

# *A Problem*



**ANTON CHEKHOV**

**TRANSLATED BY CONSTANCE GARNETT**

The strictest measures were taken that the Uskovs' family secret might not leak out and become generally known. Half of the servants were sent off to the theater or the circus; the other half were sitting in the kitchen and not allowed to leave it. Orders were given that no one was to be admitted. The wife of the Colonel, her sister, and the governess, though they had been initiated into the secret, kept up a **pretense** of knowing nothing; they sat in the dining room and did not show themselves in the drawing room or the hall.

Sasha Uskov, the young man of twenty-five who was the cause of all the commotion, had arrived some time before, and by the advice of kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch, his uncle, who was taking his part, he sat meekly in the hall by the door leading to the study, and prepared himself to make an open, **candid** explanation.

The other side of the door, in the study, a family council was being held. The subject under discussion was an exceedingly disagreeable and delicate one. Sasha Uskov had cashed at one of the banks a false promissory note,<sup>1</sup> and it had become due for payment three days before, and now his two paternal uncles and Ivan Markovitch, the brother of his dead mother, were deciding the question whether they should pay the money and save the family honor, or wash their hands of it and leave the case to go to trial.

To outsiders who have no personal interest in the matter such questions seem simple; for those who are so unfortunate as to have to decide them in earnest they are extremely difficult. The uncles had been talking for a long time, but the problem seemed no nearer decision.

"My friends!" said the uncle who was a colonel, and there was a note of exhaustion and bitterness in his voice. "Who says that family honor is a mere convention? I don't say that at all. I am only warning you against a false view; I am pointing out the possibility of an unpardonable mistake. How can you fail to see it? I am not speaking Chinese; I am speaking Russian!"

"My dear fellow, we do understand," Ivan Markovitch protested mildly.

"How can you understand if you say that I don't believe in family honor? I repeat once more; fa-mil-y ho-nor false-ly un-der-stood is a prejudice! Falsely understood! That's what I say: whatever may be the motives for screening a scoundrel, whoever he may be, and helping him to escape punishment, it is contrary to law and unworthy of a gentleman. It's not saving the family honor; it's civic cowardice! Take the army, for instance. . . . The honor of the army is more precious to us than any other honor, yet we don't screen

#### ◀ Critical Viewing

Based on this painting, what do you expect the mood of the story will be?

#### ◀ Vocabulary

**pretense** (prē tens') *n.*  
a pretending; a false show of something

**candid** (kan' did)  
*adj.* honest; direct

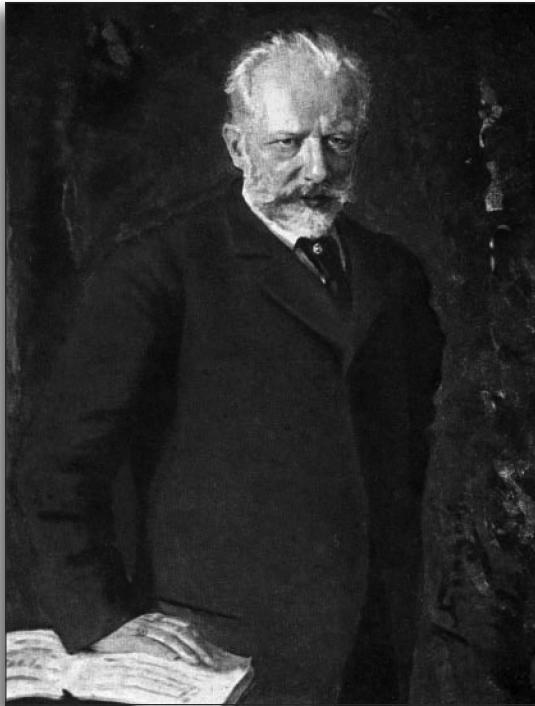
#### Comprehension

Why is Sasha in trouble?

1. **promissory note** written promise to pay a specified sum on demand; an IOU.

### Character and Characterization

Contrast the Colonel's position with Ivan Markovitch's. What does this contrast indirectly reveal about the two?



### Vocabulary ►

**lofty** (lôf' tē)

*adj.* elevated in character; noble

our guilty members, but condemn them. And does the honor of the army suffer in consequence? Quite the opposite!”

The other paternal uncle, an official in the Treasury, a taciturn, dull-witted, and rheumatic man, sat silent, or spoke only of the fact that the Uskovs' name would get into the newspapers if the case went for trial. His opinion was that the case ought to be hushed up from the first and not become public property; but, apart from publicity in the newspapers, he advanced no other argument in support of this opinion.

The maternal uncle, kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch, spoke smoothly, softly, and with a tremor in his voice. He began with saying that youth has its rights and its peculiar temptations. Which of us has not been young, and who has not been led astray? To say nothing of ordinary mortals, even great men have not escaped errors and mistakes in their youth. Take, for instance, the biography of great writers. Did not every one of them gamble, drink, and draw down upon himself the anger of right-thinking people in his young days? If Sasha's error bordered upon crime, they must remember that Sasha had received practically no education; he had been expelled from the high school in the fifth class; he had lost his parents in early childhood, and so had been left at the tenderest age without guidance and good, benevolent influences. He was nervous, excitable, had no firm ground under his feet, and, above all,

he had been unlucky. Even if he were guilty, anyway he deserved indulgence<sup>2</sup> and the sympathy of all compassionate souls. He ought, of course, to be punished, but he was punished as it was by his conscience and the agonies he was enduring now while awaiting the sentence of his relations. The comparison with the army made by the Colonel was delightful, and did credit to his lofty intelligence; his appeal to their feeling of public duty spoke for the chivalry of his soul, but they must not forget that in each individual the citizen is closely linked with the Christian. . . .

“Shall we be false to civic duty,” Ivan Markovitch exclaimed passionately, “if instead of punishing an erring boy we hold out to him a helping hand?”

Ivan Markovitch talked further of family honor. He had not the honor to belong to the Uskov family himself, but he knew their distinguished family went back to the thirteenth century; he did

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2. **indulgence** (in dul' jəns) *n.* forgiveness; tolerance.

not forget for a minute, either, that his precious, beloved sister had been the wife of one of the representatives of that name. In short, the family was dear to him for many reasons, and he refused to admit the idea that, for the sake of a paltry fifteen hundred rubles,<sup>3</sup> a blot should be cast on the escutcheon<sup>4</sup> that was beyond all price. If all the motives he had brought forward were not sufficiently convincing, he, Ivan Markovitch, in conclusion, begged his listeners to ask themselves what was meant by crime? Crime is an immoral act founded upon ill-will. But is the will of man free? Philosophy has not yet given a positive answer to that question. Different views were held by the learned. The latest school of Lombroso,<sup>5</sup> for instance, denies the freedom of the will, and considers every crime as the product of the purely anatomical peculiarities of the individual.

“Ivan Markovitch,” said the Colonel, in a voice of entreaty, “we are talking seriously about an important matter, and you bring in Lombroso, you clever fellow. Think a little, what are you saying all this for? Can you imagine that all your thunderings and rhetoric will furnish an answer to the question?” •

Sasha Uskov sat at the door and listened. He felt neither terror, shame, nor depression, but only weariness and inward emptiness. It seemed to him that it made absolutely no difference to him whether they forgave him or not; he had come here to hear his sentence and to explain himself simply because kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch had begged him to do so. He was not afraid of the future. It made no difference to him where he was: here in the hall, in prison, or in Siberia.

“If Siberia, then let it be Siberia, damn it all!”

He was sick of life and found it insufferably hard. He was inextricably involved in debt; he had not a farthing<sup>6</sup> in his pocket; his family had become **detestable** to him; he would have to part from his friends and his women sooner or later, as they had begun to be too contemptuous of his sponging on them. The future looked black.

Sasha was indifferent, and was only disturbed by one circumstance; the other side of the door they were calling him a scoundrel and a criminal. Every minute he was on the point of jumping up, bursting into the study and shouting in answer to the detestable metallic voice of the Colonel:

“You are lying!”

3. **rubles** (rōō' belz) *n.* A ruble is the basic unit of Russian currency.

4. **escutcheon** (e skuch' ən) *n.* shield displaying a family's coat of arms, symbol of its nobility.

5. **Lombroso** Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), an Italian criminologist who believed that criminals were of a distinct human type and were led to crime by hereditary, inborn characteristics.

6. **farthing** (fār' thin) *n.* coin of little value.

### Make Inferences

Based on Sasha's thoughts, what can you infer about how mature he is?

### ◀ Vocabulary

**detestable** (dē tes' tə bəl) *adj.* deserving hate or scorn; offensive

### Comprehension

What is one reason Ivan Markovitch wants to help Sasha?

### Critical Viewing ►

How is the painting similar to or different from your mental image of the Uskovs' home?

### Character and Characterization

How do Sasha's thoughts about himself compare with what you have learned about his character?

"Criminal" is a dreadful word—that is what murderers, thieves, robbers are; in fact, wicked and morally hopeless people. And Sasha was very far from being all that. . . . It was true he owed a great deal and did not pay his debts. But debt is not a crime, and it is unusual for a man not to be in debt. The Colonel and Ivan Markovitch were both in debt. . . .

"What have I done wrong besides?" Sasha wondered.

He had discounted a forged note. But all the young men he knew did the same. Handrikov and Von Burst always forged IOU's from their parents or friends when their allowances were not paid at the regular time, and then when they got their money from home they redeemed them before they became due. Sasha had done the same, but had not redeemed the IOU because he had not got the money which Handrikov had promised to lend him. He was not to blame; it was the fault of circumstances. It was true that the use of another person's signature was considered reprehensible; but, still, it was not a crime but a generally accepted dodge, an ugly formality which injured no one and was quite harmless, for in forging the Colonel's signature Sasha had had no intention of causing anybody damage or loss.

"No, it doesn't mean that I am a criminal . . ." thought Sasha.

"And it's not in my character to bring myself to commit a crime. I am soft, emotional. . . . When I have the money I help the poor. . . ."

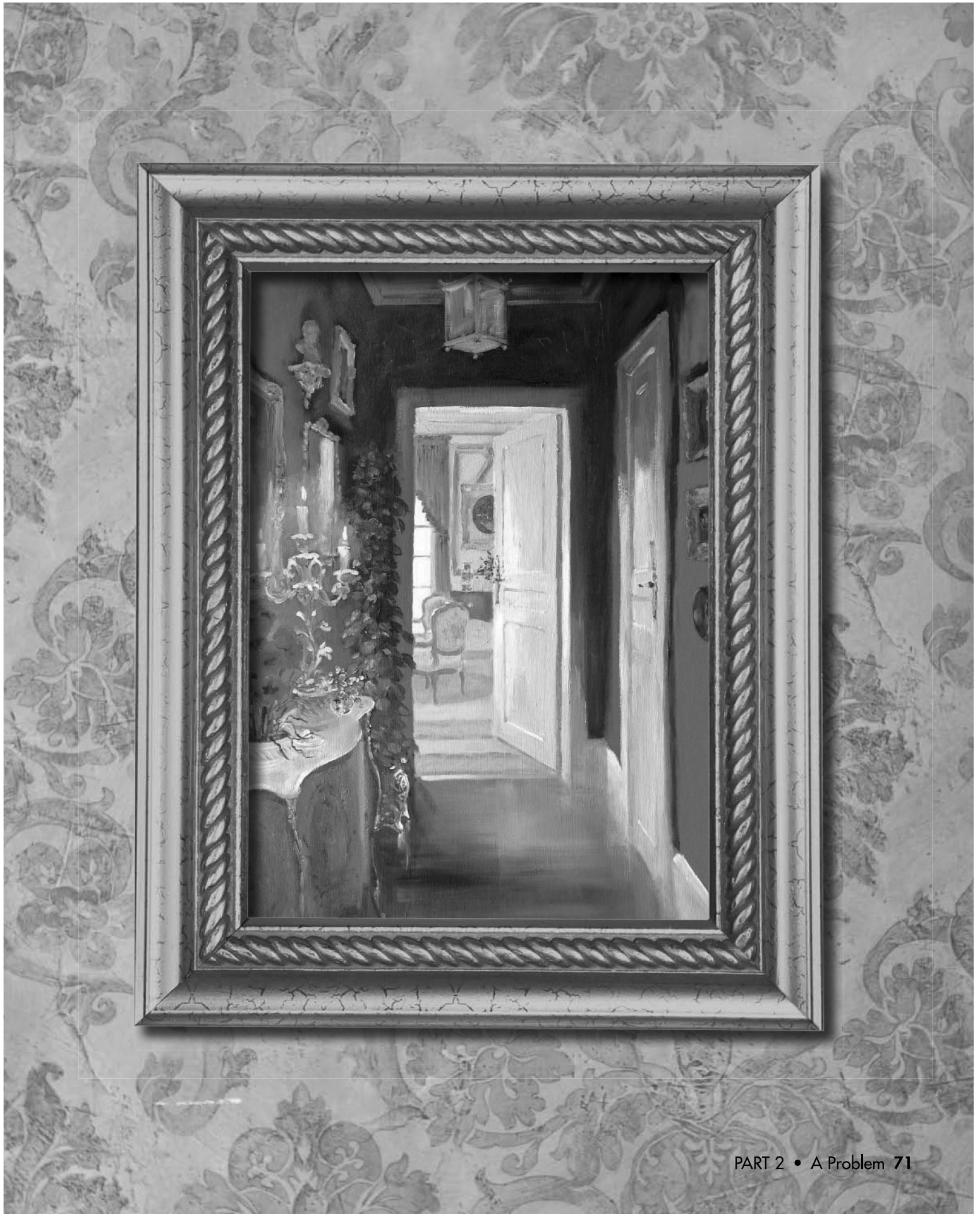
Sasha was musing after this fashion while they went on talking the other side of the door.

"But, my friends, this is endless," the Colonel declared, getting excited. "Suppose we were to forgive him and pay the money. You know he would not give up leading a dissipated life, squandering money, making debts, going to our tailors and ordering suits in our names! Can you guarantee that this will be his last prank? As far as I am concerned, I have no faith whatever in his reforming!"

The official of the Treasury muttered something in reply; after him Ivan Markovitch began talking blandly and suavely again. The Colonel moved his chair impatiently and drowned the other's words with his detestable metallic voice. At last the door opened and Ivan Markovitch came out of the study; there were patches of red on his cleanshaven face.

"Come along," he said, taking Sasha by the hand. "Come and speak frankly from your heart. Without pride, my dear boy, humbly and from your heart."

Sasha went into the study. The official of the Treasury was sitting down; the Colonel was standing before the table with one hand in his pocket and one knee on a chair. It was smoky and stifling in the study. Sasha did not look at the official or the Colonel; he felt



### Spiral Review

**PLOT** What conflict are readers suddenly aware of in this scene?

### Character and Characterization

How does the writer reveal without directly stating it that Sasha is not sorry?

### Vocabulary ►

**subdued** (səb dōōd')  
*adj.* quiet; lacking energy

### Make Inferences

Based on Ivan's response and your knowledge of families, make an inference about the uncles' feelings for Sasha's mother.

suddenly ashamed and uncomfortable. He looked uneasily at Ivan Markovitch and muttered:

"I'll pay it . . . I'll give it back. . . ."

"What did you expect when you discounted the IOU?" he heard a metallic voice.

"I . . . Handrikov promised to lend me the money before now."

Sasha could say no more. He went out of the study and sat down again on the chair near the door. He would have been glad to go away altogether at once, but he was choking with hatred and he awfully wanted to remain, to tear the Colonel to pieces, to say something rude to him. He sat trying to think of something violent and effective to say to his hated uncle, and at that moment a woman's figure, shrouded in the twilight, appeared at the drawing room door. It was the Colonel's wife. She beckoned Sasha to her, and, wringing her hands, said, weeping:

"*Alexandre*, I know you don't like me, but . . . listen to me; listen, I beg you. . . . But, my dear, how can this have happened? Why, it's awful, awful! For goodness' sake, beg them, defend yourself, entreat them."

Sasha looked at her quivering shoulders, at the big tears that were rolling down her cheeks, heard behind his back the hollow, nervous voices of worried and exhausted people, and shrugged his shoulders. He had not in the least expected that his aristocratic relations would raise such a tempest over a paltry fifteen hundred rubles! He could not understand her tears nor the quiver of their voices. •

An hour later he heard that the Colonel was getting the best of it; the uncles were finally inclining to let the case go for trial.

"The matter's settled," said the Colonel, sighing. "Enough."

After this decision all the uncles, even the emphatic Colonel, became noticeably depressed. A silence followed.

"Merciful Heavens!" sighed Ivan Markovitch. "My poor sister!"

And he began saying in a **subdued** voice that most likely his sister, Sasha's mother, was present unseen in the study at that moment. He felt in his soul how the unhappy, saintly woman was weeping, grieving, and begging for her boy. For the sake of her peace beyond the grave, they ought to spare Sasha.

The sound of a muffled sob was heard. Ivan Markovitch was weeping and muttering something which it was impossible to catch through the door. The Colonel got up and paced from corner to corner. The long conversation began over again.

But then the clock in the drawing room struck two. The family council was over. To avoid seeing the person who had moved him to



such wrath, the Colonel went from the study, not into the hall, but into the vestibule. . . . Ivan Markovitch came out into the hall. . . . He was agitated and rubbing his hands joyfully. His tear-stained eyes looked good-humored and his mouth was twisted into a smile.

“Capital,” he said to Sasha. “Thank God! You can go home, my dear, and sleep tranquilly. We have decided to pay the sum, but on condition that you repent and come with me tomorrow into the country and set to work.”

A minute later Ivan Markovitch and Sasha in their greatcoats and caps were going down the stairs. The uncle was muttering something **edifying**. Sasha did not listen, but felt as though some uneasy weight were gradually slipping off his shoulders. They had forgiven him; he was free! A gust of joy sprang up within him and sent a sweet chill to his heart. He longed to breathe, to move swiftly, to live! Glancing at the street lamps and the black sky, he remembered that Von Burst was celebrating his name day<sup>7</sup> that evening at the “Bear,” and again a rush of joy flooded his soul. . . .

“I am going!” he decided.

But then he remembered he had not a farthing, that the companions he was going to would despise him at once for his empty pockets. He must get hold of some money, come what may!

“Uncle, lend me a hundred rubles,” he said to Ivan Markovitch.

His uncle, surprised, looked into his face and backed against a lamppost.

“Give it to me,” said Sasha, shifting impatiently from one foot to the other and beginning to pant. “Uncle, I entreat you, give me a hundred rubles.”



#### ◀ Vocabulary

**edifying** (ed' i fī' in)

adj. instructive in such a way as to improve morally or intellectually

*They had forgiven him; he was free!*

*A gust of joy sprang up within him and sent a sweet chill to his heart. He longed to breathe, to move swiftly, to live!*

#### Comprehension

What decision do the uncles come to regarding Sasha?

7. **name day** feast day of the saint after whom a person is named.



### Character and Characterization

In what way does Sasha's character develop at the end of the story?

His face worked; he trembled, and seemed on the point of attacking his uncle. . . .

"Won't you?" he kept asking, seeing that his uncle was still amazed and did not understand. "Listen. If you don't, I'll give myself up tomorrow! I won't let you pay the IOU! I'll present another false note tomorrow!"

Petrified, muttering something incoherent in his horror, Ivan Markovitch took a hundred-ruble note out of his pocketbook and gave it to Sasha. The young man took it and walked rapidly away from him. . . .

Taking a sledge, Sasha grew calmer, and felt a rush of joy within him again. The "rights of youth" of which kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch had spoken at the family council woke up and asserted themselves. Sasha pictured the drinking party before him, and, among the bottles, the women, and his friends, the thought flashed through his mind:

"Now I see that I am a criminal; yes, I am a criminal."

## Language Study

**Vocabulary** The words listed below appear in "A Problem." Answer each question that follows. Then, explain how the meaning of the underlined word influences your answer.

**candid      subdued      pretense      lofty      edifying**

1. Why might you expect a candid answer from a good friend?
2. When might it be a good idea to keep your conversation subdued?
3. Is someone who displays a pretense of wealth actually rich?
4. What lofty goals might an aspiring leader have?
5. When might a child expect an edifying speech from an adult?

### WORD STUDY

The **Latin suffix -able** means "worthy of; capable of being." In this story, Sasha finds the Colonel's voice **detestable**, or worthy of being hated.

### Word Study

**Part A** Explain how the **Latin suffix -able** contributes to the meanings of these words: *admirable*, *calculable*, and *negotiable*. Consult a dictionary if necessary.

**Part B** Use the context of the sentences and what you know about the Latin suffix **-able** to explain your answer to each question.

1. If you have a *curable* disease, is it likely that you will eventually feel better?
2. When an athlete makes a *remarkable* play, do spectators usually cheer?



## Literary Analysis

### Key Ideas and Details

1. **(a)** Why is Sasha in trouble? **(b) Compare and Contrast:** Use details from the story to compare or contrast the position each uncle takes toward Sasha's problem.
2. **Make Inferences** How does Sasha feel about having been caught doing wrong? On which story details is your inference based?
3. **Make Inferences (a)** How does Sasha see himself at the end of the story? **(b)** How does he arrive at this perception? Support your answer with story details.

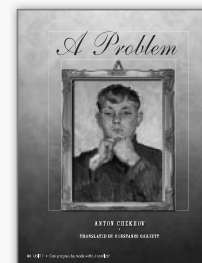
### Craft and Structure

4. **Characterization** Citing details from the story, compare and contrast the characters of Ivan Markovitch and the Colonel.
5. **Characterization (a)** Using a chart like the one shown, cite three examples of indirect characterization used to portray Sasha. Choose one from the beginning, one from the middle, and one from the end of the story. **(b)** With what aspects of life is Sasha primarily concerned? Explain. **(c)** In what ways, if any, does the character of Sasha develop over the course of the story? Explain.
6. **Characterization (a)** Cite two examples of dialogue from Sasha and two from Ivan. **(b)** What does each example reveal about the two characters' differences? Explain.

### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. **Draw Conclusions:** What can you conclude about the view of human nature portrayed in this story? Support your answer with details about the characters of Sasha, the Colonel, and Ivan Markovitch.
8. **(a) Evaluate:** Does Ivan Markovitch's attitude help or harm Sasha? Explain. **(b) Take a Position:** Would it have been better for Sasha if the family had chosen to send him to prison? Explain your response.

9. **THE BIG ?** **Can progress be made without conflict? (a)** In his support for Sasha, how does Ivan Markovitch define progress? Explain. **(b)** Did Ivan Markovitch make progress with the other uncles in his fight for Sasha? Why or why not? **(c)** Explain why Sasha did or did not learn his lesson after being given a second chance. Cite text evidence to support your answer.



#### What He Says

#### What He Does

#### What Others Say About Him

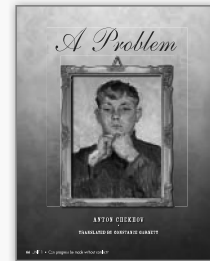
#### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

As you write and speak about "A Problem," use the words related to conflict that you explored on page 3 of this textbook.



## Conventions: Verb Tenses

A **verb** is a word that expresses existence, action, or occurrence. A **tense** is a form of a verb that indicates when an action or a condition occurs in time. All verbs have six basic tenses: present, past, future, present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect.



### Six Basic Verb Tenses

|                |                                 |                        |  |
|----------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| <b>Present</b> | He <i>arrives</i> today.        | <b>Present Perfect</b> | He <i>has arrived</i> already.               |
| <b>Past</b>    | He <i>arrived</i> yesterday.    | <b>Past Perfect</b>    | He <i>had arrived</i> earlier than expected. |
| <b>Future</b>  | He <i>will arrive</i> tomorrow. | <b>Future Perfect</b>  | He <i>will have arrived</i> by next week.    |

In most cases, tenses should not be mixed. Compare these examples:

**Mixed Tenses:** Kei *has knocked* and *waited* patiently at the door. Nothing *happens*. Kei *had decided* to leave.

**Consistent Tense:** Kei *knocked* and *waited* patiently at the door. Nothing *happened*. Kei *decided* to leave.

Mixing tenses is correct only when a sentence refers to actions occurring at two different times: Kei *had waited* for ten minutes before the door *opened*.

### Practice A

Revise the sentences to correct mixed tenses.

1. Until Sasha's friends complained, he will live a quiet, uneventful life.
2. In the past, Sasha sponged money from friends who start to get angry.
3. After the uncles make their decision, Sasha will have felt better.
4. Sasha's uncles have gone easy on him and he returned to his old ways.

**Reading Application** Find two sentences in "A Problem" that contain correct use of mixed tenses. For each sentence, write down the verbs, and identify the tense each one represents.

### Practice B

State whether the use of mixed tenses in the following sentences is correct. If incorrect, revise the sentence.

1. After he decides to go to the party, Sasha had demanded money from his uncle.
2. Sasha avoided punishment when Ivan Markovitch defends him to the others.
3. Sasha had escaped punishment before his uncles learned the truth.
4. As Ivan Markovitch pleaded for Sasha, the Colonel will change his mind.

**Writing Application** Write down three reasons why the Colonel thought Sasha should be punished. Use verb tenses correctly.