceous rock. A cheerless position, there's no denying, yet all the surrounding inhabitants know the road to Kolotovka well; they go there often, and are always glad to go.

At the very summit of the ravine, a few paces from the point where it starts as a narrow fissure in the earth, there stands a small square hut. It stands alone, apart from all the others. It is thatched, and has a chimney; one window keeps watch like a sharp eye over the ravine, and on winter evenings when it is lighted from within, it is seen far away in the dim frosty fog, and its twinkling light is the guiding star of many a peasant on his road. A blue board is nailed up above the door; this hut is a tavern, called the "Welcome Resort." Spirits are sold here probably no cheaper than the usual price, but it is far more frequented than any other establishment of the same sort in the neighbourhood. The explanation of this is to be found in the tavern-keeper, Nikolai Ivanich.

Nikolai Ivanich--once a slender, curly-headed and rosy-cheeked young fellow, now an excessively stout, grizzled man with a fat face, sly and good-natured little eyes, and a shiny forehead, with wrinkles like lines drawn all over it--has lived for more than twenty years in Kolotovka. Nikolai Ivanich is a shrewd, acute fellow, like the majority of tavern-keepers. Though he makes no conspicuous effort to please or to talk to people, he has the art of attracting and keeping customers, who find it particularly pleasant to sit at his bar under the placid and genial, though alert eye of the phlegmatic host. He has a great deal of common sense; he thoroughly understands the landowner's conditions of life, the peasant's, and the townsman's. He could give sensible advice on difficult points, but, like a cautious man and an egoist, prefers to stand aloof, and at most--and that only in the case of his favourite customers--by remote hints, dropped, as it were, unintentionally, to lead them into the true way. He is an authority on everything that is of interest or importance to a Russian: on horses and cattle, on timber, bricks, and crockery, on woollen stuffs and on leather, on songs and dances. When he has no customers, he is usually sitting like a sack on the ground before the door of his hut, his thin legs tucked under him, exchanging a friendly greeting with every passer-by. He has seen a great deal in his time: many a score of petty landowners, who used to come to him for spirits, he has seen pass away before him; he knows everything that is done for a hundred miles round, and never gossips, never gives a sign of knowing what is unsuspected by the most keen-sighted police officer. He keeps his own counsel, laughs, and makes his glasses ring. His neighbours respect him; the civilian general Shcherepetenko, the landlord highest in rank in the district, gives him a condescending nod whenever he drives past his little house. Nikolai Ivanich is a man of influence; he made a notorious horse-stealer return a horse he had taken from the stable of one of his friends; he brought the peasants of a neighbouring village to their senses when they refused to accept a new overseer, and so on. It must not be imagined, though, that he does this from love of justice, from devotion to his neighbour--no! he simply tries to prevent anything that might, in any way, interfere with his ease and comfort. Nikolai Ivanich is married, and has children. His wife, a smart, sharp-nosed and keen-eyed townswoman, has grown somewhat stout of late years, like her husband. He relies on her in everything, and she keeps the key of the cash-box. Drunken brawlers are afraid of her: she does not like them; they bring little profit and make a great deal of noise; those who are taciturn and surly in their cups are more to her taste. Nikolai Ivanich's children are still small; the first all died, but those that are left take after their parents; it is a pleasure to look at their intelligent, healthy little faces.

It was an insufferably hot day in July when, slowly dragging my feet along, I went up alongside the Kolotovka ravine with my dog towards the Welcome Resort. The sun blazed, as it were, fiercely in the sky, baking the parched earth relentlessly; the air was thick with stifling dust. Glossy crows and ravens with gaping beaks looked

plaintively at the passers-by, as though asking for sympathy; only the sparrows did not droop, but, pluming their feathers, twittered more vigorously than ever as they quarrelled among the hedges, or flew up all together from the dusty road and hovered in grey clouds over the green hempfields. I was tormented by thirst. There was no water near: in Kolotovka, as in many other villages of the steppes, the peasants, having no spring or well, drink a sort of thin mud out of the pond. For no one could call that repulsive beverage water. I wanted to ask for a glass of beer or kvas at Nikolai Ivanich's.

It must be confessed that at no time of the year does Kolotovka present a very cheering spectacle; but it has a particularly depressing effect when the relentless rays of a dazzling July sun pour down full upon the brown, tumble-down roofs of the houses and the deep ravine, and the parched, dusty common over which the thin, long-legged hens are straying hopelessly, and the remains of the old manor house, now a hollow, grey framework of aspen-wood, with holes instead of windows, overgrown with nettles, wormwood, and rank grass, and the pond black, as though charred, and covered with goose feathers, with its edge of half-dried mud, and its broken-down dyke, near which, on the finely trodden, ash-like earth, sheep, breathless and gasping with the heat, huddle dejectedly together, their heads drooping with weary patience, as though waiting for this insufferable heat to pass at last. With weary steps I drew near Nikolai Ivanich's dwelling, arousing in the village children the usual wonder manifested in a concentrated, meaningless stare, and in the dogs an indignation expressed in such hoarse and furious barking that it seemed as if it were tearing their very entrails, and left them breathless and choking, when suddenly in the tavern doorway there appeared a tall peasant without a cap, in a frieze cloak, girt about below his waist with a blue handkerchief. He looked like a house-serf; thick grey hair stood up in disorder above his withered and wrinkled face. He was calling to someone hurriedly, waving his arms, which obviously were not quite under his control. It could be seen that he had been drinking.

"Come, come along!" he stammered, raising his shaggy eyebrows with an effort. "Come, Blinkard, come along! Ah, brother, how you creep along, 'pon my word! It's too bad, brother. They're waiting for you within, and here you crawl along. Come."

"Well, I'm coming, I'm coming!" called a jarring voice, and from behind a hut a little, short, fat, lame man came into sight. He wore a rather tidy cloth coat, pulled half on, and a high pointed cap right over his brows, which gave his round plump face a sly and comic expression. His little yellow eyes moved restlessly about, his thin lips wore a continual forced smile, while his sharp, long nose peered forward saucily in front like a rudder. "I'm coming, my dear fellow." He went hobbling towards the tavern. "What are you calling me for? Who's waiting for me?"

"What am I calling you for?" repeated the man in the frieze coat reproachfully. "You're a queer fish, Blinkard: we call you to come to the tavern, and you ask what for? Here are honest folks all waiting for you: Yakov the Turk, and the Wild Master, and the booth-keeper from Zhizdra. Yakov's got a bet on with the booth-keeper: the stake's a pot of beer--for the one that does best, sings the best, I mean . . . do you see?"

"Is Yakov going to sing?" said the man addressed as Blinkard, with lively interest. "But isn't it your humbug, Gabbler?"

"I'm not humbugging," answered the Gabbler with dignity; "it's you are crazy. I should think he would sing since he's got a bet on it, you precious innocent, you noodle, Blinkard!"

"Well, come in, simpleton!" retorted the Blinkard.

"Then give us a kiss at least, lovey," stammered the Gabbler, opening wide his arms.

"Get out, you great softy!" responded the Blinkard contemptuously, giving him a poke with his elbow, and both, stooping, entered the low doorway.

The conversation I had overheard roused my curiosity exceedingly. More than once rumours had reached me of Yakov the Turk as the best singer in the vicinity, and here was an opportunity all at once of hearing him in competition with another master of the art. I quickened my steps and went into the house.

Few of my readers have probably had an opportunity of getting a good view of any village taverns, but we hunters go everywhere. They are constructed on an exceedingly simple plan. They usually consist of a dark outer shed, and an inner room with a chimney, divided in two by a partition, behind which none of the customers have a right to go. In this partition there is a wide opening cut above a broad oak table. At this table or bar the spirits are served. Sealed up bottles of various sizes stand on the shelves, right opposite the opening. In the front part of the room, devoted to customers, there are benches, two or three empty barrels, and a corner table. Village taverns are for the most part rather dark, and you hardly ever see on their wainscotted walls any of the glaring cheap prints which few huts are without.

When I went into the Welcome Resort, a fairly large party were already assembled there.

In his usual place behind the bar, almost filling up the entire opening in the partition, stood Nikolai Ivanich in a striped print shirt; with a lazy smile on his full face, he poured out with his plump white hand two glasses of spirits for the Blinkard and the Gabbler as they came in; behind him, in a corner near the window, could be seen his sharp-eyed wife. In the middle of the room was standing Yakov the Turk, a thin, graceful fellow of three-and-twenty, dressed in a long skirted coat of blue nankin. He looked a smart factory-hand, and could not, to judge by his appearance, boast of very good health. His hollow cheeks, his large, restless grey eyes, his straight nose, with its delicate mobile nostrils, his pale-brown curls brushed back over the sloping white brow, his full but beautiful, expressive lips, and his whole face betrayed a passionate and sensitive nature. He was in a state of great excitement; he blinked, his breathing was hurried, his hands shook, as though in fever, and he was really in a fever--that sudden fever of excitement which is so well known to all who have to speak and sing before an audience. Near him stood a man of about forty, with broad shoulders and broad jaws, with a low forehead, narrow Tartar eyes, a short flat nose, a square chin, and shining black hair, coarse as bristles. The expression of his face--a swarthy face, with a sort of leaden hue in it--and especially of his pale lips, might almost have been called savage, if it had not been so still and dreamy. He hardly stirred a muscle; he only looked slowly about him like a bull under the yoke. He was dressed in a sort of surtout, not over new, with smooth brass buttons; an old black silk handkerchief was twisted round his immense neck. He was called the Wild Master. Right opposite him, on a bench under the holy images, was sitting Yakov's rival, the booth-keeper from Zhizdra; he was a short, stoutly built man of about thirty, pockmarked and curly-headed, with a blunt, turn-up nose, lively brown eyes, and a scanty beard. He looked keenly about him, and, sitting with his hands under him, he kept carelessly swinging his legs and tapping with his feet, which were encased in stylish top-boots with a coloured edging. He wore a new thin coat of grey cloth, with a plush collar, in sharp contrast with the crimson shirt below, buttoned close across the chest. In the opposite corner, to the right of the door, a peasant sat at the table in a narrow, shabby smock-frock, with a huge rent on the shoulder. The sunlight fell in a narrow, yellowish streak through the dusty panes of the two small windows, but it seemed as if it struggled in vain with the habitual darkness of the room; all the objects in it were dimly, as it were, patchily lighted up. On the other hand, it was almost cool in the room, and the sense of stifling heat dropped off me like a weary load directly I crossed the threshold.

My entrance, I could see, was at first somewhat disconcerting to Nikolai Ivanich's customers; but observing that he greeted me as a friend, they were reassured, and took no more notice of me. I asked for some beer and sat down in the corner, near the peasant in the ragged smock.

"Well, well," piped the Gabbler, suddenly draining a glass of spirits at one gulp and accompanying his exclamation with the strange gesticulations, without which he seemed unable to utter a single word; "what are we waiting for? If we're going to begin, then begin. Hey, Yakov?"

"Begin, begin," chimed in Nikolai Ivanich approvingly.

"Let's begin, by all means," observed the booth-keeper coolly, with a self-confident smile; "I'm ready."

"And I'm ready," Yakov pronounced in a voice thrilled with excitement.

"Well, begin, lads," whined the Blinkard. But, in spite of the unanimously expressed desire, neither began; the booth-keeper did not even get up from the bench--they all seemed to be waiting for something.

"Begin!" said the Wild Master sharply and sullenly. Yakov started. The booth-keeper pulled down his girdle and cleared his throat.

"But who's to begin?" he inquired in a slightly changed voice addressing the Wild Master, who still stood motionless in the middle of the room, his stalwart legs wide apart and his powerful arms thrust up to the elbow into his breeches pockets.

"You, you, booth-keeper," stammered the Gabbler; "you, to be sure, brother."

The Wild Master looked at him from under his brows. The Gabbler gave a faint squeak, in confusion looked away at the ceiling, twitched his shoulder, and said no more.

"Cast lots," the Wild Master pronounced emphatically; "and the pot on the table."

Nikolai Ivanich bent down, and with a gasp picked up the pot of beer from the floor and set it on the table.

The Wild Master glanced at Yakov and said, "Come!"

Yakov fumbled in his pockets, took out a kopek, and marked it with his teeth. The booth-keeper pulled from under the skirts of his long coat a new leather purse, deliberately untied the string, and shaking out a quantity of small change into his hand, picked out a new kopek. The Gabbler held out his dirty cap, with its broken peak hanging loose; Yakov dropped his kopek in, and the booth-keeper his.

"You must pick out one," said the Wild Master, turning to the Blinkard.

The Blinkard smiled complacently, took the cap in both hands, and began shaking it.

For an instant a profound silence reigned; the kopeks clinked faintly, jingling against each other. I looked round attentively; every face wore an expression of intense expectation; the Wild Master himself showed signs of uneasiness; my neighbour even, the peasant in the tattered smock, craned his neck inquisitively. The Blinkard put his hand into the cap and took out the booth-keeper's kopek; everyone drew a long breath. Yakov flushed, and the booth-keeper passed his hand over his hair.

"There, I said you'd begin," cried the Gabbler; "didn't I say so?"

"There, there, don't cluck," remarked the Wild Master contemptuously. "Begin," he went on, with a nod to the booth-keeper.

"What song am I to sing?" asked the booth-keeper, beginning to be nervous.

"What you choose," answered the Blinkard; "whatever you like."

"What you choose, to be sure," Nikolai Ivanich chimed in, slowly folding his hands on his breast, "you're quite at liberty about that. Sing what you like; only sing well; and we'll give a fair decision afterwards."

"A fair decision, of course," put in the Gabbler, licking the edge of his empty glass.

"Let me clear my throat a bit, fellows," said the booth-keeper, fingering the collar of his coat.

"Come, come, no dilly-dallying--begin!" protested the Wild Master, and he looked down.

The booth-keeper thought a minute, shook his head, and stepped forward. Yakov's eyes were riveted upon him.

But before I enter upon a description of the contest itself, I think it will not be amiss to say a few words about each of the personages taking part in my story. The lives of some of them were known to me already when I met them in the Welcome Resort; I collected some facts about the others later on.

Let us begin with the Gabbler. This man's real name was Evgraf Ivanov; but no one in the whole neighbourhood knew him as anything but the Gabbler, and he himself referred to himself by that nickname, so well did it fit him. Indeed, nothing could have been more appropriate to his insignificant, ever-restless features; he was a dissipated, unmarried house-serf, whose own masters had long ago got rid of him, and who, without any employment, without earning a kopek, found means to get drunk every day at other people's expense. He had a great number of acquaintances who treated him to drinks of spirits and tea, though they could not have said why they did so themselves; for, far from being entertaining in company, he bored everyone with his meaningless chatter, his insufferable familiarity, his spasmodic gestures and incessant, unnatural laugh. He could neither sing nor dance; he had never said a clever, or even a sensible thing in his life; he chattered away, telling lies about everything--a regular Gabbler! And yet not a single drinking party for thirty versts around took place without his lank figure turning up among the guests; so that they were used to him by now, and put up with his presence as a necessary evil. They all, it is true, treated him with contempt; but the Wild Master was the only one who knew how to keep his foolish sallies in check.

The Blinkard was not in the least like the Gabbler. His nickname, too, suited him, though he was no more given to blinking than other people; it is a well-known fact that the Russian peasants have a talent for finding good nicknames. In spite of my endeavours to get more detailed information about this man's past, many passages in his life have remained spots of darkness to me, and probably to many other people; episodes buried, as the bookmen say, in the darkness of oblivion. I could only find out that he was once a coachman in the service of an old childless lady; that he had run away with three horses he was in charge of; had been lost for a whole year, and no doubt, convinced by experience of the drawbacks and hardships of a wandering life, he had gone back, a cripple, and flung himself at his mistress's feet. He succeeded in a few years in smoothing over his offence by his exemplary conduct, and, gradually getting higher in her favour, at last gained her complete confidence, was made a bailiff, and on his mistress's death, turned out--in what way was never known--to have received his freedom. He got admitted into the class of tradesmen; rented patches of market-garden from the neighbours; grew rich, and now was living in ease and comfort. He was a man of experience, who knew on which side his bread was buttered; was more actuated by prudence than by either good or ill nature; had knocked about, understood men, and knew how to turn them to his own advantage. He was cautious, and at the same time enterprising, like a fox; though he was as fond of gossip as an old woman, he never let out his own affairs, while he made everyone else talk freely of theirs. He did not affect to be a simpleton, though, as so many crafty men of his sort do; indeed it would have been difficult for him to take anyone in, in that way; I have never seen a sharper, keener pair of eyes than his tiny cunning "peepers," as they call them in Orel. They were never simply looking about; they were always looking one up and down and through and through. The Blinkard would sometimes ponder for weeks together over some apparently simple undertaking, and again he would suddenly decide on a desperately bold line of action, which one would fancy would bring him to ruin. But it would be sure to turn out all right; everything would go smoothly. He was lucky, and believed in his own luck, and believed in omens. He was exceedingly superstitious in general. He was not liked, because he would have nothing much to do with anyone, but he was respected. His whole family consisted of one little son, whom he idolized, and who, brought up by such a father, is likely to get on in the world. "Little Blinkard'll be his father over again," is said of him already in undertones by the old men, as they sit on their mud walls gossiping on summer evenings, and every one knows what that means; there is no need to say more.

As to Yakov the Turk and the booth-keeper, there is no need to say much about them. Yakov, called the Turk because he actually was descended from a Turkish woman, a prisoner from the war, was by nature an artist in every sense of the word, and by calling, a ladler in a paper factory belonging to a merchant. As for the booth-keeper, his career, I must own, I know nothing of; he struck me as being a smart townsman of the tradesman class, ready to turn his hand to anything. But the Wild Master calls for a more detailed account.

The first impression the sight of this man produced on you was a sense of coarse, heavy, irresistible power. He was clumsily built, "all in one piece," as they say among us, but there was an air of triumphant vigour about him, and--strange to say--his bear-like figure was not without a certain grace of its own, proceeding, perhaps, from his absolutely placid confidence in his own strength. It was hard to decide at first to what class this Hercules belonged: he did not look like a house-serf, nor a townsman, nor an impoverished clerk out of work, nor a small ruined landlord, such as takes to being a huntsman or a fighting man; he was, in fact, quite individual. No one

knew where he came from or what brought him into our district; it was said that he came of freeholder stock, and had once been in the government service somewhere, but nothing positive was known about this; and indeed there was no one from whom one could learn--certainly not from him; he was the most silent and morose of men. So much so that no one knew for certain what he lived on; he followed no trade, visited no one, associated with scarcely anyone; yet he had money to spend; little enough, it is true, still he had some. In his behaviour he was not exactly retiring--retiring was not a word that could be applied to him: he lived as though he noticed no one about him, and cared for no one. The Wild Master (that was the nickname they had given him: his real name was Pervlesov) enjoyed an immense influence in the whole district; he was obeyed with eager promptitude, though he had no kind of right to give orders to anyone, and did not himself evince the slightest pretension to authority over the people with whom he came into casual contact. He spoke--they obeyed: strength always has an influence of its own. He scarcely drank at all, had nothing to do with women, and was passionately fond of singing. There was much that was mysterious about this man; it seemed as though vast forces sullenly reposed within him, knowing, as it were, that once roused, once bursting free, they were bound to crush him and everything they came in contact with; and I am greatly mistaken if, in this man's life, there had not been some such outbreak; if it was not owing to the lessons of experience, to a narrow escape from ruin, that he now kept himself so tightly in hand. What especially struck me in him was the combination of a sort of inborn natural ferocity with an equally inborn generosity--a combination I have never met in any other man.

And so the booth-keeper stepped forward, and, half shutting his eyes, began singing in high falsetto. He had a fairly sweet and pleasant voice, though rather hoarse; he played with his voice like a wood-lark, twisting and turning it in incessant roulades and trills up and down the scale, continually returning to the highest notes, which he held and prolonged with special care. Then he would break off, and again suddenly take up the first motive with a sort of go-ahead daring. His modulations were at times rather bold, at times rather comical; they would have given a connoisseur great satisfaction, and have made a German furiously indignant. He was a Russian *tenore di grazia*, *ténor léger*. He sang a song to a lively dance-tune, the words of which, all that I could catch through the endless maze of embellishments, ejaculations and repetitions, were as follows:

*A tiny patch of land, young lass,
I'll plough for thee,
And tiny crimson flowers, young lass,
I'll sow for thee.*

He sang; all listened to him with great attention. He seemed to feel that he had to do with really musical people, and therefore was exerting himself to do his best. And they really are musical in our part of the country; the village of Sergievskoye on the Orel highroad is deservedly noted throughout Russia for its harmonious chorus-singing. The booth-keeper sang for a long while without evoking much enthusiasm in his audience; he lacked the support of a chorus; but at last, after one particularly bold flourish, which set even the Wild Master smiling, the Gabbler could not refrain from a shout of delight. Everyone was roused. The Gabbler and the Blinkard began joining in in an undertone and exclaiming, "Bravely done!. . . Take it, you rogue!. . . Sing it out, you serpent! Hold it! That shake again, you dog, you!. . . May Herod confound your soul!" and so on. Nikolai Ivanich behind the bar was nodding his head from side to side approvingly. The Gabbler at last was swinging his legs, tapping with his feet and twitching his shoulder, while Yakov's eyes fairly glowed like coal, and he trembled all over like a leaf, and smiled nervously. The Wild Master alone did not change countenance, and stood motionless as before; but his eyes, fastened on the booth-keeper, looked somewhat softened, though the expression of his lips was still scornful. Emboldened by the signs of general approbation, the booth-keeper went off in a whirl of flourishes, and began to round off such trills, to turn such shakes off his tongue, and to make such furious play with his throat, that when at last, pale, exhausted, and bathed in hot perspiration, he uttered the last dying note, his whole body flung back, a general united shout greeted him in a violent outburst. The Gabbler threw himself on his neck and began strangling him in his long, bony arms; a flush came out on Nikolai Ivanich's oily face, and he seemed to have grown younger; Yakov shouted like mad, "Capital, capital!" Even my neighbour, the peasant in the torn smock, could not restrain himself, and with a blow of his fist on the table, he cried, "Ha! well done, damn my soul, ha! well done!" And he spat on one side with an air of decision.

"Well, brother, you've given us a treat!" bawled the Gabbler, not releasing the exhausted booth-keeper from his embraces; "you've given us a treat, there's no denying! You've won, brother, you've won! I congratulate you--the quart's yours! Yakov's miles behind you. . . I tell you: miles . . . take my word for it." (And again he hugged the booth-keeper to his breast.)

"There, let him alone, let him alone; there's no being rid of you. . ." said the Blinkard with vexation; "let him sit down on the bench; he's tired, see. You're a ninny, brother, a perfect ninny! What are you sticking to him like a wet leaf for?"

"Well, then, let him sit down, and I'll drink to his health," said the Gabbler, and he went up to the bar. "At your expense, brother," he added, addressing the booth-keeper.

The latter nodded, sat down on the bench, pulled a piece of cloth out of his cap, and began wiping his face, while the Gabbler, with greedy haste, emptied his glass, and, with a grunt, assumed, after the manner of confirmed drinkers, an expression of careworn melancholy.

"You sing beautifully, brother, beautifully," Nikolai Ivanich observed caressingly. "And now it's your turn, Yakov; mind, now, don't be afraid. We shall see who'll win; we shall see. The booth-keeper sings beautifully, though; 'pon my soul, he does."

"Very beautifully," observed Nikolai Ivanich's wife, and she looked with a smile at Yakov.

"Beautifully, ha!" repeated my neighbour in an undertone.

"Ah, a wild man of the woods!" the Gabbler vociferated suddenly, and going up to the peasant with the rent on his shoulder, he pointed at him with his finger, while he pranced about and went off into an insulting guffaw. "Ha! ha! get along! wild man of the woods! Here's a ragamuffin from the Woodlands! What brought you here?" he bawled amidst laughter.

The poor peasant was abashed, and was just about to get up and make off as fast as he could, when suddenly the Wild Master's iron voice was heard:

"What does the insufferable brute mean?" he articulated, grinding his teeth.

"I wasn't doing nothing," muttered the Gabbler. "I didn't . . . I only. . ."

"There, all right, shut up!" retorted the Wild Master. "Yakov, begin!"

Yakov took himself by his throat:

"Well, really, brothers . . . something. . . . Hm, I don't know, on my word, what. . . ."

"Come, that's enough; don't be timid. For shame!. . . why go back? Sing the best you can, by God's gift."

And the Wild Master looked down expectant. Yakov was silent for a minute; he glanced round and covered his face with his hand. All had their eyes simply fastened upon him, especially the booth-keeper, on whose face a faint, involuntary uneasiness could be seen through his habitual expression of self-confidence and the triumph of his success. He leant back against the wall, and again put both hands under him, but did not swing his legs as before. When at last Yakov uncovered his face it was pale as a dead man's; his eyes gleamed faintly under their drooping lashes. He gave a deep sigh and began to sing. The first sound of his voice was faint and unequal, and seemed not to come from his chest, but to be wafted from somewhere afar off, as though it had floated by chance into the room. A strange effect was produced on all of us by this trembling, resonant note; we glanced at one another, and Nikolai Ivanich's wife seemed to draw herself up. This first note was followed by another, bolder and prolonged, but still obviously quivering, like a harp-string when suddenly struck by a stray finger it throbs in a last, swiftly dying tremble; the second was followed by a third, and, gradually gaining fire and breadth, the strains swelled into a pathetic melody. "Not one little path ran into the field," he sang, and sweet and mournful it

was in our ears. I have seldom, I must confess, heard a voice like it; it was slightly hoarse, and not perfectly true; there was even something morbid about it at first; but it had genuine depth of passion, and youth, and sweetness, and a sort of fascinating, careless, pathetic melancholy. A spirit of truth and fire, a Russian spirit, was sounding and breathing in that voice, and it seemed to go straight to your heart, to go straight to all that was Russian in it. The song swelled and flowed. Yakov was clearly carried away by enthusiasm; he was not timid now; he surrendered himself wholly to the rapture of his art; his voice no longer trembled; it quivered, but with the scarce perceptible inward quiver of passion, which pierces like an arrow to the very soul of the listeners; and he steadily gained strength and firmness and breadth. I remember I once saw at sunset on a flat sandy shore, when the tide was low and the sea's roar came weighty and menacing from the distance, a great white sea-gull; it sat motionless, its silky bosom facing the crimson glow of the setting sun, and only now and then opened wide its great wings to greet the well-known sea, to greet the sinking lurid sun: I recalled it, as I heard Yakov. He sang, utterly forgetful of his rival and all of us; he seemed supported, as a bold swimmer by the waves, by our silent, passionate sympathy. He sang, and in every sound of his voice one seemed to feel something dear and akin to us, something of breadth and space, as though the familiar steppes were unfolding before our eyes and stretching away into endless distance. I felt the tears gathering in my bosom and rising to my eyes; suddenly I was struck by dull, smothered sobs. . . . I looked round--the tavern-keeper's wife was weeping, her bosom pressed close to the windowsill. Yakov threw a quick glance at her, and he sang more sweetly, more melodiously than ever; Nikolai Ivanich looked down; the Blinkard turned away; the Gabbler, quite touched, stood, his gaping mouth stupidly open; the humble peasant was sobbing softly in the corner and shaking his head with a plaintive murmur; and on the iron visage of the Wild Master, from under his overhanging brows, there slowly rolled a heavy tear; the booth-keeper raised his clenched fist to his brow, and did not stir. I don't know how the general emotion would have ended, if Yakov had not suddenly come to a full stop on a high, exceptionally shrill note--as though his voice had broken. No one called out, or even stirred; everyone seemed to be waiting to see whether he was not going to sing more; but he opened his eyes as though wondering at our silence, looked round at all of us with a face of inquiry . . . and saw that the victory was his.

"Yakov," said the Wild Master, laying his hand on his shoulder, and he could say no more.

We all stood, as it were, petrified. The booth-keeper softly rose and went up to Yakov.

"You . . . yours . . . you've won," he articulated at last with an effort, and rushed out of the room. His rapid, decided action, as it were, broke the spell; we all suddenly fell into noisy, delighted talk. The Gabbler bounded up and down, stammered and brandished his arms like mill-sails; the Blinkard limped up to Yakov and began kissing him; Nikolai Ivanich got up and solemnly announced that he would add a second pot of beer from himself. The Wild Master laughed a sort of kind, simple laugh, which I should never have expected to see on his face; the humble peasant, as he wiped his eyes, cheeks, nose, and beard on his sleeves, kept repeating in his corner, "Ah, beautiful it was, by God! blast me for the son of a dog, but it was fine!" while Nikolai Ivanich's wife, her face red with weeping, got up quickly and went away. Yakov was enjoying his triumph like a child; his whole face was transformed, his eyes especially fairly glowed with happiness. They dragged him to the bar; he beckoned the weeping peasant up to it, and sent the tavern-keeper's little son to look after the booth-keeper, who was not found, however; and the festivities began. "You'll sing to us again; you're going to sing to us till evening," the Gabbler declared, flourishing his hands in the air.

I took one more look at Yakov and went out. I did not want to stay--I was afraid of spoiling the impression I had received. But the heat was as insupportable as before. It seemed hanging in a thick, heavy layer right over the earth; over the dark-blue sky tiny bright fires seemed whisking through the finest, almost black dust. Everything was still; and there was something hopeless and oppressive in this profound hush of exhausted nature. I made my way to a hayloft and lay down on the fresh-cut but already almost dry grass. For a long while I could not go to sleep; for a long while Yakov's irresistible voice was ringing in my ears. At last the heat and fatigue regained their sway, however, and I fell into a dead sleep. When I waked up, everything was in darkness; the hay scattered around smelt strong and was slightly damp; through the slender rafters of the half-open roof pale stars were faintly twinkling. I went out. The glow of sunset had long died away, and its last trace showed in a faint light on the horizon; but above the freshness of the night there was still a feeling of heat in the atmosphere, lately baked through by the sun, and the breast still craved for a draught of cool air. There was no wind, nor were there any

clouds; the sky all round was clear, and transparently dark, softly glimmering with innumerable but scarcely visible stars. There were lights twinkling about the village; from the flaring tavern close by rose a confused, discordant din, amid which I fancied I recognized the voice of Yakov. Violent laughter came from there in an outburst at times. I went up to the little window and pressed my face against the pane. I saw a cheerless, though varied and animated scene: all were drunk--all from Yakov upwards. With breast bared, he sat on a bench, and singing in a thick voice a street song to a dance-tune, he lazily fingered and strummed on the strings of a guitar. His moist hair hung in tufts over his fearfully pale face. In the middle of the room, the Gabbler, drunk as a lord and without his coat, was hopping about in a dance before the peasant in the grey smock; the peasant, on his side, was with difficulty stamping and scraping with his feet, and grinning meaninglessly over his dishevelled beard; he waved one hand from time to time, as much as to say, "Here goes!" Nothing could be more ludicrous than his face: however much he twitched up his eyebrows, his heavy lids would hardly rise, but seemed lying upon his scarcely visible, dim, and mawkish eyes. He was in that amiable frame of mind of a perfectly intoxicated man when every passer-by, directly he looks him in the face, is sure to say, "My, brother, what a sight you are!" The Blinkard, as red as a lobster, and his nostrils dilated wide, was laughing malignantly in a corner; only Nikolai Ivanich, as befits a good tavern-keeper, preserved his composure unchanged. The room was thronged with many new faces; but the Wild Master I did not see in it.

I turned away with rapid steps and began descending the hill on which Kolotovka lies. At the foot of this hill stretches a wide plain; plunged in the misty waves of the evening haze, it seemed more immense, and was, as it were, merged with the darkening sky. I walked with long strides along the road by the ravine, when all at once from somewhere far away in the plain came a boy's clear voice: "Antropka! Antropka-a-a!. . ." He shouted in obstinate and tearful desperation, with long, long drawing out of the last syllable.

He was silent for a few instants, and started shouting again. His voice rang out clear in the still, lightly slumbering air. Thirty times at least he had called the name Antropka, when suddenly, from the farthest end of the plain, as though from another world, there floated a scarcely audible reply:

"Wha-a-t?"

The boy's voice shouted back at once with gleeful exasperation:

"Come here, devil! you woo-od imp!"

"What fo-or?" replied the other, after a long interval. "Because Dad wants to thrash you!" the first voice shouted back hurriedly.

The second voice did not call back again, and the boy fell to shouting Antropka once more. His cries, fainter and less and less frequent, still floated up to my ears, when it had grown completely dark, and I had turned the corner of the wood which skirts my village and lies over three miles from Kolotovka. . . "Antropka-aa!" was still audible in the air, filled with the shadows of night.