

The Farmhand grunts and carries on chopping firewood as if he had never lost his earlier rhythm – rather like sounds deep inside a forest are briefly drowned out by a gust of wind, before returning. He groans, but not because of the physical exertion.

I wait with my back pressed against the wall until the sound of Henrik's steps has died away. I creep to the corner of the cowshed just in time to see the wiry figure disappear through the door. I stand still, with a throbbing in my throat that is rooted in my heart.

THE OLD MISTRESS

The hens are laying well. I was wise enough to pay for a good breed. I should teach the new girl to bake.

HENRIK

She has definitely not changed for the better. I said it upon leaving and I will say it again: a cow that no longer yields milk should be taken to the knacker's yard. Never mind honouring your mother, I might as well pay my respects to the whore of Babylon.

She stands with her back to me, merely to make a point. She fiddles with her hair, which already shows some grey. But I can see her neck trembling. The grandfather clock strikes in the corner and the new housemaid clatters about in the kitchen. The girl still has a lot to learn. Or is it too much to

ask that servants do their job without creating a din worthy of the Old Testament? That is what is wrong with these people. They are useless and lazy. They are bringing this country to ruin. I had to travel hundreds of versts to get here, only to hate my homeland all over again. In St Petersburg, I thought I could strip off this nation like a torn shirt, but it was not that easy. I bear the mark of Cain. It is not enough of a destiny for a man to be born at the wrong time, he also has to be born in the wrong place. And what's more, he has no stake in that place whatsoever.

Mother turns suddenly, as if spun round by a gust of wind. Her face looks pale in the slanting light. The wrinkles that begin at the corners of her eyes and the sides of her nose have deepened, and the skin under her chin has loosened. 'What sort of a place is it, then?' she asks.

'There's no other city like it,' I reply. 'There are more fountains there than there are houses in Turku, and Nevsky Prospect is so packed with carriages you can scarcely squeeze between them. There's progress, well-being, plenty of rich folk. Not even Stockholm can compete.'

Her eyelids don't flicker. 'If it's so grand there, wouldn't you have been better off staying?'

I will not lose my temper; I will not give her the satisfaction. I answer, 'Yes, of course, but history's being made. Good men are needed here, now that we're lucky enough to be part of the Empire.'