

THE CAUSE OF IT ALL

BY
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ACT I

CHARACTERS

Old Akulina. Seventy years old; still brisk, dignified, old fashioned.

Michael. Her son; thirty-five, passionate, proud, vain, strong.

Martha. His wife, thirty-two. A grumbler; talks a great deal and rapidly.

Paraska. Ten years old. Daughter of Michael and Martha.

Watchman Taras. Fifty. Self-important, gives himself airs, speaks slowly.

Tramp. Forty; wiry, thin, speaks stiltedly.

When drunk is very free.

Ignat. A chatterbox, gay, stupid.

Neighbour. Forty. Fussy.

Autumn. A hut with a closet.

Old Akulina is spinning; the housewife Martha is making dough; little Paraska is rocking the cradle.

Martha.

Oh, my heart has a boding of ill. What can he be about? It will be as bad as last time when he went to sell the wood. He spent nearly half on drink. And it's always my fault.

Akulina.

Why reckon on evil? It is still early. It is a long way off. It takes time.

Martha.

Akimich has returned. It's not early. He left after my man, but my

man is not back. Worry, worry, that's all the pleasure one gets.

Akulina.

Akimich had sold his wood; he only had to deliver it. Our man was taking his to the market.

Martha.

I should not be afraid if he was alone, but he went with Ignat. And every time he goes out with that thick-headed mule – heaven help me ! it never ends well, he always gets drunk. Day after day I struggle on. Everything depends on me. If anything good ever came along! But nothing pleasant ever happens, and it's work, work from morning till night.

The door opens, and the local watchman Taras enters with a ragged tramp.

Taras.

How do you do? I have brought you a lodger.

Tramp.

(Bowing.) Greetings to the hosts.

Martha.

Why do you bring them to us so often? We had a man here Wednesday night. You always bring them to us. You ought to take them to Stepanida: she has no children. I don't know where to turn with mine, and you always bring tramps to us.

Taras.

I take them to every one in turn.

Martha.

In turn, indeed! I have children. And my man is out.

Taras.

If he sleeps here he won't wear out the place he lies on.

Akulina.

(To //re TRAMP.) Come in, sit down. Make yourself at home.

TRAMP.

Thanks. I should like something to eat, if possible.

MARTHA.

Hasn't had time to look round, and asks for food at once. Didn't you come through the village?

TRAMP.

(Sighs.) I'm not accustomed to this sort of thing in my position. But as I have nothing of my own –

Akulina rises, gets the bread, cuts a slice and gives it to the tramp.

Tramp.

(Taking the bread.) Merci. (He sits down on the bench and eats greedily.)

Taras.

Where is Michael?

Martha.

Gone to town with the hay. It's time he was back, but he's not. I can't help thinking something has happened.

Taras.

What could happen?

Martha.

What, indeed? Nothing good, of course; but you can count on something bad.

Akulina.

(Sitting down to her spinning wheel. To Taras, pointing at Martha.) She never can hold her tongue. I know, we women are not wise. But once he's out of the house, he doesn't care a rap. I expect him to come home drunk.

Martha.

If he was alone I wouldn't be afraid, but he went with Ignat.

Taras.

(Smiling.) Oh, well, Ignat Ivanovich is a rare one for drink.

Akulina.

What has Ignat got to do with him?

Martha.

It's all very well for you to talk, mother. But I'm just sick to death of his drunkenness. When he's sober, it would be a sin to complain, but when he's drunk you know what he's like. Don't say a word. Everything's wrong.

Taras.

But what about you women? A man gets drunk. Well, what of that? He shows off a bit. Sleep it off, and all will be smooth again. But you women must pester.

Martha.

It doesn't matter what you do. If he's drunk, everything's wrong.

Taras.

You must understand that a man can't help drinking sometimes. Your woman's work keeps you at home; but we can't help it, if we've got business or are in company. What if one does drink? There's no harm in it.

Martha.

It's all very well for you to talk, but it's hard on us women; oh! so hard. If you men were in our place for a week you'd alter your tune, I know. Make and bake, and boil and spin, and weave, and the cattle, and all the work, and these little naked things to be washed and dressed and fed. It all falls on us, and directly the least thing isn't exactly as he likes – there it is, especially when he's drunk. Oh, what a life is woman's!

Tramp.

{Munching.} Quite true. Drink is the cause of it all, and all the catastrophes of life come from it.

Taras.

It's evident that it's knocked you over.

Tramp.

No, not exactly, though I have suffered from it too. Were it not for that, the course of my life might have been different.

Taras.

Well, to my mind, if you drink wisely no harm comes of it.

Tramp.

And I say it has such power that it may ruin a man.

Martha.

That's what I say. You work, you do your best, and all your reward is to be scolded or beaten like a dog.

Tramp.

Not only that, but there are people who are slaves to it – who lose their heads through it, and perform actions that are quite undesirable. So long as he does not drink, give him anything you like, he will take nothing that does not belong to him. Once he's drunk, he grabs anything that comes to hand. He gets blows, he is put in prison. When he's not drunk he is honest, worthy; but directly he drinks, he becomes slavish – he takes anything he can.

Akulina.

I think it depends on oneself.

Tramp.

It depends on oneself when one is healthy, but drink is a disease.

Taras.

A disease, indeed! You give him what he de-serves, and that disease will very soon disappear. Good-bye, so long. {He leaves.}

Martha, wiping her hands, is about to go out.

Akulina.

{Looking at the tramp and seeing that he has eaten the bread.}
Martha, Martha, cut him some more.

Martha.

What next! I'm going to see to the samovar. Akulina rises, goes to the table, takes the bread and cuts a slice and gives it to the tramp.

Tramp.

Merci. I have developed a great appetite.

Akulina.

Are you a factory hand?

Tramp.

Who? I? I was an engine-driver.

Akulina.

Did you earn much?

Tramp.

From 50 to 70 roubles a month.

Akulina.

Dear me! How on earth did you come down in the world so?

Tramp.

I'm not the only one who's come down in the world. I came down because we live in such times that an honest man can't make his way.

Martha.

{Entering with samovar.} O Lord, he's not back yet. He'll certainly be drunk. My heart tells me so.

Akulina.

I'm beginning to think he's gone on the spree.

Martha.

There, you see ! I have to struggle on alone, make and bake, boil and spin, and weave, and the cattle, it all falls on me, and these little naked things. {She points to the children. The baby in the cradle screams.} Parasha, rock the cradle. Oh, what a life is woman's! And if he's drunk it is all wrong. Say a word he doesn't like -

Akulina.

{Making the tea.} Here's the last of the tea. Did you tell him to bring some?

Martha.

Of course. He meant to. But will he? Will he give a thought to his home? {She puts the samovar on the table.}

The Tramp leaves the table.

Akulina.

Why do you get up? We are going to have tea.

Tramp.

I give you thanks for your kind hospitality. (He throws down his cigarette and approaches the table.)

Martha.

What are you? Are you a peasant or what?

Tramp.

I'm neither a peasant nor a noble, missus; I belong to a double-edged class.

Martha.

What do you mean! (Gives him a cup.)

Tramp.

Merci. I mean that my father was a Polish count; and besides him there were many more, and I had two mothers also.

Akulina.

O Lord! How could you?

Tramp.

It was this way, because my mother lived in prostitution – in polygamy, therefore – and there were all sorts of fathers, and there were two mothers, because the mother who bore me deserted me in my tender years. A yard-porter's wife took pity on me and brought me up. In general, my biography is complicated.

Martha.

Have some more tea. Were you apprenticed?

Tramp.

My apprenticeship was unsatisfactory. I was given to a smith, not by my real mother but my adopted mother. That blacksmith was my first teacher. And his teaching consisted in beating me so, that he hit his anvil seldomer than my unhappy head. But no matter how much he beat me, he could not deprive me of talent. Then I went to a locksmith; there I was appreciated, and made my way. I became the chief craftsman; I made the acquaintance of educated men. I belonged to a party; I was able to acquire literary speech. My life might have been raised, for I had enormous talent.

Akulina.

Of course.

Tramp.

And then there was a disturbance – the tyrannous burden of the people's life – and I got into prison, and was deprived of liberty of my life.

Martha.

What for?

Tramp.

For rights.

Martha.

What rights?

Tramp.

What rights! The rights that the well-to-do should not be everlastingly idle, and that the working proletariat should be rewarded for his toil.

Akulina.

You're talking about the land.

Tramp.

Of course. It is the same in the agrarian question.

Akulina.

May the Lord and the Queen of Heaven grant it. We are sorely pushed for land.

Tramp.

So my barque was carried along on the waves of life's ocean.

Akulina.

What are you going to do now?

Tramp.

Now? Now I'm going to Moscow. I shall go to some contractor. There's no help for it. I shall humble myself. I shall say, Give me any work you like, only take me on.

Akulina.

Have some more tea.

Tramp.

Thank you ; I mean merci,

Akulina.

There's Michael. Just in time for tea.

Martha.

(Rises.) Oh, woe betide us. He's with Ignat. So he's drunk.

Michael and Ignat stumble into the room; both are drunk.

Ignat.

How do you do? {He prays before the ikon.) Here we are, you dirty skunk,* just in time for the samovar. We go to church – mass is just over; we go to dinner, just eaten up, but we go to the pub and we're in the nick of time. Ha-ha-ha. You offer us tea, we offer you vodka. That's all right, isn't it? {He laughs.)

Michael.

Where did this swell come from? {He takes a bottle from his coat pocket and puts it on the table.) Where are the cups?

Akulina.

Did you have a good trip?

Ignat.

It couldn't have been better, you dirty skunk. We drank, we had a good time, and here we are.

Michael.

{Fills the cup, and hands one to his mother and then one to the tramp.) Have a drink, too.

* Literally, " dirty stick "– a very offensive expression in Russia.
– Editor.

Tramp.

{Takes cup.) I give you heartfelt thanks. To your health. {Empties cup.)

Ignat.

You're a brick, you dirty skunk, to gulp it down like that. I expect it's gone all down your muscles after your fast. {He pours out more

vodka.)

Tramp.

{Drinking.} I wish success to all you undertake.

Akulina.

Did you get a good price?

Ignat.

Whatever the price was, it's all gone on drink, you dirty skunk. Hasn't it, Michael?

Michael.

Of course. What's the good of looking at money? It's not often you get the chance of a spree.

Martha.

What are you showing off for? Ifs not nice. There's no food in the house, and you go on like this.

Michael.

(Threateningly.) Martha !

Martha.

What's the good of saying Martha? I know I'm Martha. The very sight of you makes me sick, you shameless drunkard !

Michael.

Martha, you take care.

Martha.

Take care, indeed. I shan't take care.

Michael.

Pour out the vodka, and offer it to the guests.

Martha.

Oh, you blear-eyed dog! I don't want to speak to you.

Michael.

You don't! You dog's hide! What did you say?

Martha.

(Rocking the cradle.) What did I say? I said I didn't want to speak to you, so there!

Michael.

Ah, you've forgotten? (Springs from the table and gives her a blow on the head that displaces her shawl.)

Martha.

(Running to the door.) Oh-h-h-h !

Michael.

You shan't go away, you beast! (Rushes towards her.)

Tramp.

(Jumps from the table and seizes Michael's hand.) You have no right whatever to do that.

Michael.

(Pausing and looking at the tramp with amazement.) Is it long since you had a thrashing?

Tramp.

You have no right whatever to insult the female sex.

Michael.

Oh, you hound. Do you see that? {He shows him his fist.}

Tramp.

You are not allowed to exploit the female sex.

Michael.

I'll give you such a sound licking that you won't know your head from your heels.

Tramp.

Well, beat me. Why don't you? Beat me. {He offers him his face.}

Michael.

(Shrugs his shoulders and lifts his hands.) Well, if I do -

Tramp.

You may sin seven times; you can only pay the penalty once. Beat me.

Michael.

You are a queer man, I must say. {He drops his arms and shakes his head.}

Ignat.

It's easy to see you're pretty gone on women, you dirty skunk.

Tramp.

I stand up for rights.

Michael.

{To Martha, going to the table and breath-ing heavily.} Well, Martha, you'd better light a big candle, and say a good prayer for him.* If it hadn't been for him I'd have beaten you to pulp.

Martha.

What else do I expect from you? Struggle all your life, bake and boil, and directly –

Michael.

That'll do, that'll do. {He offers the tramp some vodka.} Drink. {To his wife.} What are you making such a fuss about? Can't understand a joke. Here, take the money, and put it away. Here are six roubles and forty kopeks.

Akulina.

What about the tea and sugar she asked for?

Michael gets a packet out of his pocket and gives it to his wife. MARTHA takes the money and the parcel and goes into the closet, silently arranging the shawl on her head.

Michael.

These women folk are such fools. {He offers more vodka.}

* It is a custom in Russia to light candles before ikons in the churches, and to light one on behalf of the person you wish to thank is a common way of expressing gratitude.–Editor.

Tramp.

(Refusing.) Drink it yourself.

Michael.

Don't stand on ceremony.

Tramp.

(Drinks.) All success to you.

Ignat.

(To the Tramp.) I expect you've seen many sights. Oh, you've got a fine coat on, a real good coat. Wherever did you get it? (He touches the ragged coat.) Don't you mend it; it's fine just as it is. Years are telling on it, but you can't help that. If I had a coat like that the women would love me too. (To Martha.) Wouldn't they?

Akulina.

You ought not to make fun of a man that you know nothing about, Ignat.

Tramp.

It is want of education.

Ignat.

I mean it kindly. Drink. (Offers cup.) Tramp drinks.

Akulina.

You said yourself that it was the cause of all things, and that you'd been to prison through it.

Michael.

What did you do time for?

Tramp.

(Very drunk.) I suffered because I made an appropriation.

Michael.

How?

Tramp.

It was like this. We came to him, the fat-bellied creature, and we said, "Money – if not, see here's a revolver." He tried every way, this way and that, but he gave us 2,300 roubles.

Akulina.

Ø Lord !

Tramp.

We were just going to distribute this sum fairly; Zembrikov was our leader. But the crows were down on us. We were arrested – sent to prison.

Ignat.

And did they take the money.

Tramp.

Of course. But they could not bring it home to me. The prosecuting counsel said to me, " You have stolen money." I answered at once, " Robbers steal; but we have simply appropriated for the party." He couldn't say anything to that. He tried one thing and another, but he could not answer. " Take him away to prison," he said, thus cutting short my liberty of my life.

Ignat.

(To Michael.) He's clever, the hound. A brick. {He offers more vodka.) Drink, you dirty skunk.

Akulina.

What language you do use.

Ignat.

I'm not swearing, grannie. That's only a little phrase of mine – dirty skunk, dirty skunk. To your health, grannie.

Martha comes in, goes to the table and –pours out tea.

Michael.

That's all right. What's the good of being offended? I say thank you to him. I respect you, Martha, ever so much. (To the Tramp.)' Don't you make a mistake. (He puts his arm round Martha.) I respect my old woman – that's how I respect my old woman. My old woman; she's Ai. I wouldn't change her for anybody.

Ignat.

That's right. Grannie Akulina, have a drink. I stand it.

Tramp.

Such is the power of alcoholic stimulation. Every one was in a state of melancholy. Now all is pleasant. Friendly feeling reigns, grannie. I feel full of love to you and to all mankind. Dear

brothers. (He sings a revolutionary song.)

Michael.

It affects him very much. He's been starved.

ACT II

The same hut. Morning. Akulina and Martha. Michael is still sleeping.

Martha.

(Picking up the axe.) I'm going to chop some wood.

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Akulina.

(With a pail.) He'd have knocked you about badly yesterday if it hadn't been for that other one. I don't see him. Has he gone? I expect he has.

They both go out.

Michael.

(Getting down from the stove.) Oh, oh, the sun is up. (He gets up and puts on his boots.) I suppose the women have gone to fetch water. Oh, my head does ache. But I don't care. It can go to the devil. (Says his prayers; washes.) I'll go and harness the horse.

Martha enters with wood.

Martha.

Where's yesterday's beggar? Is he gone?

Michael.

I suppose so. I don't see him.

Martha.

It doesn't matter. But he is clearly a clever man. He said he earned fifty roubles a month. He is a good man also.

Michael.

You think he is good because he took your part.

Martha.

What of that?

Michael dresses.

Martha.

Did you put away the tea and sugar you brought home last night?

Michael.

I thought you took them.

Akulina enters with the pail.

Martha.

(To the old woman.) Mother, did you take the parcel?

Akulina.

I don't know anything about it.

Michael.

I put it down on the window sill last night.

Akulina.

I saw it there.

Martha.

Where can it be? (Searches.)

Akulina.

It's a bad job.

A Neighbour enters.

Neighbour.

Well, Michael, are you ready to go for the wood?

Michael.

Of course. I'll harness directly. But, you see, we've lost something.

Neighbour.

Have you? What is it?

Martha.

The master brought back a parcel of tea and sugar from town last night. He put it here on the window. I hadn't the sense to put it away, and now it's gone.

Michael.

We suspect the tramp who slept here. Neighbour.

What tramp?

Martha.

He was a thin man, without a beard.

Michael.

With a ragged coat.

Neighbour.

And curly hair and a hooked nose?

Michael.

Yes, yes.

, Neighbour.

I just met him. I wondered to see him walk so fast.

Michael.

It's sure to be him. Was he far off when you met him?

Neighbour.

I don't expect he's crossed the bridge yet.

Michael.

(Seizes his cap; he and the Neighbour run out.) We must catch him, the rogue. He took it.

Martha.

Oh, what a sin. It's sure to be him.

Akulina.

And what if it is not? Once, about twenty years ago, a man was accused of having stolen a horse. The villagers gathered together; one said, " I saw him put a halter on him." Another said, " I saw him leading it off." The horse was a big, long, dappled one, easy to see. Everybody began to search for it. In the wood they met the

young man. " You took it." He swore on his oath he hadn't. " You took it. What's the good of looking at him?" said one; "the women said they had seen him and they are right." He answered roughly. And George Lapushkin, a hot-tempered man he was – he's dead now – just lifted his fist and gave him a blow in the face. " It was you," he said. After that blow, every one fell on him; they struck him with sticks and with their fists, and they beat him to death. And then what do you think happened? The next day they found the real thief. The other young man had only gone to the wood to pick out a tree to fell.

Martha.

Of course, it's easy enough to make a mistake. Although he's not in a good position, it's clear he's a good man.

Akulina.

He's fallen very low. What can you expect from such a man?

Martha.

Listen to them shouting! They are bringing him back, I expect.

Michael enters, also the Neighbour, an old man, and a boy. They push in the Tramp between them.

Michael.

(Holding the tea and sugar to his wife, excitedly.) I found it in his trouser pocket. The thief, the rogue!

Akulina.

(To Martha.) Yes, it's him, poor fellow. See how he hangs his head.

Martha.

He was evidently talking about himself yesterday, when he said that a man will take anything when he's drunk.

Tramp.

I'm not a thief. I'm an appropriator. I am a worker, and I must live. You can't understand. You may do your worst.

Neighbour.

Shall we take him to the village elder, or straight to the police?

Tramp.

Do what you like, I say. I am afraid of nothing, and can suffer for my convictions. If you were well educated you would understand.

Martha.

(To her husband.) Let him go in peace. We've got the parcel back. Let him go; don't let us sin.

Michael.

(Repeating his wife's words.) Don't let us sin. You want to teach me I I don't know what to do without you?

Martha.

I only said you might let him off.

Michael.

Let him off. Don't I know what to do unless you teach me, you fool? Let him off! He may go, but I have a word to say to him to make him feel what he's done. So you listen, *mossieu*, to what I have to say. You may be in a nasty fix, but what you've done is disgusting, very disgusting. Another man would break your ribs for it, and then take you to the police; but I say, You've done a nasty thing: it could not be worse. But you are in such a bad way that I don't want to harm you. Go, go, in God's name, and don't do such a thing again. (Turning to his wife.) And you wanted to teach me.

Neighbour.

You're wrong, Michael; you're wrong to encourage them.

Michael-

(Still holding the parcel.) If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. It's my business. (To his wife.) You want to teach me. (He pauses, looks at the parcel, and with a decisive movement gives it to the TRAMP, looking at his wife.) Take this, and drink tea on your way. (To the wife.) You want to teach me. Go along, go along; it's no good talking about it.

Tramp.

(Takes the parcel.- A pause.) You think I don't understand? (His voice trembles.) I quite understand. Had you beaten me like a dog it would have been easier. Do you think I don't know what I am? I am a rogue: I mean a degenerate. Forgive me, for Christ's sake. (Sobs, throws the parcel on the table, and leaves the hut hurriedly.)

Martha.

I'm glad he didn't take the tea, or we couldn't have made any.

Michael.

(To his wife.) You wanted to teach me.

Neighbour.

Poor fellow! he burst into tears.

Akulina.

He is a man, too.