ANTON CHEKHOV

Fifty-Two Stories

TRANSLATED BY
RICHARD PEVEAR AND
LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY

PENGUIN CLASSICS

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FIFTY-TWO STORIES

1883–1898

A new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Contents

Preface

Our intention in making this collection has been to represent the extraordinary variety of Chekhov's stories, from earliest to latest, in terms of characters, events, social classes, settings, voicing, and formal inventiveness. By chance the selection came to fifty-two stories—a full deck! But, as Chekhov once wrote, "in art, as in life, there is nothing accidental."

When Chekhov began to write humorous stories and sketches, he thought he was doing it simply for money. And so he was. His father's grocery business, in their native Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov, had gone bankrupt in 1876, and to avoid debtor's prison the family had fled to Moscow, where Chekhov's two older brothers were already studying at the university. Chekhov, who was sixteen at the time, stayed behind to finish high school, supporting himself in various ways, one of them being the publication of humorous sketches in local papers, signed with various pseudonyms. In 1879 he graduated and moved to Moscow himself, where he entered medical school, and where his writing, still pseudonymous, became virtually the sole support of the family—mother, father, four brothers, and a sister.

Chekhov paid no attention to the artistic quality of his sketches; he simply tossed them off, sometimes several a day, and sent them to various daily or weekly humor sheets, whose editors gladly printed them. But his true artistic gift—innate, intuitive—showed itself even in the most exaggerated, absurd, and playful of these early jottings. They were mainly jokes, often satirical, but he also played with words

in them, for instance in naming his characters. In "At the Post Office" (1883), the postmaster's name is Sweetpepper and the police chief's name is Swashbuckle. The French tutor in "In a Foreign Land" is Monsieur Shampooing, the French word for shampoo. Corporal Whompov is the heavy-handed officer in the story named for him. In "An Educated Blockhead" (1885), the name of the accused is Slopsov and the justice of the peace is Sixwingsky, suggestive of a seraph. In "Romance with a Double Bass" (1886), the main character, owner of the double bass, is named Bowsky, after the instrument's articulator; we also run into such men as Buzzkin, Flunkeyich, and Flaskov. And there are others. These names have almost always been simply transliterated in English, giving no hint of their literal meaning in Russian.

After 1886, Chekhov stopped using such overtly comical names, but in later stories we still find characters like Zhmukhin in "The Pecheneg" (1897), whose name, while credible enough, also suggests pushing, squeezing, oppression. Chekhov also persisted in his transcribing of noises. The dog in "The Teacher of Literature" (1894) does not simply bark; his "grrr . . . nya-nya-nya-nya" pervades the story. The night owl in "The Pecheneg" keeps calling "Sleep! Sleep!" The wind howls "Hoo! Hoo!" And in his descriptions of nature there is a pervasive anthropomorphism—trees that swoon, rivers that speak, the "malicious, but deeply unhappy" storm in "On the Road" (1886), the previous day's mist in "Fear" (1892), which "timidly pressed itself to the bushes and hummocks." In a letter of May 10, 1886, to his older brother Alexander, who was also trying to be a writer, he offers some advice:

> For instance, you will succeed in depicting a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle flashed like a bright star and the black shadow of a dog or wolf rolled along like a ball and so forth. Nature comes alive if you're not squeamish about comparing natural phenomena to human actions . . .*

* Translation by Cathy Popkin, in her edition of *Anton Chekhov's Collected Stories* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), p. 517.

Yet in a letter dated January 14, 1887, to an acquaintance, Maria Kiselyova, who complained to him that he kept digging in the "dung heap" of immorality, Chekhov asserts: "What makes literature *art* is precisely its depiction of life as it really is. Its charge is the unconditional and honest truth." And further on he says of the writer: "He's no different from the run-of-the-mill reporter."* It is true that Chekhov's stories are filled with details of everyday existence, often very dark and always very keenly observed. He had an unusually wide personal experience of Russian life on all levels, and portrays a great variety of people: landowners, peasants, the military, bureaucrats, farmers, townspeople, clergy high and low, provincial school teachers, intellectuals, university students, boys, mistresses, wives, hunters, shepherds. In one story the central character is a boy two years and eight months old; in another the central character is a dog. But the stories he tells about them are hardly run-of-the-mill reporting.

The formal variety of Chekhov's stories is also far from "slice-of-life" realism. Sometimes he chooses suspended moments—on a train, on the road, in a cart—that allow for unexpected revelations, or pseudo-revelations. Many are essentially monologues, which occasionally lead to surprise reversals. In "The Siren" (1887), after a court session, the court secretary entices his superiors, even the stern philosopher, with an inspired and minutely detailed five-page discourse on Russian eating and drinking, ending with honey-spice vodka, of which he says: "After the first glass, your whole soul is engulfed in a sort of fragrant mirage, and it seems that you are not at home in your armchair, but somewhere in Australia, on some sort of ultrasoft ostrich . . ." There are doublings, as in the early "Fat and Skinny" or the late "Big Volodya and Little Volodya." In his notes for the rather grim story "The Bet" (1889), he first refers to it as "a fairy tale." The formal qualities of storytelling, of parables, anecdotes, and morality tales, are present throughout his work. It is nurtured by tradition, though he puts that tradition to his own use.

Chekhov was well aware of the political movements of his time and their main spokesmen. His characters refer at various moments

* Popkin, p. 518.

to Sergei Aksakov and the Slavophiles, to the Nihilists, to the utilitarian Dmitri Pisarev, to the populist Nikolai Mikhailovsky, as well as to the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the German philosopher Schopenhauer. He was friends with the conservative writer, journalist, and editor Alexei Suvorin, who published many of his stories in his journal *Novoye Vremya* ("New Times"), but he did not share the editor's increasingly reactionary views, and broke with him over the controversy of the Dreyfus affair. Chekhov never espoused any ideas as a writer; he had no program, no ideology; the critics of his time wondered what his work was "about." Tolstoy wrote of him in a letter to his son dated September 4, 1895: "he has not yet revealed a definite point of view."* Chekhov revealed his attitude to the peasantry by offering a large number of them free medical treatment while living on his small country estate in Melikhovo. He showed his concern for the environment, not like the old man in "The Shepherd's Pipe," who bemoans at great length the dying out of nature, but by planting trees, like Doctor Astrov in the play *Uncle Vanya*.

In his stories, Chekhov does what storytellers have always done: he satirizes human pretensions and absurdities, he plays out the comedy of human contradictions, and ultimately, even in the darkest of them, he celebrates natural and human existence in all its conditional variety.

Richard Pevear

* Popkin, p. 505.

FIFTY-TWO STORIES

Joy

It was midnight.

Mitya Kuldarov, agitated, disheveled, came flying into his parents' apartment and quickly passed through all the rooms. His parents had already turned in for the night. His sister was lying in bed, reading the last page of a novel. His schoolboy brothers were asleep.

"Where have you been?" his astonished parents asked. "What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, don't ask! I never expected it! No, I never expected it! It's . . . it's even incredible!"

Mitya laughed loudly and sat down in an armchair, unable to stay on his feet from happiness.

"It's incredible! You can't even imagine! Just look!"

His sister jumped out of bed and, covering herself with a blanket, went over to her brother. The schoolboys woke up.

"What's the matter? You don't look yourself!"

"It's from joy, Mama! I'm known all over Russia now! All over! Before only you knew that in this world there existed the Collegiate Registrar Dmitri Kuldarov,[1] but now all of Russia knows it! Mama! Oh, lord!"

Mitya jumped up, ran through all the rooms, and sat down again.

"But what's happened? Just tell us!"

"You live like wild animals, don't read newspapers, don't pay any attention to publicity, yet there are so many amazing things in the

newspapers! When something happens, it gets known right away, nothing escapes them! I'm so happy! Oh, lord! Newspapers only write about famous people, and now they've written about me!"

"What's that? Where?"

The papa went pale. Mama glanced at the icon and crossed herself. The schoolboys leaped out of their beds and, just as they were, in their nightshirts, went up to their older brother.

"That's right! They've written about me! Now all of Russia knows me! Take this issue as a keepsake, mama! We'll reread it sometimes. Look here!"

Mitya took a newspaper from his pocket, gave it to his father, and poked his finger at a place circled in blue pencil.

"Read!"

His father put on his spectacles.

"Go on, read!"

Mama glanced at the icon and crossed herself. The papa cleared his throat and began to read:

"On December 29th, at eleven o'clock in the evening, the Collegiate Registrar Dmitri Kuldarov . . ."

"You see, you see? Go on!"

". . . the Collegiate Registrar Dmitri Kuldarov, leaving the alehouse on Malaya Bronnaya Street, at Kozikhin's, and being in a state of inebriation . . ."

"It was me and Semyon Petrovich . . . It's all described in minute detail! Keep reading! Go on! Listen!"

". . . and being in a state of inebriation, slipped and fell under the horse of the cabby Ivan Drotov, a peasant from the village of Durykino, Yukhnovsky District. The frightened horse, having stepped over Kuldarov and dragged the sleigh over him, with Stepan Lukov, a Moscow merchant of the second guild, sitting in it, rushed off down the street and was stopped by the sweepers. Kuldarov, at first being in a state of unconsciousness, was taken to the police precinct and examined by a doctor. The blow which he had received on the back of the head . . ."

"I was hit by the shaft, Papa. Go on! Go on reading!"

". . . which he had received on the back of the head, was classified

as slight. The protocol of the incident was drawn up. The victim was given first aid . . .”

“They told me to put cold compresses on my head. So you’ve read it now? Eh? Really something! Now it’ll spread all over Russia! Give it here!”

Mitya grabbed the newspaper, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

“I’ll run to the Makarovs and show them . . . I’ve also got to show it to the Ivanitskys, Natalya Ivanovna, Anisim Vassilyich . . . I’m off! Goodbye!”

Mitya put on a peaked cap with a cockade and, triumphant, joyful, dashed out of the house.

1883

Fat and Skinny

Two friends ran into each other at the Nikolaevsky train station:[1] one fat, the other skinny. The fat one had just had dinner in the station, and his butter-smeared lips glistened like ripe cherries. He smelled of sherry and fleur d'oranger. The skinny one had just gotten off a train and was loaded down with suitcases, bundles, and boxes. He smelled of ham and coffee grounds. From behind his back peeked a thin woman with a long chin—his wife—and a tall schoolboy with a screwed-up eye—his son.

"Porfiry!" exclaimed the fat one, seeing the skinny one. "Is it you? My dear fellow! Long time no see!"

"Good heavens!" the skinny one said in amazement. "Misha! My childhood friend! Where did you pop up from?"

The friends kissed three times and fixed their tear-filled eyes on each other. Both were pleasantly astonished.

"Dear friend!" the skinny one began after the kissing. "How unexpected! What a surprise! Let me have a good look at you! As handsome as ever! A dear soul and a dandy! Oh, Lord God! So, how are you? Rich? Married? I'm already married, as you can see . . . This is my wife, Louisa, born Wanzenbach . . . a Lutheran . . . And this is my son Nathaniel, a third-grader. Nathaniel, this is my childhood friend! We were in school together!"

Nathaniel pondered a little and took off his cap.

"In school together!" the skinny one went on. "Remember how

they nicknamed you? They called you Herostratus, because you burned a schoolbook with a cigarette, and me Ephialtes, because I liked snitching.[2] Ha-ha . . . We were kids! Don't be afraid, Nathaniel. Come closer to us . . . And this is my wife, born Wanzenbach . . . a Lutheran."

Nathaniel pondered a little and hid behind his father's back.

"So, how's life, my friend?" the fat one asked, gazing rapturously at his friend. "You're in government service somewhere? Worked your way up?"

"That I have, my dear! Been a collegiate assessor for two years now and got myself a Stanislas.[3] Poor salary . . . but never mind! My wife gives music lessons, I make wooden cigarette cases on the side. Excellent cigarette cases! I sell them for a rouble apiece. Anybody who takes ten or more gets a discount, you see. We manage somehow. I used to work in headquarters, you know, but now I've been transferred here as chief clerk in the same department . . . I'll be working here. Well, and what about you? Already a state councillor I'll bet? Eh?"

"No, my dear, aim higher," said the fat one. "I'm already a privy councillor . . . I've got two stars."[4]

The skinny one suddenly turned pale, froze, but his face quickly spread in all directions into the broadest smile; sparks seemed to fly from his face and eyes. He himself shriveled, shrank, subsided . . . His suitcases, bundles, and boxes shriveled, cringed . . . His wife's long chin grew longer; Nathaniel stood to attention and buttoned his school uniform . . .

"I, Your Excellency . . . Very pleased, sir! A friend, one might say, from childhood . . . suddenly turns out to be such a dignitary! Hee-hee, sir."

"Enough, now!" The fat one winced. "Why this tone? You and I are friends from childhood—no need to go bowing to rank!"

"For pity's sake . . . It's not that, sir . . ." The skinny one started to giggle, shriveling still more. "Your Excellency's gracious attention . . . like life-giving water . . . This, Your Excellency, is my son Nathaniel . . . my wife Louisa, a Lutheran, in some sense . . ."

The fat one was about to protest, but written on the skinny one's face was such veneration, sweetness, and respectful twinging that the

privy councillor felt sick. He turned away from the skinny one and gave him his hand in farewell.

The skinny one squeezed three fingers, bowed with his whole body, and giggled like a Chinaman: "Hee-hee-hee." His wife smiled. Nathaniel bowed, scraped with his foot, and dropped his cap. All three were pleasantly astonished.

1883

At the Post Office

A few days ago we buried the young wife of our old postmaster Sweetpepper. Having interred the beauty, we, following the custom of our forebears, went to the post office to "commemorate."

As the blini[1] were served, the old widower wept bitterly and said:

"These blini are as glowing as my late wife's cheeks. Beauties just like her! Exactly!"

"Yes," the commemorators agreed, "you had yourself a real beauty . . . A top-notch woman!"

"Yes, sir . . . Everybody was astonished looking at her . . . But I didn't love her for her beauty, gentlemen, nor for her good nature. Those two qualities are inherent in all womankind and are quite often met with in the sublunary realm. I loved her for another quality of the soul. Namely, sirs: I loved my late wife—may she rest in peace—because, for all the pertness and playfulness of her character, she was faithful to her husband. She was faithful to me, though she was only twenty and I will soon hit sixty! She was faithful to me, old as I am!"

The deacon, sharing the communal meal with us, grunted and coughed eloquently to express his doubts.

"So you don't believe it?" The widower turned to him.

"It's not that I don't believe it"—the deacon became embarrassed—"it's just . . . young wives these days are much too . . . rendevous, sauce provençale . . ."

"You doubt it, but I'll prove it to you, sir! I kept her faithful by various means of a strategic sort, so to speak, something like fortifications. With my behavior and my cunning character, there was no way she could betray me. I used cunning to protect my marital bed. I know certain words, a sort of password. I say these same words and—basta, I can sleep peacefully as regards her faithfulness."

"What are those words?"

"Simple as could be. I spread a wicked rumor around town. This rumor is well known to you. I told everybody: 'My wife Alyona is cohabiting with our police chief, Ivan Alexeich Swashbuckle.' These words were enough. Not a single man dared to court Alyona, for fear of the police chief's wrath. It used to be they'd just run away at the sight of her, so that Swashbuckle wouldn't get any ideas. Heh, heh, heh. Once you got mixed up with that mustachioed idol, you'd really regret it, he could slap five fines on you over sanitary conditions. For instance, he'd see your cat on the street and slap a fine on you as if it was a stray cow."

"So that means your wife didn't live with Ivan Alexeich?" we all drawled in surprise.

"No, that was my cunning . . . Heh, heh . . . So I really hoodwinked you, eh, boys? Well, there you have it."

Three minutes passed in silence. We sat and said nothing, feeling offended and ashamed that this fat, red-nosed old man had led us on so cunningly.

"Well, God willing, you'll marry again!" the deacon muttered.

1883

Reading

An Old Coot's Story

Once the impresario of our theater, Galamidov, was sitting in the office of our bureau chief, Ivan Petrovich Semipalatov, and talking with him about the art and the beauty of our actresses.

"But I don't agree with you," Ivan Petrovich was saying, signing some budget documents. "Sofya Yuryevna has a strong, original talent! She's so sweet, graceful . . . Such a delight . . ."

Ivan Petrovich wanted to go on, but rapture kept him from uttering a single word, and he smiled so broadly and sweetly that the impresario, looking at him, felt a sweet taste in his mouth.

"What I like in her . . . e-e-eh . . . is the agitation and the tremor of her young breast when she recites monologues . . . How she glows, how she glows! At such moments, tell her, I'm ready . . . for anything!"

"Your Excellency, kindly sign the reply to the letter from the Khersonese Police Department concerning . . ."

Semipalatov raised his smiling face and saw before him the clerk Merdyaev. Merdyaev stood before him, goggle-eyed, and held out to him the paper to be signed. Semipalatov winced: prose interrupted poetry at the most interesting place.

"This could have waited till later," he said. "You can see I'm talking! Terribly ill-mannered, indelicate people! See, Mr. Galamidov . . . You said we no longer have any Gogolian types . . . But here, you see!

Isn't he one? Scruffy, out at the elbows, cross-eyed . . . never combs his hair . . . And look how he writes! Devil knows what it is! Illiterate, meaningless . . . like a cobbler! Just look!"

"M-m-yes . . . ," mumbled Galamidov, having looked at the paper. "Indeed . . . You probably don't read much, Mr. Merdyaev."

"It's not done, my dear fellow!" the chief went on. "I'm ashamed for you! You might at least read books . . ."

"Reading means a lot!" Galamidov said and sighed for no reason. "A whole lot! Read and you'll see at once how sharply your horizons change. And you can get hold of books anywhere. From me, for instance . . . It will be my pleasure. I'll bring some tomorrow, if you like."

"Say thank you, my dear fellow!" said Semipalatov.

Merdyaev bowed awkwardly, moved his lips, and left.

The next day Galamidov came to our office and brought along a stack of books. With this moment the story began. Posterity will never forgive Semipalatov for his light-minded behavior! A young man might perhaps be forgiven, but an experienced actual state councillor—never![1] When the impresario came, Merdyaev was summoned to the office.

"Here, read this, my dear fellow!" said Semipalatov, handing him a book. "Read it attentively."

Merdyaev took the book with trembling hands and left the office. He was pale. His crossed eyes shifted anxiously and seemed to be looking for help from the objects around him. We took the book from him and cautiously began to examine it.

The book was *The Count of Monte Cristo*.[2]

"You can't go against his will!" our old accountant, Prokhor Semyonych Budylda, said with a sigh. "Give it a try, force yourself . . . Read a little, and then, God grant, he'll forget and you can drop it. Don't be afraid . . . And above all, don't get involved in it . . . Read but don't get involved in this clever stuff."

Merdyaev wrapped the book in paper and sat down to work. But this time he was unable to work. His hands trembled and his eyes crossed in different directions: one towards the ceiling, the other towards the inkstand. The next day he came to work in tears.

"Four times I began," he said, "but I couldn't make anything of it . . . Some sort of foreigners . . ."

Five days later Semipalatov, passing by the desks, stopped at Merdyaev's and asked:

"Well, so? Have you read the book?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"What is it about, my dear fellow? Go on, tell me!"

Merdyaev raised his head and moved his lips.

"I forget, Your Excellency . . . ," he said after a minute.

"Meaning you didn't read it, or . . . e-e-eh . . . you read it inattentively! Me-chaa-nically! That won't do! Read it over again! In general, gentlemen, I recommend that. Kindly read! Read, all of you! Take books from my windowsill over there and read. Paramonov, go, take a book for yourself! You step over, too, Podkhodtsev, my dear fellow! You, too, Smirnov! All of you, gentlemen! Please!"

They all went and took books for themselves. Only Budylda ventured to voice a protest. He spread his arms, shook his head, and said:

"No, excuse me, Your Excellency . . . I'd sooner take my retirement . . . I know what comes of these same critiques and writings. On account of them my older grandson calls his own mother a fool right to her face and gulps milk all through Lent.[3] Excuse me, sir!"

"You understand nothing," said Semipalatov, who usually forgave the old man all his rude words.

But Semipalatov was mistaken: the old man understood everything. A week later we already saw the fruits of this reading. Podkhodtsev, who was reading the second volume of *The Wandering Jew*,[4] called Budylda "a Jesuit"; Smirnov started coming to work in an inebriated state. But no one was so affected by the reading as Merdyaev. He lost weight, became pinched, began to drink.

"Prokhor Semyonych!" he begged Budylda. "I'll pray to God eternally for you! Ask his excellency to excuse me . . . I can't read. I read day and night, don't sleep, don't eat . . . My wife's worn out from reading aloud to me, but, God strike me dead, I understand nothing! Do me this great service!"

Budylda ventured several times to report to Semipalatov, but he only waved his hands and, strolling around the department with

Galamidov, reproached everybody for their ignorance. Two months went by like that, and this whole story ended in the most terrible way.

One day Merdyaev, arriving at work, instead of sitting at his desk, knelt in the midst of those present, burst into tears, and said:

"Forgive me, Orthodox Christians, for making counterfeit money!"

Then he went into the office, knelt before Semipalatov, and said:

"Forgive me, Your Excellency, I threw a baby down a well yesterday!"

He beat his head on the floor and sobbed . . .

"What's the meaning of this?!" Semipalatov asked in astonishment.

"It means, Your Excellency," said Budylda with tears in his eyes, stepping forward, "that he's lost his mind! His wits are addled! This is what your silly Galamidov achieved with these writings! God sees everything, Your Excellency. And if you don't like my words, then allow me to take my retirement. It's better to die of hunger than to see such things in my old age!"

Semipalatov turned pale and paced from corner to corner.

"Don't receive Galamidov!" he said in a hollow voice. "And you, gentlemen, calm yourselves. I see my mistake now. Thank you, old man!"

And since then nothing has gone on in our office. Merdyaev recovered, but not completely. And to this day he trembles and turns away at the sight of a book.

1884

The Cook Gets Married

Grisha, a chubby seven-year-old, was standing by the kitchen door, eavesdropping and peeking through the keyhole. In the kitchen something was going on which, in his opinion, was extraordinary, never seen before. At the kitchen table, on which meat was usually cut and onions chopped, sat a big, burly peasant in a cabby's kaftan, red-headed, bearded, with a big drop of sweat on his nose. He was holding a saucer on the five fingers of his right hand and drinking tea from it, biting so noisily on a lump of sugar that it sent shivers down Grisha's spine. Across from him, on a dirty stool, sat the old nanny Aksinya Stepanovna, also drinking tea. The nanny's face was serious and at the same time shone with some sort of triumph. The cook Pelageya was pottering around by the stove and looked as if she was trying to hide her face somewhere far away. But on her face Grisha saw a whole play of lights: it glowed and shimmered with all colors, beginning with reddish purple and ending with a deathly pallor. Her trembling hands constantly clutched at knives, forks, stove wood, rags; she moved about, murmured, knocked, but in fact did nothing. Never once did she glance at the table where they were drinking tea, and to the questions the nanny put to her she replied curtly, sternly, without turning her face.

"Help yourself, Danilo Semyonych!" the nanny offered the cabby. "What's this tea all the time? Help yourself to some vodka!"

And the nanny moved a decanter and a glass towards the guest, her face acquiring a most sarcastic expression.

"I'm not in the habit, ma'am . . . No, ma'm . . . ," the cabby protested. "Don't make me, Aksinya Stepanovna."

"What sort of . . . A cabby, and he doesn't drink . . . An unmarried man can't possibly not drink. Help yourself!"

The cabby gave a sidelong glance at the vodka, then at the nanny's sarcastic face, and his own face acquired a no less sarcastic expression: No, you won't catch me, you old witch!

"Sorry, ma'am, I don't drink . . . Such a weakness doesn't suit our trade. A workman can drink, because he sits in one place, but our kind are always on view, in public. Right, ma'am? You go to a pot-house, and your horse walks away; you get drunk—it's even worse: you fall asleep or tumble off the box. So it goes."

"And how much do you make in a day, Danilo Semyonych?"

"Depends on the day. Some days you get as much as a greenback, and other times you go home without a kopeck. There's days and days, ma'am. Nowadays our business isn't worth much. There's no end of cabbies, you know it yourself, hay is expensive, and customers are piddling, they'd rather take a horse tram. But all the same, thank God, there's no complaints. Food enough, clothes enough, and . . . maybe even enough to make for somebody else's happiness" (the cabby cast a glance at Pelageya) ". . . if her heart's so inclined."

What else they talked about, Grisha did not hear. His mama came to the door and sent him to the children's room to study.

"Go and study. You've got no business listening here!"

Having come to the children's room, Grisha placed his primer before him, but he could not read. All that he had just seen and heard raised a host of questions in his head. "The cook's getting married . . . ," he thought. "Strange. I don't understand why people get married. Mama married Papa, cousin Verochka married Pavel Andreich. But anyhow Papa and Pavel Andreich were worth marrying: they've got gold watch chains, good clothes, their boots are always polished; but to marry that scary cabby with the red nose, in felt boots—phooey! And why does this nanny want poor Pelageya to get married?"

When the visitor left the kitchen, Pelageya went off to the rooms

and started tidying up. The agitation still had not left her. Her face was red and as if frightened. She barely touched the floor with the broom and swept each corner five times. She lingered for a good while in the room where Mama was sitting. Obviously it was hard for her to be alone, and she wanted to speak, to share her impressions with somebody, to pour out her soul.

"He left!" she murmured, seeing that Mama did not start a conversation.

"He's obviously a good man," Mama said, not tearing her eyes from the embroidery. "So sober, steady."

"By God, ma'am, I won't marry him!" Pelageya suddenly shouted, flushing all over. "By God, I won't!"

"Don't be silly, you're not a little girl. It's a serious step, you must think it over very well, and not shout for no reason. Do you like him?"

"You're making it up, ma'am!" Pelageya became embarrassed. "To say such things . . . my God . . ."

("She should just say: I don't like him!" thought Grisha.)

"Aren't you a prissy one, though . . . Do you like him?"

"But he's old, ma'am! Wa-a-ah!"

"You're making it up, too!" the nanny snapped at Pelageya from another room. "He's not forty yet. And what do you need a young one for? A face isn't everything, you fool . . . Just marry him, that's all!"

"By God, I won't!" shrieked Pelageya.

"You and your whimsies! What the devil do you want? Another girl would fall at his feet, but you—'I won't marry him!' All you want is to trade winks with mailmen and repetutors! There's a repetutor who comes to Grishenka, ma'am, she just stared her stupid eyes out at him. Shameless creature!"

"Have you seen this Danilo before?" the lady asked Pelageya.

"Where could I have seen him? I saw him for the first time today, Aksinya found the cursed fiend somewhere and brought him here . . . And so he landed on my head!"

Over dinner, as Pelageya served the food, the diners all looked her in the face and teased her about the cabby. She blushed terribly and giggled unnaturally.

("It must be shameful to get married . . . ," thought Grisha. "Terribly shameful!")

The food was all oversalted, blood seeped from the underdone chickens, and to top it off, during the mealtime plates and knives spilled from Pelageya's hands as if from a crooked shelf, but nobody uttered a word of reproach, since they all understood her state of mind. Only once Papa flung his napkin down angrily and said to Mama:

"Why do you want to get everybody married? What business is it of yours? Let them get married as they like."

After dinner the neighboring cooks and maids flitted through the kitchen, and the whispering went on till evening. How they had sniffed out the matchmaking—God knows. Waking up at midnight, Grisha heard the nanny and the cook whispering behind the curtain in the children's room. The nanny was persuading, and the cook now sobbed, now giggled. Falling asleep after that, Grisha dreamed that Pelageya was being abducted by a Chernomor and a witch . . .[1]

The next day came a lull. Kitchen life continued on its course, as if there were no cabby. Only from time to time the nanny would put on a new shawl, assume a solemnly stern expression, and go off somewhere for an hour or two, evidently for negotiations . . . Pelageya and the cabby did not see each other, and, when reminded of him, she would flare up and shout:

"Curse him up and down! Why should I think about him! Tphoo!"

One evening in the kitchen, when the nanny and the cook were assiduously cutting out a pattern, Mama came in and said:

"You can marry him, of course, that's your business, but you must know, Pelageya, that he cannot live here . . . You know I don't like to have someone sitting in the kitchen. See that you remember . . . And I won't give you the nights off."

"God knows what you're thinking up, ma'am," shrieked the cook. "Why do you reproach me over him? Let him rot! Why should I be stuck with this . . ."

Peeking into the kitchen one Sunday morning, Grisha froze in amazement. The kitchen was packed full of people. There were cooks from all the households, a caretaker, two policemen, a corporal with

his stripes, the boy Filka . . . This Filka usually loitered around the laundry room and played with the dogs, but he was neatly combed, washed, and holding an icon in a foil casing. In the middle of the kitchen stood Pelageya in a new calico dress and with a flower on her head. Beside her stood the cabby. The newlyweds were both red-faced, sweaty, and kept blinking their eyes.

"Well, now . . . seems it's time . . . ," the corporal began after a long pause.

Pelageya's whole face twitched and she burst into tears . . . The corporal took a big loaf of bread from the table, stood beside the nanny, and started to recite the blessing. The cabby went over to the corporal, plopped down before him, and gave him a smacking kiss on the hand. He did the same before Aksinya. Pelageya followed him mechanically and also plopped down. Finally, the outside door opened, white fog blew into the kitchen, and the public all moved noisily from the kitchen into the yard.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" thought Grisha, listening to the cook's sobs. "Where are they taking her? Why don't Papa and Mama stand up for her?"

After the church there was singing and concertina playing in the wash-house till evening. Mama was angry all the while that the nanny smelled of vodka and that on account of these weddings there was nobody to prepare the samovar. When Grisha went to bed, Pelageya had still not come back.

"Poor thing, now she's crying somewhere in the dark!" he thought. "And the cabby tells her: 'Shut up! Shut up!' "

The next morning the cook was already in the kitchen. The cabby stopped by for a minute. He thanked Mama and, looking sternly at Pelageya, said:

"Keep an eye on her, ma'am. Be her father and mother. And you, too, Aksinya Stepanna, don't let up, see that everything stays honorable . . . no mischief . . . And also, ma'am, allow me an advance of five little roubles on her salary. I've got to buy a new yoke."

Another puzzler for Grisha: Pelageya had lived freely, as she liked, not answering to anybody, and suddenly, out of the blue, appeared some stranger, who somehow got the right to her doings and her

property! Grisha was upset. He wanted passionately, to the point of tears, to be nice to this victim, as he thought, of people's abuse. Choosing the biggest apple in the pantry, he snuck into the kitchen, put it in Pelageya's hand, and rushed back out again.

1885

In a Foreign Land

Sunday noon. The landowner Kamyshev is sitting in his dining room at a sumptuously laid table, having a leisurely lunch. His meal is being shared by a neat, clean-shaven little old Frenchman, Monsieur Shampooing. This Shampooing was once the Kamyshevs' family tutor, taught the children manners, proper pronunciation, and dancing; then, when the Kamyshev children grew up and became lieutenants, Shampooing stayed on as something like a male governess. The duties of the former tutor are not complicated. He has to dress decently, smell of perfume, listen to Kamyshev's idle talk, eat, drink, sleep—and that, it seems, is all. In return he receives room, board, and an unspecified salary.

Kamyshev is eating and, as usual, babbling away.

"Deadly!" he says, wiping the tears that rise up following a slice of ham thickly smeared with mustard. "Oof! It hits you in the head and all the joints. Your French mustard wouldn't do that, even if you ate a whole jar."

"Some like French mustard, and some Russian . . . ," Shampooing pronounces meekly.

"Nobody likes French mustard, except maybe the French. But a Frenchman will eat anything you give him: frogs, rats, cockroaches—brr! You, for instance, don't like this ham because it's Russian, but if they give you fried glass and tell you it's French, you'll eat it and smack your lips . . . In your opinion, everything Russian is bad."

"I'm not saying that."

"Everything Russian is bad, and everything French—oh, say tray jolee![1] In your opinion, there's no better country than France, but in mine . . . well, what is France, honestly speaking? A little scrap of land! Send our policeman there, and a month later he'll ask to be transferred: there's no room to turn around! You can travel all over your France in a day, but with us you step through the gate and—endless space! Drive on and on . . ."

"Yes, monsieur, Russia is an enormous country."

"There you have it! In your opinion, there's no better people than the French. Educated, intelligent folk! Civilized! I agree, the French are all educated, well-mannered . . . it's true . . . A Frenchman will never allow himself to be boorish: he'll promptly move a chair for a lady, won't eat crayfish with a fork, won't spit on the floor, but . . . it's not the right spirit! He doesn't have the right spirit! I can't explain it to you, but, how shall I put it, there's something lacking in Frenchmen, a certain" (the speaker twiddles his fingers) ". . . something . . . juridical. I remember reading somewhere that you all have an intelligence acquired from books, while ours is inborn. If a Russian learns all your subjects properly, no professor of yours will compare with him."

"Maybe so . . . ," Shampooing says as if reluctantly.

"No, not maybe—it's true! Don't wince, I'm telling the truth! Russian intelligence is inventive! Only, of course, it's not given scope enough, and it's no good at boasting . . . It will invent something and then break it or give it to children to play with, while your Frenchman invents some sort of rubbish and shouts for all the world to hear. The other day the coachman Jonah made a manikin out of wood: you pull a string on this manikin and he makes an indecent gesture. And yet Jonah doesn't boast. Generally . . . I don't like the French! I'm not talking about you, but generally . . . Immoral people! Outwardly they seem to resemble humans, but they live like dogs . . . Take marriage, for instance. With us, whoever marries cleaves to his wife and there's no more talking, but with you devil knows what goes on. The husband sits in a café all day, and his wife infests the house with Frenchmen and cancans away with them."

"That's not true!" Shampooing, unable to help himself, flares up. "In France the family principle is held very high!"

"We know all about that principle! And you should be ashamed to defend it. One must be impartial: pigs are pigs . . . Thanks to the Germans for beating them . . . By God, yes. God grant them good health . . ."

"In that case, monsieur, I don't understand," says the Frenchman, jumping up and his eyes flashing, "if you really hate the French, why do you keep me?"

"What else can I do with you?"

"Let me go, and I'll leave for France!"

"Wha-a-at? As if they'd let you back into France now! You're a traitor to your fatherland! One day Napoleon is your great man, then it's Gambetta . . . the devil himself can't figure you out!"

"Monsieur," Shampooing says in French, spluttering and crumpling the napkin in his hands, "even an enemy could not have come up with a worse insult to my feelings than you have just done! All is finished!!"

And, making a tragic gesture with his hand, the Frenchman affectedly throws the napkin on the table and walks out with dignity.

Some three hours later the table setting is changed and dinner is served. Kamyshev sits down to eat alone. After the first glass, he is overcome with a thirst for idle talk. He would like to chat, but there is no one to listen.

"What's Alphonse Ludvigovich doing?" he asks the servant.

"Packing his suitcase, sir."

"What a dunderhead, God forgive me! . . . ," says Kamyshev, and he goes to the Frenchman.

Shampooing is sitting on the floor in the middle of his room and with trembling hands is packing his linen, perfume bottles, prayer books, suspenders, neckties into a suitcase . . . His whole respectable figure, his suitcase, bed, and table exude refinement and effeminacy. From his big blue eyes large tears drop into the suitcase.

"Where are you off to?" asks Kamyshev, after standing there for a while.

The Frenchman is silent.

"You want to leave?" Kamyshev goes on. "Well, you know best . . . I wouldn't dare hold you back . . . Only here's the strange thing: how are you going to go without a passport? I'm surprised! You know, I

lost your passport. I put it somewhere among the papers, and it got lost . . . And here they're very strict about passports. You won't go three miles before they nab you."

Shampooing raises his head and looks mistrustfully at Kamyshev.

"Yes . . . You'll find out! They'll see by your face that you've got no passport, and right away: 'Who are you? Alphonse Shampooing! We know these Alphonse Shampooings! Maybe you'd like to be shipped off to some not-so-nearby parts!' "

"Are you joking?"

"Why on earth would I be joking? As if I need that! Only watch out, I warn you: no whimpering and letter-writing afterwards. I won't lift a finger when they march you by in chains!"

Shampooing jumps up, pale, wide-eyed, and starts pacing the room.

"What are you doing to me?!" he says, clutching his head in despair. "My God! Oh, cursed be the hour when the pernicious thought came to my head of leaving my fatherland!"

"Now, now, now . . . I was joking!" says Kamyshev, lowering his tone. "What an odd fellow, he doesn't understand jokes! One dare not utter a word!"

"My dear!" shrieks Shampooing, calmed by Kamyshev's tone. "I swear to you, I'm attached to Russia, to you, to your children . . . To leave you is as hard for me as to die! But each word you say cuts me to the heart!"

"Ah, you odd fellow! Why on earth should you be offended if I denounce the French? We denounce all sorts of people—should they all be offended? An odd fellow, really! Take my tenant Lazar Isakich, for example . . . I call him this and that, Yid and kike, make a pig's ear out of my coattail, pull him by the whiskers . . . he doesn't get offended."

"But he's a slave! He's ready for any meanness to make a kopeck!"

"Now, now, now . . . enough! Let's go and eat. Peace and harmony!"

Shampooing powders his tear-stained face and goes with Kamyshev to the dining room. The first course is eaten in silence, after the second the same story begins, and so Shampooing's sufferings never end.

1885

Corporal Whompov

Corporal Whompov! You are accused of insulting, on the third of September *instant*, by word and deed, the village constable Zhigin, the parish elder Alyapov, the local militiaman Efimov, the witnesses Ivanov and Gavrilov, and another six peasants—the first three being subjected to your insults while in performance of their duties. Do you acknowledge your guilt?"

Whompov, a wrinkled corporal with a prickly face, stands at attention and answers in a hoarse, stifled voice, rapping out each word as if giving a command:

"Your Honor, Mister Justice of the Peace! It transpires that, by all the articles of the law, there is the following reason for attesting to each circumstance in its reciprocity. The guilty party is not me, but all the others. This whole business occurred on account of a dead corpse—may he rest in peace. Two days ago I was walking with my wife Anfisa, quietly, honorably, I see—there's a heap of various folk standing on the riverbank. By what full right have these folk gathered here? I ask. How come? Does the law say folk come in herds? I shouted: 'Break it up!' I started pushing the folk so they'd go to their homes, ordered the militiaman to drive them away . . ."

"Excuse me, but you're not a policeman or a headman—what business have you got dispersing folk?"

"None! None!" Voices are heard from various corners of the courtroom. "There's no living with him, Y'ronor! Fifteen years we've suf-

fered from him! Ever since he got back from the army, we've felt like fleeing the village. He torments everybody!"

"Exactly right, Y'ronor!" testifies the village headman. "We're all complaining. It's impossible to live with him! We're carrying icons, or there's a wedding, or, say, some other occasion, everywhere he's shouting, clamoring, demanding order all the time. He boxes the children's ears, keeps an eye on the women like a father-in-law, lest there be some mischief . . . The other day he went around the cottages, giving orders not to sing songs or burn candles. There's no law, he says, that allows you to sing songs."

"Wait, you'll have your chance to give evidence," says the justice of the peace. "Now let Whompov continue. Continue, Whompov!"

"Yes, sir," croaks the corporal. "You, Your Honor, are pleased to say I have no business dispersing folk . . . Very well, sir . . . But if there's disorder? Can folk be allowed to act outrageously? Is it written somewhere in the law that folk can do as they like? I can't allow it, sir. If I don't disperse them and punish them, who will? Nobody in the whole village knows about real order except me alone, you might say, Your Honor, I know how to deal with people of lower rank, and, Your Honor, I can understand it all. I'm not a peasant, I'm a corporal, a retired quartermaster, I served in Warsaw, at headquarters, sir, and after that, if you care to know, in civilian life, I became a fireman, sir, and after that, weakened by illness, I left the fire department and for two years worked in a boys' classical primary school as a porter . . . I know all about order, sir. But your peasant is a simple man, he understands nothing and has to obey me, because—it's for his own good. Take this case, for example . . . I disperse the folk, and there on the bank in the sand lies the drowned corpse of a dead man. On what possible grounds, I ask you, is he lying there? Is there any order in that? Where is the constable looking? 'Why is it, constable,' I say, 'that you don't inform the authorities? Maybe this drowned dead man drowned on his own, and maybe it has a whiff of Siberia. Maybe it's a criminal homicide . . .' But Constable Zhigin pays no attention, he just smokes his cigarette.

" 'Who have we got giving orders here?' he says. 'Where,' he says, 'did he come from? Don't we know,' he says, 'how to behave without him?' 'Meaning you don't know, fool that you are,' I say, 'since you're

standing here paying no attention.' 'I,' he says, 'already informed the district superintendent yesterday.' 'Why the district superintendent?' I ask. 'By what article of the legal code? In such a case, when there's a drowning or a hanging or the like—in such a case, what can the superintendent do? Here,' I say, 'we have a criminal case, a civil case . . . Here,' I say, 'you must quickly pass the torch to the honorable prosecutors and judges, sir. And first of all,' I say, 'you must draw up a report and send it to the honorable justice of the peace.' But he, the constable, listens to it all and laughs. And the peasants, too. They all laughed, Your Honor. I'll testify to it under oath. This one laughed, and that one laughed, and Zhigin laughed. 'Why bare your teeth?' I say. And the constable says, 'The justice of the peace,' he says, 'doesn't judge such cases.' At those words I even broke into a sweat. Didn't you say that, Constable?" The corporal turned to Constable Zhigin.

"I did."

"Everybody heard you say in front of all those simple folk: 'The justice of the peace doesn't judge such cases.' Everybody heard you say that . . . I broke out in a sweat, Your Honor, I even got all scared. 'Repeat,' I say, 'you this-and-that, repeat what you said!' Again he says the same words . . . I say to him: 'How can you speak that way about an honorable justice of the peace? You, a police officer, are against the authorities? Eh? Do you know,' I say, 'that for such talk the honorable justice of the peace, if he's of a mind to, can pack you off to the provincial police department on account of your untrustworthy behavior? Do you know,' I say, 'where the honorable justice of the peace can send you for such political talk?' And the elder says: 'The justice,' he says, 'can't stake out anything beyond his boundaries. He only has jurisdiction over minor offenses.' That's what he said, everybody heard it . . . 'How dare you,' I say, 'belittle the authorities? You, brother,' I say, 'don't start joking with me, or things will go badly for you.' In Warsaw, or when I was a porter in the boys' primary school, whenever I'd hear such inappropriate talk, I'd look around for a policeman: 'Come here, officer,' I'd say—and report it all to him. But here in the village, who can I tell? . . . I flew into a rage. It upsets me that folk nowadays are sunk in willfulness and disobedience. I took a swing and . . . not hard, of course, but just right, lightly,

so that he wouldn't dare say such words about Your Honor . . . The constable stood up for the elder. So I gave it to the constable, too . . . And so it went . . . I lost my temper, Your Honor, but, well, it's really impossible without a beating. If a stupid man doesn't get a beating, the sin's on your soul. Especially if there's something up . . . some disorder . . ."

"I beg your pardon! There are people who look out for disorder. That's why we have the constable, the headman, the militiaman . . ."

"A constable can't look out for everything, and a constable doesn't understand what I understand . . ."

"But don't you see that it's none of your business?"

"What's that, sir? How is it not mine? Strange, sir . . . People behave outrageously and it's none of my business! Should I praise them, then, or what? So they complain to you that I forbid singing songs . . . What's the good of songs? Instead of taking up some kind of work, they sing songs . . . and they've also made it a fashion to sit in the evening with candles burning. They should go to bed, but they're talking and laughing. I've got it written down, sir!"

"What have you got written down?"

"Who sits with candles burning."

Whompov pulls a greasy scrap of paper from his pocket, puts on his spectacles, and reads:

"Peasants who sit with candles burning: Ivan Prokhorov, Savva Mikiforov, Pyotr Petrov. The soldier's widow Shrustrova lives in depraved lawlessness with Semyon Kislov. Ignat Sverchok is taken up with magic and his wife Mavra is a witch, who goes by night to milk other people's cows."

"Enough!" says the justice, and he starts to interrogate the witnesses.

Corporal Whompov raises his spectacles on his brow and looks in astonishment at the justice, who is obviously not on his side. His popping eyes flash, his nose turns bright red. He stares at the justice, at the witnesses, and simply cannot understand what makes this justice so flustered, and why whispering and restrained laughter are heard from all corners of the courtroom. He also cannot understand the sentence: a month in jail!

"What for?!" he says, spreading his arms in bewilderment. "By what law?"

And it is clear to him that the world has changed and that living in it is no longer possible. Gloomy, dismal thoughts come over him. But, leaving the courtroom and seeing the peasants crowding around and talking about something, he, by force of a habit he can no longer control, stands at attention and shouts in a hoarse, angry voice:

"Brea-a-ak it up! Don't cr-r-rowd around! Go home!"

1885

Grief

The woodturner Grigori Petrov, long known as an excellent craftsman and at the same time as the most good-for-nothing peasant in the whole Galchinsky district, is taking his sick old wife to the local hospital. He has to drive some twenty miles, and moreover the road is terrible, hard enough for a government postman to deal with, not to mention such a lazybones as the woodturner Grigori. A sharp, cold wind blows right in his face. In the air, wherever you look, big clouds of snowflakes whirl, so that it is hard to tell whether the snow is coming from the sky or from the earth. Neither the fields, nor the telegraph poles, nor the forest can be seen through the snowy mist, and when an especially strong gust of wind hits Grigori, he cannot even see the shaft bow. The decrepit, feeble little nag barely trudges along. All her energy is spent on pulling her legs out of the deep snow and tossing her head. The woodturner is in a hurry. He fidgets restlessly on the box and keeps whipping the horse's back.

"Don't you cry, Matryona . . . ," he mutters. "Hold out a little longer. God grant we'll get to the hospital, and in a flash you'll be, sort of . . . Pavel Ivanych will give you some little drops, or order a blood-letting, or maybe he'll be so kind as to rub you with some sort of spirits, and that will . . . ease your side. Pavel Ivanych will do his best. He'll scold, stamp his feet, but he'll do his best . . . He's a nice gentleman, well-mannered, God grant him good health . . .

"As soon as we get there, he'll come running out of his quarters and start calling up all the devils. 'What? How's this?' he'll shout. 'Why don't you come at the right time? Am I some sort of dog, to bother with you devils all day long? Why didn't you come in the morning? Out! So there's no trace of you left! Come tomorrow!' And I'll say: 'Doctor, sir! Pavel Ivanych! Your Honor!' Get a move on, devil take you! Hup!"

The woodturner whips his nag and, not looking at the old woman, goes on muttering under his breath:

" 'Your Honor! Truly, as before God himself . . . I swear, I set out at daybreak. How could I make it here on time, if the Lord . . . the Mother of God . . . turned wrathful and sent such a storm? Kindly see for yourself . . . A nobler horse wouldn't even have made it, and mine, kindly see for yourself, isn't a horse, it's a disgrace!' Pavel Ivanych will frown and shout: 'We know your kind! You always find some excuse! Especially you, Grishka! I've known you a long time! No doubt you stopped off maybe five times at a pot-house!' And I say to him: 'Your Honor! What am I, some sort of villain or heathen? The old woman's rendering up her soul to God, she's dying, and I should go running around to the pot-houses? Mercy, how can you? Let them all perish, these pot-houses!' Then Pavel Ivanych will have you carried into the hospital. And I'll bow down to him . . . 'Pavel Ivanych! Your Honor! I humbly thank you! Forgive us, cursed fools that we are, don't take offense at us peasants! You should have kicked us out, but you kindly went to the trouble and got your feet covered with snow!' And Pavel Ivanych will glance at me as if he's about to hit me and say: 'Instead of bowing at my feet, you'd do better, you fool, to stop guzzling vodka and pity your old woman. You could use a good whipping!' 'Exactly so, Pavel Ivanych, a good whipping, God strike me dead, a good whipping! And how can I not bow at your feet, if you're our benefactor and dear father? Your Honor! I give you my word . . . as if before God . . . spit in my face if I'm lying: as soon as my Matryona here recovers and is her old self again, anything Your Grace cares to order from me, I'll be glad to make! A cigar box of Karelian birch, if you wish . . . croquet balls, I can turn bowling pins just like the foreign ones . . . I'll do it all for you! I won't take a kopeck

for it! In Moscow a cigar box like that would cost you four roubles, but I won't take a kopeck.' The doctor will laugh and say: 'Well, all right, all right . . . I get it! Only it's too bad you're a drunkard . . .' I know, old girl, how to talk with gentlemen. There's no gentleman I couldn't talk with. Only God keep us from losing our way. What a blizzard! My eyes are all snowy."

And the woodturner mutters endlessly. He babbles away mechanically, so as to stifle his heavy feeling if only a little. He has many words on his tongue, but there are still more thoughts and questions in his head. Grief has come suddenly, unexpectedly, and taken the woodturner by surprise, and now he cannot recover, come to his senses, figure things out. Up to then he had lived serenely, as if in a drunken half-consciousness, knowing neither grief nor joy, and now he suddenly feels a terrible pain in his soul. The carefree lazybones and tippler finds himself all at once in the position of a busy man, preoccupied, hurrying, and even struggling with the elements.

The woodturner remembers that the grief began the previous evening. When he came home the previous evening, a bit drunk as usual, and from inveterate habit began cursing and shaking his fists, the old woman glanced at her ruffian as she had never done before. Usually the expression of her old-woman's eyes was martyred, meek, as with dogs that are much beaten and poorly fed, but now she looked at him sternly and fixedly, as saints on icons or dying people do. It was with those strange, unhappy eyes that the grief began. The dazed woodturner persuaded a neighbor to lend him a horse, and he was now taking his old wife to the hospital, hoping that Pavel Ivanych, with his powders and ointments, would restore the old woman's former gaze.

"And you, Matryona, well . . . ," he mutters. "If Pavel Ivanych asks you if I beat you or not, say: 'No, never!' And I won't beat you anymore. I swear to God. Do you think I beat you out of spite? I beat you just so, for nothing. I pity you. Another man wouldn't care much, but see, I'm driving . . . I'm trying hard. And the blizzard, what a blizzard! Lord, Thy will be done! Only grant we get there and don't lose our way . . . What, your side hurts? Matryona, why don't you say anything? I'm asking you: does your side hurt?"

It seems strange to him that the snow does not melt on the old wom-

an's face, that the face itself has become somehow peculiarly long, acquired a pale-gray, dirty-wax color, and become stern, serious.

"What a fool!" mutters the woodturner. "I speak to you in all conscience, like to God . . . and you . . . What a fool! I just won't take you to Pavel Ivanych!"

The woodturner lets go of the reins and falls to thinking. He cannot bring himself to turn and look at the old woman: scary! To ask her something and not get an answer is also scary. Finally, to put an end to the uncertainty, without turning to look, he feels for the old woman's cold hand. The raised hand drops back limply.

"So she died! What a chore!"

And the woodturner weeps. Not so much from pity as from vexation. He thinks: how quickly it all gets done in this world! His grief had barely begun, and the ending was already there waiting. He had barely begun to live with his old wife, to talk with her, to pity her, when she up and died. He had lived with her for forty years, but those forty years had passed as if in a fog. With all the drinking, fighting, and poverty, life had not been felt. And, as if on purpose, the old woman died just at the very moment when he felt that he pitied her, could not live without her, was terribly guilty before her.

"And she went begging," he recalls. "I sent her out myself to ask people for bread—what a chore! She should have lived a dozen more years, the fool, but she probably thinks this is how I really am. Holy Mother of God, where the devil have I got to? It's not treatment she needs now, it's burial. Turn around!"

The woodturner turns around and whips up his nag with all his might. The road gets worse and worse every moment. Now he cannot see the shaft bow at all. Occasionally the sledge rides over a young fir tree, a dark object scratches his hands, flashes before his eyes, and the field of vision again becomes white, whirling.

"To live life over again . . . ," thinks the woodturner.

He remembers that forty years ago Matryona was young, beautiful, cheerful, from a rich family. They gave her to him in marriage because they were seduced by his craftsmanship. There were all the makings for a good life, but the trouble was that he got drunk after the wedding, dropped off, and it was as if he never woke up until now.

The wedding he remembers, but of what came after the wedding—for the life of him, he cannot remember anything, except maybe that he drank, slept, fought. So forty years vanished.

The white snowy clouds gradually begin to turn gray. Darkness falls.

"Where am I going?" The woodturner suddenly rouses himself. "I've got to bury her, not go to the hospital . . . I must be in a daze!"

He turns around again and again whips up the horse. The mare strains with all her might and, snorting, trots along. The woodturner whips her on the back again and again . . . He hears some sort of knocking behind him, and though he does not turn around, he knows that it is the deceased woman's head knocking against the sledge. And it grows darker and darker around him, the wind turns colder and sharper . . .

"To live it all over again," thinks the woodturner. "To get new tools, take orders . . . give the money to the old woman . . . yes!"

And here he drops the reins. He feels for them, wants to pick them up and cannot; his hands no longer obey him . . .

"Never mind . . . ," he thinks. "The horse will go by herself, she knows the way. I could do with some sleep now . . . till the funeral or the memorial service."

The woodturner closes his eyes and dozes off. A short while later he hears that the horse has stopped. He opens his eyes and sees something dark in front of him, like a hut or a haystack . . .

He ought to climb down from the sledge and find out what it is, but there is such laziness in his whole body that he would rather freeze to death than move from his place . . . And he falls peacefully asleep.

He wakes up in a big room with painted walls. Bright sunlight pours through the windows. The woodturner sees people around him and wants first of all to show that he is a man of dignity and understanding.

"What about a little Panikhida, brothers, for the old woman?" he says. "The priest should be told . . ."

"Well, enough, enough! Just lie there!" Someone's voice interrupts him.

"Good Lord! Pavel Ivanych!" The woodturner is surprised to see the doctor before him. "Y'ronor! My benefactor!"

He wants to jump up and throw himself at the feet of medicine, but feels that his arms and legs do not obey him.

"Your Honor! Where are my legs? My arms?"

"Say goodbye to your arms and legs . . . They got frozen. Now, now . . . what are you crying for? You've lived, thank God for that! You must have lived some sixty years—that will do you!"

"Grief! . . . Y'ronor, it's such grief! Kindly forgive me! Another five or six little years . . ."

"What for?"

"I borrowed the horse, I've got to return it . . . Bury the old woman . . . How quickly it all gets done in this world! Your Honor! Pavel Ivanych! A cigar box of the best Karelian birch! Croquet balls . . ."

The doctor waves his hand and walks out of the ward. Woodturner—amen!

1885

The Exclamation Point

A Christmas Story

On the night before Christmas, Efim Fomich Perekladin, a collegiate secretary,[1] went to bed offended and even insulted.

"Stop bothering me, you she-devil!" he barked angrily at his wife when she asked why he was so gloomy.

The trouble was that he had just come back from a party where many things had been said that he found unpleasant and offensive. At first they talked about the benefits of education in general, then they moved on imperceptibly to the educational requirements for civil servants, about the low level of which a great many laments, reproaches, and even gibes were voiced. And here, as is customary in all Russian gatherings, they moved on from the general to the personal.

"Take you, for instance, Efim Fomich." A young man turned to Perekladin. "You occupy a respectable post . . . but what kind of education did you receive?"

"None, sir. For us no education's needed," Perekladin said meekly. "Just write correctly . . ."

"And where did you learn to write correctly?"

"Habit, sir . . . After forty years of service you get the knack of it, sir . . . Of course, it was hard at first, I made mistakes, but then I got used to it, sir . . . no problem . . ."

"And punctuation?"

"Punctuation's no problem . . . Just put it in correctly."

"Hm! . . ." The young man became embarrassed. "But habit's not the same as education. It's not enough to put in punctuation correctly . . . not enough, sir! You should put it in consciously! When you put in a comma, you should know why you're putting it in . . . yes, sir! And this unconscious . . . reflex orthography of yours isn't worth a kopeck. It's mechanical production and nothing more."

Perekladin held his tongue and even smiled meekly (the young man was the son of a state councillor and had the right to the tenth rank), but now, on going to bed, he was all transformed into anger and indignation.

"I've served for forty years," he thought, "and no one has ever called me a fool, but now just look what critics have turned up! 'Unconscious . . . Lefrex! Mechanical production . . .' Ah, you, devil take you! Anyhow, maybe I understand more than you do, even if I didn't study in your universities."

Having mentally poured out all the abuse known to him at the critic's expense and getting warm under the blanket, Perekladin began to calm down.

"I know . . . I understand . . . ," he thought, falling asleep. "I wouldn't put a colon where a comma's called for, which means I'm aware, I understand. Yes . . . So there, young man . . . First you've got to live, serve, and only then judge your elders . . ."

In the closed eyes of the dozing Perekladin, through a crowd of dark, smiling clouds, a fiery comma flew like a meteor. It was followed by a second, a third, and soon the whole boundless dark background spread out before his imagination was covered with dense clusters of flying commas . . .

"Take just these commas . . . ," thought Perekladin, feeling his limbs turning sweetly numb from the onset of sleep. "I understand them perfectly . . . I can find a place for each one, if you like . . . and . . . and consciously, not by chance . . . Test me and you'll see . . . Commas are put in various places, where they go, and where they don't. The more confusing the document, the more commas are needed. They're put before 'which' and sometimes before 'that.' If there's a list of officials, each one should be separated by a comma . . . I know!"

The golden commas spun around and raced off to one side. They were replaced by fiery periods . . .

"And periods are put at the end of a document . . . Where a big pause and a glance at the listener is needed, there should also be a period. After every long passage a period is needed, so that the secretary's mouth doesn't go dry while he's reading. Periods are not put anywhere else . . ."

Again the commas come flying . . . They mix with the periods, whirl around—and Perekladin sees a whole multitude of colons and semicolons . . .

"And these I know . . . ," he thinks. "Where a comma is too little and a period is too much, there we need a semicolon. Before 'but' and 'therefore' I always put a semicolon . . . Well, and the colon? A colon is needed after the phrases 'it has been decreed' or 'decided' . . ."

The colons and semicolons fade away. It is the turn of the question marks. They leap down from the clouds dancing the cancan . . .

"As if we've never seen question marks! Even if there were a thousand of them, I'd find a place for them all. They're always used when there's a request to be made or, let's say, documents are being examined: 'Where is the remainder of the sums for such-and-such year?' or 'Will the police department find it possible for a certain Mrs. Ivanov . . . ?' and so on."

The question marks nodded their hooks in approval and instantly, as if on command, straightened themselves into exclamation points . . .

"Hm! . . . This punctuation mark is often used in letters. 'My dear sir!' or 'Your Excellency, father and benefactor! . . .' But when in documents?"

The exclamation points drew themselves up still taller and stood waiting . . .

"They're used in documents when . . . well . . . that's . . . how is it? Hm! . . . In fact, when are they used in documents? Wait . . . God help me remember . . . Hm! . . ."

Perekladin opened his eyes and turned on his other side. But before he could close them again, the exclamation points appeared once more against the dark background.

"Devil take them . . . When should they be used?" he thought, trying to drive the uninvited guests out of his imagination. "Can it be I've forgotten? Forgotten, or . . . just never used them . . ."

Perekladin began to recall the contents of all the documents he

had written out in his forty years of service; but however much he thought, however much he furrowed his brow, in his past he did not find a single exclamation point.

"How odd! Writing for forty years and never once using an exclamation point . . . Hm! . . . But when does the long devil get used?"

From behind the row of fiery exclamation points appeared the sarcastically grinning mug of his young critic. The points also smiled and merged into one big exclamation point.

Perekladin shook his head and opened his eyes.

"Devil knows what . . . ," he thought. "Tomorrow morning I have to get up for matins, and I can't drive this fiendish thing out of my head . . . Pah! But . . . when do we use it then? There's habit for you! There's getting the knack for you! Not a single exclamation point in forty years! Eh?"

Perekladin crossed himself and closed his eyes, but immediately opened them again; the big point still stood there against the dark background . . .

"Pah! This way I won't sleep all night. Marfusha!" He turned to his wife, who often boasted of having finished boarding school. "Do you know, sweetheart, when to use an exclamation point in documents?"

"As if I don't! I didn't spend seven years in boarding school for nothing. I remember all of grammar by heart. It's used in appeals, exclamations, and expressions of delight, indignation, joy, anger, and other feelings."

"So-o-o . . . ," thought Perekladin. "Delight, indignation, joy, anger, and other feelings . . ."

The collegiate secretary fell to thinking . . . For forty years he had been writing out documents, he had written out thousands, tens of thousands of them, but he did not remember a single line that expressed delight, indignation, or anything of the sort . . .

"And other feelings . . . ," he thought. "But is there any need for feelings in documents? Even a man with no feelings can write them out . . ."

The young critic's mug peeked out again from behind the fiery point and smiled sarcastically. Perekladin got up and sat on the bed. He had a headache, cold sweat stood out on his brow . . . In the corner an icon lamp glimmered cozily, the furniture was clean and had

a festive look, over everything spread the warmth and presence of a woman's hands, but the poor little clerk was cold, uncomfortable, as if he were sick with typhus. The exclamation point no longer stood in his closed eyes, but before him, in the room, by his wife's dressing table, and it winked mockingly at him . . .

"Machine! Writing machine!" whispered the ghost, wafting dry cold at the clerk. "Unfeeling block of wood!"

The clerk covered himself with the blanket, but he also saw the ghost under the blanket; he pressed his face to his wife's shoulder, but it stuck out from behind her shoulder as well . . . Poor Perekladin suffered all night, but in the daytime the ghost did not leave him. He saw it everywhere: in the boots he was putting on, in his cup of tea, in his Stanislas medal . . .[2]

"And other feelings . . . ," he thought. "It's true there haven't been any feelings . . . I'm going now to sign my superior's Christmas greeting . . . but is it done with any feelings? So, it's all nothing . . . A merry-christmas machine . . ."

When Perekladin went out and hailed a cab, it seemed to him that an exclamation point drove up instead of a cabby.

Coming to his superior's anteroom, instead of a porter he saw the same exclamation point . . . And it all spoke to him of delight, indignation, anger . . . The pen in its stand also looked like an exclamation point. Perekladin took it, dipped the pen in ink, and wrote:

"Collegiate Secretary Efim Perekladin!!!"

And in setting down these three exclamation points he felt delight, indignation, joy, and he seethed with anger.

"There, take that! Take that!" he muttered as he pressed down with the pen.

The fiery exclamation point was satisfied and vanished.

1885