



Recollections of a Billiard-marker

Leo Tolstoy

1855

Well, it happened about three o'clock. The gentlemen were playing. There was the tall visitor, as our men called him. The prince was there,—the two are always together. The mustached barin was there; also the little hussar, Oliver, who was an actor; there was the Polish pan.^[1] It was a pretty good crowd.

The tall visitor and the prince were playing together. Now, here I was walking up and down around the billiard-table with my stick, keeping tally,—ten and forty-seven, twelve and forty-seven.

Everybody knows it's our business to score. You don't get a chance to get a bite of anything, and you don't get to bed till two o'clock o' nights, but you're always being screamed at to bring the balls.

I was keeping tally ; and I look, and see a new barin comes in at the door. He gazed and gazed, and then sat down on the divan. Very good!

“Now, who can that be?” thinks I to myself. “He must be somebody.”

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His dress was neat, –neat as a pin, –checkered tricot pants, stylish little short coat, plush vest, and gold chain and all sorts of trinkets dangling from it.

He was dressed neat; but there was something about the man neater still; slim, tall, his hair brushed forward in style, and his face fair and ruddy, –well, in a word, a fine young fellow.

You must know our business brings us into contact with all sorts of people. And there's many that ain't of much consequence, and there's a good deal of poor trash. So, though you 're only a scorer, you get used to telling folks; that is, in a certain way you learn a thing or two.

I looked at the barin. I see him sit down, modest and quiet, not knowing anybody; and the clothes on him are so brand-new that, thinks I, "Either he 's a foreigner, –an Englishman maybe, –or some count just come. And though he's so young, he has an air of some distinction."

Oliver sat down next him, so he moved along a little.

They began a game. The tall man lost. He shouts to me. Says he, "You 're always cheating. You don't count straight. Why don't you pay attention?"

He scolded away, then threw down his cue, and went out. Now, just look here! Evenings, he and the prince plays for fifty silver rubles a game; and here he only lost a bottle of Makon wine, and got mad. That's the kind of a character he is.

Another time he and the prince plays till two o'clock. They don't bank down any cash; and so I know neither of them's got any cash, but they are simply playing a bluff game.

"I'll go you twenty-five rubles," says he.

"All right."

Just yawning, –and not even stopping to place the ball, –you see, he was not made of stone, –now just notice what he said. "We are playing for money," says he, "and not for chips."

with the same ears, I think the same thoughts; there is the same strange incoherence, unsteadiness, and lightness in my thoughts.”

But this man puzzled me worse than all the rest. Well, then, when the big man left, the prince says to the stranger, “Wouldn’t you like,” says he, “to play a game with me?”

“With pleasure,” says he.

He sat there, and looked rather foolish, indeed he did. He may have been courageous in reality; but, at all events, he got up, went over to the billiard-table, and did not seem flustered as yet. But whether he was flustered or not, you couldn’t help seeing that he was not quite at his ease.

Either his clothes were a little too new, or he was embarrassed because everybody was looking at him; at any rate, he seemed to have no energy. He sort of sidled up to the table, caught his pocket on the edge, began to chalk his cue, dropped his chalk.

Whenever he hit the ball, he always glanced around, and reddened. Not so the prince. He was used to it; he chalked and chalked his hand, tucked up his sleeve; he goes and sits down when he pockets the ball, even though he is such a little man.

They played two or three games; then I notice the prince puts up the cue, and says, “Would you mind telling me your name?”

“Nekhliudof,” says he.

Says the prince, “Was your father commander in the corps of cadets?”

“Yes,” says the other.

Then they began to talk in French, and I could not understand them. I suppose they were talking about family affairs.

“Au revoir” says the prince. “I am very glad to have made your acquaintance.”

He washed his hands, and went to get a lunch; but the other stood by the billiard-table with his cue, and was knocking the balls about.

It’s our business, you know, when a new man comes long, to be rather sharp; it’s the best way. I took the balls, and went to put them up. He reddened, and says, “Can’t I play any longer?”

“Certainly you can,” says I. “That’s what billiards is for.” But I don’t pay any attention to him. I straighten the cues.

“Will you play with me?”

“Certainly, sir,” says I.

I place the balls.

“Shall we play for odds?”

“What do you mean,—‘play for odds?’”

“Well,” says I, “you give me a half-ruble, and I crawl under the table.”

Of course, as he had never seen that sort of thing, it seemed strange to him; he laughed.

“Go ahead,” says he.

“Very well,” says I, “only you must give me odds.”

“What!” says he, “are you a worse player than I am?”

“Most likely,” says I. “We have few players who can be compared with you.”

We began to play. He certainly had the idea that he was a crack shot. It was a caution to see him shoot; but the Pole sat there, and kept shouting out every time:—

“Ah, what a chance! ah, what a shot!”

But what a man he was! His ideas were good enough, but he didn’t know how to carry them out. Well, as usual I lost the first game, crawled under the table, and grunted.

Thereupon Oliver and the Pole jumped down from their seats, and applauded, thumping with their cues.

“Splendid! Do it again,” they cried, “once more.”

Well enough to cry “once more,” especially for the Pole. That fellow would have been glad enough to crawl under the billiard-table, or even under the Blue bridge, for a half-ruble! Yet he was the first to cry, “Splendid! but you haven’t wiped off all the dust yet.”

I, Petrushka the marker, was pretty well known to everybody.

Only, of course, I did not care to show my hand yet. I lost my second game.

“I have done nothing dishonorable, I am not unfortunate, I have not committed any crime; but I have done worse: I have destroyed my feelings, my intellect, my youth.

“I became entangled in a filthy net, from which I cannot escape, and to which I cannot accustom myself. I feel that I am falling lower and lower every moment, and I cannot stop my fall.

“And what ruined me? Was there in me some strange passion which I might plead as an excuse? No!

“...My recollections are pleasant.

“One fearful moment of forgetfulness, which can never be erased from my mind, led me to come to my senses. I shuddered when I saw what a measureless abyss separated me from what I desired to be, and might have been. In my imagination arose the hopes, the dreams, and the thoughts of my youth.

“Where are those lofty thoughts of life, of eternity, of God, which at times filled my soul with light and strength? Where that aimless power of love which kindled my heart with its comforting warmth?

“...But how good and happy I might have been, had I trodden that path which, at the very entrance of life, was pointed out to me by my fresh mind and true feelings! More than once did I try to go from the ruts in which my life ran, into that sacred path.

“I said to myself, Now I will use my whole strength of will; and yet I could not do it. When I happened to be alone, I felt awkward and timid. When I was with others, I no longer heard the inward voice; and I fell all the time lower and lower.

“At last I came to a terrible conviction that it was impossible for me to lift myself from this low plane. I ceased to think about it, and I wished to forget all; but hopeless repentance worried me still more and more. Then, for the first time, the thought of suicide occurred to me.

“I once thought that the nearness of death would rouse my soul. I was mistaken. In a quarter of an hour I shall be no more, yet my view has not in the least changed. I see with the same eyes, I hear

to see about the carriage, and just as I was going out of the door, "Petrushka! Petrushka!" he shouted, as if something suddenly frightened him.

I turn round. I see he's pale as a sheet, standing there, and looking at me.

"Did you call me, sir?" says I.

He made no reply.

"What do you want?" says I.

He says nothing.

"Oh, yes!" says he. "Let 's have another game."

Then, says he:

"Haven't I learned to play pretty well?"

He had just won the game. "Yes," says I.

"All right," says he; "go now, and see about my carriage."

He himself walked up and down the room.

Without thinking anything, I went down to the door. I didn't see any carriage at all. I started to go up again.

Just as I was going up, I heard what sounded like the thud of a billiard-cue. I went into the billiard-room. I noticed a peculiar smell.

I looked around; and there he was, lying on the floor, in a pool of blood, with a pistol beside him. I was that scared that I could not speak a word.

He kept twitching, twitching his leg, and stretched himself a little. Then he sort of snored, and stretched out his full length in such a strange way.

And God knows why such a sin came about,--how it was that it occurred to him to ruin his own soul,--but as to what he left written on this paper, I don't understand it at all.

Truly, you can never account for what is going on in the world.

"God gave me all that a man can desire, wealth, name, intellect, noble aspirations. I wanted to enjoy myself, and I trod in the mire all that was best in me.

"It does not become me at all to play with you, sir," says I.

He laughed. Then, as I was playing the third game, he stood forty-nine and I nothing. I laid the cue on the billiard-table, and said, "Barin, shall we play off?"

"What do you mean by playing off?" says he. "How would you have it?"

"You make it three rubles or nothing," says I.

"Why," says he, "have I been playing with you for money?" The fool!

He turned rather red.

Very good. He lost the game. He took out his pocket-book, quite a new one, evidently just from the English shop, opened it; I see he wanted to make a little splurge. It was stuffed full of bills, nothing but hundred-ruble notes.

"No," says he, "there's no small stuff here."

He took three rubles from his purse.

"There," says he, "there's your two rubles; the other pays for the games, and you keep the rest for vodka."

"Thank you, sir, most kindly."

I see that he is a splendid fellow. For such a one I would crawl under anything. For one thing, it's a pity that he won't play for money. For then, thinks I, I should know how to work him for twenty rubles, and maybe I could stretch it out to forty.

As soon as the Pole saw the young barin's money, he says, "Wouldn't you like to try a little game with me? You play so admirably."

Such sharpers prowl around.

"No," says he, "excuse me; I have not the time."

And he went out.

I don't know who that man was, that Pole. Some one called him Pan, and it stuck to him. Every day he used to sit in the billiard-room, and always look on. He was no longer allowed to take a hand in any game whatever; but he always sat by himself, and got out his pipe, and smoked. But then he could play well.

Very good. Nekhliudof came a second time, a third time; he began to come frequently. He would come morning and evening. He learned to play French carom and pyramid pool,—everything, in fact. He became less bashful, got acquainted with everybody, and played tolerably well. Of course, being a young man of a good family, with money, everybody liked him. The only exception was the “tall visitor”; he quarreled with him.

And the whole thing grew out of a trifle.

They were playing pool,—the prince, the “tall visitor,” Nekhliudof, Oliver, and some one else. Nekhliudof was standing near the stove talking with some one. When it came the big man’s turn to play, it happened that his ball was just opposite the stove. There was very little space there, and he liked to have elbow-room.

Now, either he didn’t see Nekhliudof, or he did it on purpose; but, as he was flourishing his cue, he hit Nekhliudof in the chest, a tremendous rap. It actually made him groan. What then? He did not think of apologizing, he was so boorish. He even went farther: he didn’t look at him; he walks off grumbling:—

“Who’s jostling me there? It made me miss my shot. Why can’t we have some room?”

Then the other went up to him, pale as a sheet, but quite self-possessed, and says so politely:—

“You ought first, sir, to apologize; you struck me,” says he.

“Catch me apologizing now! I should have won the game,” says he, “but now you have spoiled it for me.”

Then the other one says:—

“You ought to apologize.”

“Get out of my way! I insist upon it, I won’t.”

And he turned away to look after his ball.

Nekhliudof went up to him, and took him by the arm.

“You’re a boor,” says he, “my dear sir.”

Though he was a slender young fellow, almost like a girl, still he was all ready for a quarrel. His eyes flashed fire; he looked as if he

“I will give forty rubles for six, in a week’s time.”

“If only I had it,” says I, “I should not think of refusing you, but I haven’t.”

What do you think! He rushed away, his teeth set, his fist doubled up, and ran down the corridor like one mad, and all at once he gave himself a knock on the forehead.

“O my God!” says he, “hat has it come to?”

But he did not return to the dining-room; he jumped into a carriage, and drove away. Didn’t we have our laugh over it! The hussar asks:

“Where is the gentleman who was dining with me?”

“He has gone,” said some one.

“Where has he gone? What message did he leave?”

“He didn’t leave any; he just took to his carriage, and went off.”

“That’s a fine way of entertaining a man!” says he.

Now, thinks I to myself, it’ll be a long time before he comes again after this; that is, on account of this scandal. But no. On the next day he came about evening. He came into the billiard-room. He had a sort of a box in his hand. Took off his overcoat.

“Now, let us have a game,” says he.

He looked out from under his eyebrows, rather fierce like.

We played one game.

“That’s enough now,” says he; “go and bring me a pen and paper; I must write a letter.”

Not thinking anything, not suspecting anything, I bring some paper, and put it on the table in the little room.

“It’s all ready, sir,” says I.

“Very good.”

He sat down at the table. He kept on writing and writing, and muttering to himself all the time; then he jumps up, and, frowning, says:

“Look and see if my carriage has come yet.”

It was on a Friday, during carnival time, and so there weren’t any of the customers on hand; they were all at some ball. I went

Very good. The hussar won, and they went off for their dinner. They sat down at table, and then Nekhliudof says, "Simon, a bottle of Claude Vougeaux, and see that you warm it to the proper point."

Simon went out, brought in the dinner, but no wine.

"Well," says he, "where 's the wine?"

Simon hurried out, brought in the roast.

"Let us have the wine," says he.

Simon makes no reply.

"What's got into you ? Here we've almost finished dinner, and no wine. Who wants to drink with dessert?"

Simon hurried out.

"The landlord," says he, "wants to speak to you."

Nekhliudof turned scarlet. He sprang up from the table.

"What's the need of calling me?"

The landlord is standing at the door.

Says he, "I can't trust you any more, unless you settle my little bill."

"Well, didn't I tell you that I would pay the first of the month?"

"That will be all very well," says the landlord, "but I can't be all the time giving credit, and having no settlement. There are more than ten thousand rubles of debts outstanding now," says he.

"Well, that'll do, *monshoor*, you know that you can trust me! Send the bottle, and I assure you that I will pay you very soon."

And he hurried back.

"What was it? why did they call you out?" asked the hussar.

"Oh, some one wanted to ask me a question."

"Now it would be a good time," says the hussar, "to have a little warm wine to drink."

"Simon, hurry up!"

Simon came back, but still no wine, nothing. Too bad! He left the table, and came to me.

"For God's sake," says he, "Petrushka, let me have six rubles!"

He was pale as a sheet.

"No, sir," says I; "by God, you owe me quite too much now."

could eat him alive. The big guest was a strong, tremendous fellow, no match for Nekhliudof.

"Wha-at!" says he, "you call me a boor?"

Yelling out these words, he raises his hand to strike him.

Then everybody there rushed up, and seized them both by the arms, and separated them.

After much talk, Nekhliudof says:—

"Let him give me satisfaction; he has insulted me."

"Not at all," said the other. "I don't care a whit about any satisfaction. He's nothing but a boy, a mere nothing. I'll pull his ears for him."

"If you aren't willing to give me satisfaction, then you are no gentleman."

And, saying this, he almost cried.

"Well, and you, you are a little boy; nothing you say or do can offend me."

Well, we separated them,—led them off, as the custom is, to different rooms. Nekhliudof and the prince had become friends.

"Go," says the former; "for God's sake make him listen to reason..."

The prince went. The big man says:—

"I'm not afraid of any one," says he. "I am not going," says he, "to have any explanation with such a baby. I won't do it, and that's the end of it."

Well, they talked and talked, and then the matter died out, only the "tall visitor" ceased to come to us any more.

As a result of this,—this row, I might call it,—he was regarded as quite the cock of the walk. He was quick to take offense,—I mean Nekhliudof;—as to so many other things, however, he was as unsophisticated as a new-born babe.

I remember once, the prince says to Nekhliudof, "Whom do you keep here?"

"No one," says he.

"What do you mean, 'no one'!"

“Why should I?” says Nekhliudof.

“How so, why should you?”

“I have always lived thus. Why shouldn't I continue to live the same way?”

“You don't say so! It is incredible!”

And saying this, the prince burst into a peal of laughter, and the mustached barin also roared. They couldn't get over it.

“What, never?” they asked.

“Never!”

They were dying with laughter. Of course I understood well enough what they were laughing at him for.

I keep my eyes open. “What,” thinks I, “will come of it?”

“Come,” says the prince, “come with me now.”

“No; not for anything,” was his answer.

“Now, that is absurd,” says the prince. “Come along!”

They went out.

They came back at one o'clock. They sat down to supper; quite a crowd of them were assembled. Some of our very best customers,—Atanof, Prince Razin, Count Shustakh, Mirtsof. And all congratulated Nekhliudof, laughing as they did so. They called me in; I saw that they were pretty jolly.

“Congratulate the barin,” they shout.

“What on?” I ask.

How did he call it? His initiation or his enlightenment;^[2] I can't remember exactly.

“I have the honor,” says I, “to congratulate you.”

And he sits there very red in the face, yet he smiles. Didn't they have fun with him, though!

Well and good. They went afterwards to the billiard-room, all very gay; and Nekhliudof went up to the billiard-table, leaned on his elbow, and said:

“It 's amusing to you, gentlemen,” says he, “but it's sad for me. Why,” says he, “why did I do it? Prince,” says he, “I shall never forgive you or myself as long as I live.”

“Here,” says he, “take my watch or this diamond pin, and pawn it. They will give you more than one hundred and eighty rubles for it, and when I get my money I will redeem it,” says he.

“No matter, sir,” says I. “If you don't happen to have any money, it's no consequence; let me have the watch, if you don't mind. I can wait for your convenience.”

I can see that the watch is worth more than three hundred.

Very good. I pawned the watch for a hundred rubles, and carried him the ticket.

“You will owe me eighty rubles,” says I, “and you had better redeem the watch.”

And so it happened that he still owed me eighty rubles.

After that he began to come to us again every day. I don't know how matters stood between him and the prince, but at all events he kept coming with him all the time, or else they would go and play cards up-stairs with Fedotka. And what queer accounts those three men kept between them! this one would lend money to the other, the other to the third, yet who it was that owed the money you never could find out.

And in this way he kept on coming our way for well-nigh two years; only it was to be plainly seen that he was a changed man, such a devil-may-care manner he assumed at times. He even went so far at times as to borrow a ruble of me to pay a hack-driver; and yet he would still play with the prince for a hundred rubles' stake.

He grew gloomy, thin, sallow. As soon as he came he used to order a little glass of absinthe, take a bite of something, and drink some port wine, and then he would grow more lively.

He came one time before dinner; it happened to be carnival time, and he began to play with a hussar.

Says he, “Do you want to play for a stake?”

“Very well,” says he. “What shall it be?”

“A bottle of Claude Vougeaux? What do you say?”

“Il right.”

see them only once, that was at Christmas time; he never shows his nose there. Yes, and even their people laugh about it to me. 'Why,' says they, 'your barin is not a bit like his father!' And once I take it upon myself to say to him:—

“‘Why wouldn't you go, sir, and visit your aunt? They are feeling bad because you haven't been for so long.’

“‘It 's stupid there, Demyanitch,’ says he. Just to think, he found his only amusement here in the saloon! If he only would enter the service! yet, no; he has got entangled with cards and all the rest of it. When men get going that way, there's no good in anything; nothing comes to any good... *E-ekh!* we are going to the dogs, and no mistake The late mistress (the kingdom of heaven be hers!) left us a rich inheritance: no less than a thousand souls, and about three hundred thousand rubles worth of timber lands. He has mortgaged it all, sold the timber, let the estate go to rack and ruin, and still no money on hand. When the master is away, of course, the overseer is more than the master. What does he care? He only cares to stuff his own pockets.

“A few days ago a couple of peasants brought complaints from the whole estate. 'He has wasted all the property,' they say. What do you think? he pondered over the complaints, and gave the peasants ten rubles apiece. Says he, 'I'll be there very soon. I shall have some money, and I will settle all accounts when I come,' says he.

“But how can he settle accounts when we are getting into debt all the time? Money or no money, yet the winter here has cost eighty thousand rubles, and now there isn't a silver rouble in the house. And allowing to his kindheartedness. You see, he's such a simple barin that it would be hard to find his equal; that's the very reason that he's going to ruin, going to ruin, all for nothing.”

And the old man almost wept.

Nekhliudof woke up about eleven, and called me in.

“They haven't sent me any money yet,” says he, “But it isn't my fault. Shut the door,” says he.

I shut the door.

And he actually burst into tears. Evidently he did not know himself what he was saying. The prince went up to him with a smile.

“Don't talk nonsense,” says he. “Let 's go home, Anatoli.”

“I won't go anywhere,” says the other. “Why did I do that?”

And the tears poured down his cheeks. He would not leave the billiard-table, and that was the end of it. That's what it means for a young and inexperienced man to...

In this way he used often to come to us. Once he came with the prince, and the mustached man who was the prince's crony; the gentlemen always called him “Fedotka.” He had prominent cheekbones, and was homely enough, to be sure; but he used to dress neatly and drove in a carriage. Why did the gentlemen like him so well? I really could not tell.

“Fedotka! Fedotka!” they'd call, and ask him to eat and to drink, and they'd spend their money paying up for him; but he was a thoroughgoing beat. If ever he lost, he would be sure not to pay; but if he won, you bet he wouldn't fail to collect his money. Often, too, he came to grief; yet there he was, walking arm in arm with the prince.

“You are lost without me,” he would say to the prince.

“I am, Fedot,”^[3] says he; “but not a Fedot of that sort.”

And what jokes he used to crack, to be sure! Well, as I said, they had already arrived that time, and one of them says, “Let's have the balls for three-handed pool.”

“All right,” says the other.

They began to play at three rubles a stake. Nekhliudof and the prince chat about all sorts of things.

“Ah!” says one of them, “you mind only what a neat little ankle she has.”

“Oh,” says the other, “her ankle is well enough; but what beautiful hair.”

Of course they paid no attention to the game, only kept on talking to one another.

As to Fedotka, that fellow was alive to his work; he played his very best, but they didn't do themselves justice at all.

And so he won six rubles from each of them. God knows how many games he had won from the prince, yet I never knew them to pay each other any money; but Nekhliudof took out two greenbacks, and handed them over to him.

"No," says he, "I don't want to take your money. Let's square it: play 'quits or double,'^[4]—either double or nothing."

I set the balls. Fedotka began to play the first hand. Nekhliudof seemed to play only for fun; sometimes he would come very near winning a game, yet just fail of it. Says he, "It would be too easy a move, I won't have it so." But Fedotka did not forget what he was up to. Carelessly he proceeded with the game, and thus, as if it were unexpectedly, won.

"Let us play double stakes once more," says he.

"All right," says Nekhliudof.

Once more Fedotka won the game.

"Well," says he, "it began with a mere trifle. I don't wish to win much from you. Shall we make it once more or nothing?"

"Yes."

Say what you may, but fifty rubles is a pretty sum, and Nekhliudof himself began to propose, "Let us make it double or quit." So they played and played.

It kept growing worse and worse for Nekhliudof. Two hundred and eighty rubles were written up against him. As to Fedotka, he had his own method; he would lose a simple game, but when the stake was doubled, he would win sure.

But the prince sits by and looks on. He sees that the matter is growing serious.

"Enough!"^[5] says he, "hold on."

My! they keep increasing the stake.

At last it went so far that Nekhliudof was in for more than five hundred rubles. Fedotka laid down his cue, and said:

"Aren't you satisfied for to-day? I'm tired," says he.

"No," says he, "I won't come, I tell you. For you it's all one whether I go or not, yet for me it's no good to come here."

And so he did not come for ten days more. And then, it being the holidays, he came dressed up in a dress suit: he'd evidently been into company. And he was here all day long; he kept playing, and he came the next day, and the third...

And it began to go in the old style, and I thought it would be fine to have another trial with him.

"No," says he, "I'm not going to play with you; and as to the one hundred and eighty rubles that I owe you, if you'll come at the end of a month, you shall have it."

Very good. So I went to him at the end of a month.

"By God," says he, "I can't give it to you; but come back on Thursday."

Well, I went on Thursday. I found that he had a splendid suite of apartments.

"Well," says I, "is he at home?"

"He hasn't got up yet," I was told.

"Very good, I will wait."

For a body-servant he had one of his own serfs, such a gray-haired old man! That servant was perfectly single-minded, he didn't know anything about beating about the bush. So we got into conversation.

"Well," says he, "what is the use of our living here, master and I? He 's squandered all his property, and it's mighty little honor or good that we get out of this Petersburg of yours. When he started from the country, he thought it would be as it was with the last barin (the kingdom of heaven be his!), I shall go about with princes and counts and generals; he thought to himself, 'I'll find a countess for a sweetheart, and she'll have a big dowry, and we'll live on a big scale.' But it's quite a different thing from what he expected; here we are, running about from one tavern to another as bad off as we could be! The Princess Rtishcheva, you know, is his own aunt, and Prince Borotintsef is his godfather. What do you think? He went to

“Oh, let us play, I beg of you.”

And he brought the cue, and put it in my hand.

I took the cue, and I threw the balls on the table so that they bounced over on to the floor; I could not help showing off a little, naturally. I say, “ All right, sir.”

But he was in such a hurry that he went and picked up the balls himself, and I thinks to myself, “Anyway, I’ll never be able to get the seven hundred rubles from him, so I can lose them to him all the same.”

I began to play carelessly on purpose. But no—he won’t have it so.

“Why,” says he, “you are playing badly on purpose.”

But his hands trembled, and when the ball went toward a pocket, his fingers would spread out and his mouth would screw up to one side, as if he could by any means force the ball into the pocket. Even I couldn’t stand it, and I say:

“That won’t do any good, sir.”

Very well. As he won this game, I says:

“This will make it one hundred and eighty rubles you owe me, and fifty games; and now I must go and get my supper.”

So I put up my cue, and went off.

I went and sat down all by myself, at a small table opposite the door; and I look in and see, and wonder what he will do. Well, what would you think? He began to walk up and down, up and down, probably thinking that no one’s looking at him; and then he would give a pull at his hair, and then walk up and down again, and keep muttering to himself; and then he would pull his hair again.

After that he wasn’t seen for a week. Once he came into the dining-room as gloomy as could be, but he didn’t enter the billiard-room.

The prince caught sight of him.

“Come,” says he, “let’s have a game.”

“No,” says the other, “I am not going to play any more.”

“Nonsense! come along.”

Yet I knew he was ready to play till dawn of day, provided there was money to be won. Stratagem, of course. And the other was all the more anxious to go on. “Come on! Come on!”

“No,—by God, I’m tired. Come,” says Fedot; “let’s go up-stairs; there you shall have your revanche.”

Up-stairs with us meant the place where the gentlemen used to play cards.

From that very day, Fedotka wound his net round him so that he began to come every day. He would play one or two games of billiards, and then proceed up-stairs, every day up-stairs.

What they used to do there, God only knows; but it is a fact that from that time he began to be an entirely different kind of man, and seemed hand in glove with Fedotka. Formerly he used to be stylish, neat in his dress, with his hair slightly curled even; but now it would be only in the morning that he would be anything like himself; but as soon as he had paid his visit up-stairs, he would not be at all like himself.

Once he came down from up-stairs with the prince, pale, his lips trembling, and talking excitedly.

“I cannot permit such a one as he is,” says he, “to say that I am not... “ How did he express himself? I cannot recollect, something like “not defined^[6] enough,” or what,—“and that he won’t play with me any more. I tell you I have paid him ten thousand, and I should think that he might be a little more considerate, before others, at least.”

“Oh, bother!” says the prince, “is it worth while to lose one’s temper with Fedotka?”

“No,” says the other, “I will not let it go so.”

“Why, old fellow, how can you think of such a thing as lowering yourself to have a row with Fedotka?”

“That is all very well; but there were strangers there, mind you.”

“Well, what of that? “ says the prince; “ strangers? Well, if you wish, I will go and make him ask your pardon.”

“No,” says the other.

And then they began to chatter in French, and I could not understand what it was they were talking about.

And what would you think of it? That very evening he and Fedotka ate supper together, and they became friends again.

Well and good. At other times again he would come alone.

“Well,” he would say, “do I play well?”

It’s our business, you know, to try to make everybody contented, and so I would say, “Yes, indeed;” and yet how could it be called good play, when he would poke about with his cue without any sense whatever.

And from that very evening when he took in with Fedotka, he began to play for money all the time. Formerly he didn’t care to play for stakes, even for a dinner or for champagne. Sometimes the prince would say:

“Let’s play for a bottle of champagne.”

“No,” he would say. “Let us rather have the wine by itself. Halloo, there! bring a bottle!”

And now he began to play for money all the time; he used to spend his entire days in our establishment. He would either play with some one in the billiard’ room, or he would go “up-stairs.”

Well, thinks I to myself, every one else gets something from him, why don’t I get some advantage out of it?

“Well, sir,” says I, one day, “it’s a long time since you have had a game with me.”

And so we began to play. Well, when I won ten half-rubles of him, I says:—

“Don’t you want to make it double or quit, sir?”

He said nothing. Formerly, if you remember, he would call me *durak*, fool, for such a boldness. But now we went to playing “quit or double.”

I won eighty rubles of him.

Well, what would you think? Since that first time he used to play with me every day. He would wait till there was no one about, for of course he would have been ashamed to play with a mere marker

in presence of others. Once he had got rather warmed up by the play (he already owed me sixty rubles), and so he says:

“Do you want to stake all you have won?”

“All right,” says I.

I won. “One hundred and twenty to one hundred and twenty?”

“All right,” says I.

Again I won. “Two hundred and forty against two hundred and forty?”

“Isn’t that too much?” I ask.

He made no reply. We played the game. Once more it was mine. “Four hundred and eighty against four hundred and eighty?”

I says, “Well, sir, I don’t want to wrong you. Let us make it a hundred rubles that you owe me, and call it square.”

You ought to have heard how he yelled at this, and yet he was not a proud man at all.

“Either play, or don’t play!” says he.

Well, I see there’s nothing to be done. “Three hundred and eighty, then, if you please,” says I.

I really wanted to lose. I allowed him forty points in advance. He stood fifty-two to my thirty-six. He began to cut the yellow one, and missed eighteen points; and I was standing just at the turning-point. I made a stroke so as to knock the ball off of the billiard-table. No so luck would have it. Do what I might, he even missed the doublet. I had won again.

“Listen,” says he. “Piotr,”—he did not call me Petrushka then,—“I can’t pay you the whole on the spot. In a couple of months I can pay three thousand even, if it were necessary.”

And there he stood just as red, and his voice kind of trembled.

“Very good, sir,” says I.

With this he laid down the cue. Then he began to walk up and down, up and down, the sweat running down his face.

“Piotr,” says he, “let ‘s try it again, double or quit.”

And he almost burst into tears.

“What, sir, what! would you play against such luck?”