AMOVOI is a typical Russian village of about three hundred inhabitants, fifty or sixty dilapidated log houses and twice as many barns and stables. Two small smoked windows with glaring red or blue frames and smutty looking straw roofs without chimneys are seen at each house. All the smoke caused by making the fire and cooking the meals passes out through the open door. To build a chimney costs three rubles, and as the villagers do not know how to make one and are too poor to pay for having it done they are obliged to do without such a luxury.

"Maria, a letter has come. Hurry and tell Vassili and everyone you know that a letter has just come for Peter, the blacksmith. Ilia, the policeman, brought it, and gave it to Tatiana, Peter’s wife, because Peter was not at home. She was greatly surprised at receiving it and concealed it tremblingly behind the holy picture. She, poor angel, became so pale and excited over the incident that she neglected to feed her cows, sheep and pigs. She herself has not eaten anything—now she has no appetite. I was there nearly an hour and saw everything. I saw the letter—the yellow envelope with the two blue stamps. The cows low and the pigs grunt in the yard—hungry—I pitied them—gave them some hay and potatoes—but what do I know about feeding another man’s animals? I am a stranger. Poor, poor Tatiana!" Thus hastily spoke Filip, a tall, lean and gray-bearded peasant of the village of Lamovoi.

"A letter for Peter?" queried Maria, with surprise. She was a stolid looking woman of forty, standing at the open door of her house, where Filip, dressed in a dirty looking ragged sheepskin fur had paused. "How did it happen?" she queried. "Is it an important letter and do you know who sent it?"

"O, dorogoi—my dear! I don’t know that and neither does she because she did not dare open it. Since I can remember no letter has ever been opened in Lamovoi by the person to whom it was handed. Only the one to whom it is addressed or the priest has the right to open it. I remember twenty years back and during that time eighteen letters have come to our village," muttered Filip proudly, gazing at the clouds.

"Filip, that’s great news indeed. A letter—to Lamovoi—that is unusual," said Maria, gravely shaking her head and gesticulating vehemently, while Filip stood silent as a statue. "I will put out my fire and not bother any more with the cooking and the preparations for dinner. A letter has come—who then has time to eat a dinner or to sit quietly in the house? Let us go first to Vassili, for he is so
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wise, and the oldest man of the village, and then we will see some others.”

Maria disappeared hastily into the room, for she realized that to
tell her neighbors that a letter had come would prove the most extra-
ordinary news that she could give. Filip stood solemnly like a sentinel
outside the door in the street, his thoughts turning to the letter. In
a few minutes Maria returned wearing her blue apron and a new red
scarf around her head, which she put on only during the festival days
when she went to church or made her important visits.

“But can you guess from whom the letter might be?” began
Maria in a melancholy voice. “Poor Tatiana! She must be ex-
cited. Is Viera, her daughter, not at home? Perhaps she became
so frightened at the incident that she went away. Well, well! After
I am through with my calls I will go and feed her animals. I will take
also some sugar and vodka and make her a cup of hot punch. Vodka
with hot water and sugar is good for excitement. But where is Peter,
her husband?”

“He is in the woods getting timber,” replied Filip. “He will
not be at home until late in the evening, unless a messenger is sent
immediately. I imagine how surprised he will be when he hears
that a letter has come. I think it is the second letter he has ever
received. But the question is, who can read the letter?”

“H’m; I do not know a single man at Lamovoi who can read.
I do not know even anyone at Velikoe, and Velikoe is twice as large
a village as ours,” spoke Maria more gravely than before.

“I know many people at Velikoe who can read a book,” replied
Filip, lighting his pipe, “but I think hardly anyone there can read
or write a letter, except Father John, the priest. I am sure he will
gladly read it, because he has read more than five letters for our
people. As I remember, he has never asked any pay, either, except
two quarts of vodka and one small pig. God give him health.”

“P’st, Filip,” whispered Maria, as if being reminded of something
very important. “I know a man who is in our village now, who can
read it. He arrived last evening. They say he is a soldier and a
friend of Vassili—his name is Vasska. Maybe you remember him.
He sings merry songs, accompanies them with concertina, reads news-
papers and writes letters of all kinds? Two years ago he was in our
village. The funny songs he sang and the wonderful dances he
performed made everybody laugh. He is dressed in black, carries
always pencil and paper with him and writes letters as well as the
priest. The only trouble with him is that he gets drunk after two
glasses of vodka and loses his head. He cannot drink as much vodka
as our men, without getting drunk.”
"That's the trouble with all the people who can read and write," interrupted Filip. "They cannot drink as much vodka as, for instance, Peter or I, without losing their heads. That is the result of education. You know when I wanted to educate my son Nica, the priest John said to me: 'Don't be a fool and send your son to a school. The school will spoil him. He will become a drunkard or a thief. It will be better for you both to leave him without education.' I think the batushka (priest) was right. He would not say that unless he knows. I have observed myself that the men who can read and write are worse than those who cannot. After reading books and writing letters and silly things they begin to brood upon things which they have read and they become troubled, ill and unhappy. Look at our doctor, the priest and the landlord, look at all the educated city people and you see how much more they are worried and distressed than we are. They are not happy and education never brings happiness. They sleep more, eat better and live in better houses than we do, but nevertheless they look pale and sickly. The Czar and the priests must be aware of this fact; that's the reason they object to education and the schools."

"God knows that," answered Maria, and pondering a few moments, she continued: "I think they are not sincere in refusing to allow us to educate our children. The priest and the Czar believe that their children should be taught to read books and write letters, but they don't like it that we, the peasants, should educate our children. But one thing which I cannot understand is how being able to read and write is bad for one."

Filip gazed gravely at Maria, lifted his hand and said:

"Maria, I know that. It is because education was originated not by the Holy Ghost, but by the old devil himself. God, for instance, does not know how to read a book, neither does He know how to read a letter. But the devil is a clever chap and knows how to do both. Had God understood reading and writing He would not need the priest to read to Him the prayers in the church every Sunday. The priest reads all the prayers and sermons from the book, because God does not know how to read them Himself."

Maria looked with surprise at Filip, for she never had discussed such questions with the men, and after thinking a moment replied:

"If that is so, then the priest must be a disciple of the devil for he writes and reads."

"No, no," shouted Filip, energetically shaking his head. "That is not so. The priest has been shrewd enough to learn how to read and write from the old devil, but he has nothing to do with him now. He reads and writes for God, who is too old to learn from the priest."
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“Oh, I see. That is very curious. So God is an uneducated man like all our village people. ‘How glad I am to hear that.’

They walked a distance without any conversation, for Vassili’s house was the last, back of the village. Then Filip stopped and began:

“Now, Maria, do you remember how long it is since Vassili got a letter from Vasska, the same man who is now staying with him? I remember he wrote to Vassili that he wanted to marry a girl from Lamovoi, because the cows and pigs, which are given as dowry to a girl, are fatter and of much better breed here than those of any other village. He wrote also that he liked our maids because they knew how to make coffee, bake white bread and cook delicious meals.”

“Oh, I remember now,” replied Maria. “Three days previous to that my hen had hatched the chickens which are now six months old. That was in summer. All the people of the village listened, breathless, to the priest as he read that letter in Vassili’s garden. A pig was roasted for that occasion and the priest ate with great appetite. I made tea and Peter brought some vodka. That was a great time.”

Thus chatting, Filip and Maria arrived at the house of Vassili, which they entered with serious faces.

The news that Peter had received a letter spread like wildfire throughout the village. The topic of conversation everywhere was—the letter. The women, appearing at the open doors and windows, showed excited and curious faces. Scores of ragged children walked around the house of Peter, curious to know in which place the letter was kept. Tatiana, Peter’s wife, sat dejectedly in the room near the holy picture and seemed careworn and pale. She looked as if something of the greatest importance had happened.

After a general consultation on the part of Filip, Vassili and the other notables of the village, a messenger was sent to Peter to tell him to come home immediately.

The coming of a letter was always the most exciting event at Lamovoi, and for many weeks afterward it remained the leading subject in the minds of the villagers. One letter, as a rule, was received during the year; and this was read aloud before the whole population of the village and the day was made a sort of festival. The life in Lamovoi was one without books and letters—a good and happy life, as Filip and all the people themselves believed. That there could be a better and more perfect life anywhere else in the world was not dreamed of by anyone.

Peter hurried back from the woods with the messenger. Grave and stern was his look as he passed the dozen boys who stood at the corners of the streets. Their behavior to Peter was more respectful
than it had been ever before, as they whispered to each other in awe: “Peter has a letter.”

As he entered the house his wife in her holiday dress met him at the door, grasped his hand with tears in her eyes and muttered:

“God be praised that you are here! I put it behind the holy picture. It is in a yellow envelope, with two blue stamps—and heavy. When will you have it read? Do you intend to invite the priest? A pig will have to be killed and roasted in honor of the reading.”

Peter sighed and his long face grew still longer. He took off his sheepskin fur, washed his hands, and walked gravely to the holy picture. Standing there reverently he crossed himself nine times, knelt before the picture nine times, and repeated his sacred prayer nine times. After being through with that he tremulously removed the letter from its hiding place, turned it over and over in his hands, examining it as carefully as possible. Putting it in a big wooden box he said:

“Tatiana, my dove, I will not open it now. The messenger boy told me that Vasska, a friend of Vassili, is in the village. Two years ago he was Vassili’s guest and talked and joked with our Viera more than with any other maid—you will probably remember him? I did not like him because he shaved off his beard, cut short his hair and wore a silver watch with a gilded chain. To my mind a man who does those things is vain and haughty. Otherwise he was a congenial fellow, and as he can read and write letters it will not be necessary for us to invite the priest.”

“Oh, yes. I know him. He liked our cows and pigs. He asked me how many cows and pigs I would give as a marriage gift with Viera,” replied Tatiana, leaning her head on her right hand while gesticulating in the air with the left.

Several hours passed. It was now evening. No one in the village owned a watch, but the people could tell the time at night by the stars and during the day by the sun. The room in which the letter was to be read was filled with people. This room, though the largest, was not large enough to accommodate all.

Between Filip and Vasska, the stranger, who had been invited to read the letter, sat Peter, holding the big wooden box which enclosed the letter. As he drew it forth one could hear the beating of the hearts of the assembly, so great was the attention.

“Vasska, I request you to be so good as to read the letter for us which came today,” spoke Peter with a grave voice, turning to Vasska. Then Vasska glanced at Peter, who tremblingly kept the letter. As Vasska hesitated, he smiled.
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“Don’t you want to read it?” asked Filip excitedly, looking with surprise at Vasska. Vasska burst out laughing. He laughed so long and so loud that the people did not know what to make of it. At last he whispered:

“This is the funniest incident in my life.”

Then he coughed, chuckled and replied:

“Very well. I will read it to you.”

“Hush! Be quiet!” said Peter to the audience, shaking his finger.

Vasska then opened the envelope, unrolled a small photograph and handed it to Peter who began to stare at it while Vasska began his reading:

“My dear Peter and Tatiana:

“Without shaking your hands and seeing your faces, I greet you as one whom you know. I have something important at my heart which I will explain to you in this letter. I want it to be a secret among ourselves.

“Two years ago you had some nice looking cows, pretty pigs and a nice red carriage, which you said you would give as a marriage gift with your daughter, Viera. I think I could use them now. But I want you to add to these two new suits of home-made clothes, one for me and the other for my old father. Please let me know immediately if these and Viera are still at your disposal? If so, will you then give them all to me? I enclose my picture which will impress you sufficiently. I will suit your daughter better than will anyone else in Lamovoi. I will never abuse her, never get up before sunrise and never refuse to buy a new apron whenever she likes. I remain your old friend—Ha, ha, ha!”

Vasska laughed again and said that his reading was finished. Everyone rushed to get a glimpse of the picture, everyone touched the letter and smelled it. At last the picture was passed to Viera. She gazed upon it, tittered and showed it to her friends. Peter took the letter and picture, stood up and asked Viera gravely:

“What is your opinion?”

“I’m,” replied Vassili. “We have all heard the letter and seen the picture, but I would not suggest that you marry your daughter and get rid of your property by mail. Two cows as a gift to Viera are really too many. And besides he wishes to have the two best pigs, your new red carriage and the two suits of clothes. Viera is a pretty, healthy and strong girl and does not need such a heavy dowry. When the city people marry their daughters they do not give even one cow
as a marriage gift. This man demands too much. Judging from his picture he is not worth much himself. For instance he wears a white collar and a yellow necktie like the city people. He is, no doubt, a conceited man."

"That is not all," interrupted Filip; "I never heard of anyone marrying by letter. Letters and books are invented by the devil and you must not sell your daughter in this way. You know that even the Czar does not marry his daughters by mail. Write him a reply, and say that we at Lamovoi have no cows or pigs for men who like to marry a girl by mail."

"Viera, do you think you would like him?" asked Tatiana, her mother, her eyes full of tears.

"No, no," shouted Viera. "I dislike him. His hair is short and his coat looks so silly. He must be a loafer according to his picture. I do not care to have my cows and pigs owned by a man like that."

"That's right," added Vassili. "But, Vasska, what do you think? Should Peter give his daughter, his cows and pigs to such a stranger?"

"I think he ought to give them," spoke Vasska, and his face was very pale and his hands trembled.

Peter scanned him mutely and replied:

"Vasska, if you were the man, who would ask for my cows, pigs and Viera I would not hesitate to give them. You are a man whom we would like to have at Lamovoi, for you would write and read our letters, play the concertina and sing. Viera would not have any objection to you. Isn't that so?"

Viera looked from her father to Vasska, blushed and sobbed:

"Vasska is a man whom our cows and pigs would like, and no dog in Lamovoi barks at him. I have conversed and danced with him and know that he is worthy of any maid at Lamovoi."

"Are you in earnest? Would you give me both the pink cows, both of last year's pigs, the new red carriage, the two suits of clothes and Viera?" asked Vasska with an excited voice, grasping Peter's hand. Viera smiled and blushed once more.

"Gladly, Vasska," replied Peter. "Well, Vassili and Filip, have your horses harnessed and let us drive to the priest. I think it is not necessary to waste any more time on this subject. I would like to get rid of my cows, pigs, red carriage and Viera. The priest knows how to join man to woman and we know how to celebrate the wedding ceremony."

"A marriage, the marriage of Vasska and Viera!" roared the children outside.

"I am happy—so happy," spoke Vasska, with glowing eyes, looking out of the window at the cows and the pigs in the street which

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were soon to be his property. Viera rushed to dress herself and to get ready the two suits of clothes. Peter in the meanwhile approached Vasska and said:

"Vasska, write a good and strong reply to that man whose letter you read us. You know how to write. Say that my cows, pigs and other things are disposed of. I would not give anything through a letter to a man like him. You might also add that after finishing the writing you will be the owner of them all. Curse him as heavily as you know how."

Vasska smiled and hesitated. Peter and all the other men of the village insisted that Vasska should write immediately. After a pause Vasska rose from his seat and said:

"It is not possible to write him, for I myself am the fool who sent the letter and picture. A week ago I mailed the letter and waited the reply. But the reply did not come and I could not longer wait for the answer so I came personally, but my letter had arrived at the same time. The letter and the picture which you condemned were mine."

"Ugh, all the saints be praised!" exclaimed Peter crossing himself. All the people in the assembly shouted also:

"That's incredible! Impossible! Oh, God be gracious."

"Vasska, is that really your letter and picture? Is it not much wiser to get married without a letter?" sobbed Viera, who had meanwhile returned, dressed for the ceremony.

"I think Vasska is joking, and we must not believe his jokes," said Tatiana, laughing.

Filip who had taken the letter and smelled it, said:

"It has the smell of the devil's fingers. It is surely not written by Vasska. You may all smell it."

Everyone was curious to smell it, for it was perfumed with an odor which nobody in the village had ever smelled. After the letter and picture were smelled by everybody Maria seized them and threw them out into the yard. At this the pigs, which were to be Viera's wedding gift, got frightened and ran away as fast as they could.

"Now look out," exclaimed Filip. "The pigs of Viera don't like them. They smell the wrong things pretty well from the right. No more letters to Lamovoi. We don't need them."

The people laughed and joked and started to drive to the church. In a few hours the church was filled. Viera and Vasska stood with happy faces and crowned heads before the altar. The priest solemnly read the marriage sermon. The guests thought of the wedding, the meals and the vodka; Viera's mind was busy with the letter and the two new suits of clothes; but Vasska's thoughts turned toward the cows, the pigs and the new red carriage.