

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE TRIAL

A Story

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

WE'RE in for bad luck, sir," said the driver, turning around and pointing with the whip to a hare running across the road. I knew without this evil omen that my future was desperate, for I was going to the neighboring court to be tried for bigamy. The weather was as bad as it could possibly be. When, at last, I reached the station where I was to spend the night, I was covered with snow and felt as though I had been well flogged, so cold, wet and numb was I from the monotonous shaking of the old cart.

At the station I was met by the stationmaster, a tall, rather sleepy looking man in blue striped trousers. He was bald, and had a mustache apparently growing out of his nostrils, which might have deadened his sense of smell—for smells there were aplenty, I can assure you. When the stationmaster, grumbling, sniffing and scratching the back of his head, opened the door and without a word pointed his elbow at the place I

was to settle down that night, I smelled the odor of sealing wax and of something else so very acrid that I almost choked. A tin lamp standing on a table smoldered and barely lit the unpainted wooden wall.

"There's an awful smell here, mister," said I, walking in and putting my traveling-bag down on the table. The stationmaster took a deep breath and shook his head. "It smells as it usually does," said he, and scratched his head. "It only seems so to you, because you come in from the frost."

I sent the man away and began to examine my temporary dwelling. The sofa on which I had to sleep was very broad, like a double bed, and was covered with an oilcloth as cold as ice. Besides the sofa, there was a big iron stove, the table with the lamp I mentioned, someone's felt boots, a satchel and a screen which partitioned off one corner. Behind the screen somebody was quietly sleeping. Having looked about, I made my bed and began to undress. My nose soon got

ANTON CHEKHOV is equally celebrated as a short story writer and dramatist. This story was first published in Russia in 1868 and here appears in English for the first time. The translation was made by Anna Heifetz of the Slavonic Division of the New York Public Library.

used to the smell. I took off my coat, trousers and boots; then, in order to get warm, I jumped around the stove, lifting my bare legs very high. I soon felt a little warmer. The only thing left for me to do then was stretch out on the sofa and fall asleep—but at that moment something peculiar occurred.

My gaze suddenly fell on the corner where the screen stood. Imagine my utter amazement when from behind the screen I saw a woman's head with loose hair, black eyes and a wide smile. Her dark eyebrows moved, her cheeks dimpled as though she were laughing. I was embarrassed. Observing that I saw her, she too became embarrassed and hid herself. I lay down on the sofa and covered myself with the coat.

I felt that I was responsible for the incident. How awful, I thought to myself, she must have seen me jump—it's not nice. And, recollecting the features of her sweet face, I involuntarily began to dream. Pictures exceeding one another in beauty and enticement crowded my imagination and, as though to punish me for my sinful thoughts, there was suddenly a strong burning pain on my right cheek. I touched it, and though I felt nothing I guessed what the trouble was.

"What am I to do?" I heard the woman's voice say just then. "Those nasty bugs, they really want to devour me."

I remembered my good habit of taking Keating's Powder with me

whenever I traveled. I hadn't forgotten to pack it this time. In a second the tin box with the powder was pulled out of the valise. I had only to offer the remedy to the owner of the sweet face and in this way get acquainted. But how was I to offer it?

"It's awful!" I heard her exclaim again.

"Madam," said I in a very low voice, "I understand from your last exclamation that you are being annoyed by bugs. I have some Keating's Powder. If you desire, I—"

"Yes, please."

"At once. I shall put on my coat and bring it," said I happily.

"No, no, you can hand it to me over the screen, only don't come here."

"Certainly I shall hand it over the screen. Don't be afraid, I am no boozy tramp."

"Who can tell? You are a stranger here."

"Well, and if I went behind the screen, there would be nothing wrong in that. Besides, I am a doctor," I invented on the spur of the moment, "and doctors, police inspectors and ladies' hairdressers are permitted to intrude upon privacy."

"Are you really a doctor? Seriously?"

"Upon my word. Will you allow me, then, to bring you the powder?"

"Well, if you are a doctor, please. Only why should you trouble? I can send my husband out to you." She hesitated a moment and then called in a sort of loud whisper,

"Fedya, wake up, you seal. Get up and go out behind the screen. The doctor has been so kind as to offer us some Keating's Powder."

The news that there was a Fedya behind the screen startled me. My soul was filled with as much disappointment as the trigger of a gun probably feels when it suddenly misfires: ashamed, vexed and sorry. I felt stunned; and such a scoundrel did this Fedya appear to me when he came out from behind the screen, that I almost cried out for help. Fedya was a tall, sinewy man, about fifty years old, with gray whiskers, tightly-closed lips and little blue veins all over his nose and temples. He was in a dressing-gown and slippers.

"You are very kind, doctor," said he, taking the Keating's Powder from me and returning behind the screen. "Thanks. Are you also being annoyed by the bugs?"

"Yes," said I, lying down on the sofa again, and furiously drawing the coat over myself. "Yes, indeed."

Then I heard him address his wife: "Zinochka, there's a bug running on your little nose; let me take it off."

"Do," laughed Zinochka. Then she exclaimed, "You didn't catch it! And you a state counselor! Everybody is afraid of you, yet you can't even get the better of a bug!"

"Hush, Zinochka, don't forget there's a stranger here. You always say things you shouldn't."

"The beasts, they won't let you

sleep," I grumbled angrily, not knowing why.

The couple soon dozed off. I closed my eyes and tried not to think of anything in order to fall asleep myself. Half an hour passed, then an hour, but still I could not sleep.

At last my neighbors began to fidget about and scold each other in a whisper.

"It's strange, even the Keating's Powder doesn't do any good," grumbled Fedya. "There are so many of them."

Then he called to me, "Doctor, Zinochka told me to ask you why the bugs smell so bad?"

We started talking to each other. We spoke about the bugs, the weather, the Russian winter, medicine — of which I had as little knowledge as of astronomy; we also spoke of Edison.

Then I heard him admonish his wife gently, "Don't be ashamed, Zinochka. He is a doctor. Don't be shy; ask. There's nothing to be afraid of. Doctor Shervetzov didn't help and perhaps this one will help."

"Ask him yourself," whispered Zinochka.

"Doctor," said Fedya, addressing me, "why has my wife such a pain in her chest? She coughs, you know, and feels such a weight on her chest as though there were something clotted there."

"That would require a long explanation; it can't be answered in a few words," said I, trying to get out of it.

"What does it matter if it's a long explanation? There's plenty of time,

we are not sleeping anyway. Please examine her, my dear fellow. I must tell you that Dr. Shervetzov treated her. He is a good man, but I don't believe much in what he says. No, I don't; but I see that you would not be disposed, as he is, to give us a diagnosis that's too favorable. I do wish you would examine her and I shall go meanwhile to the station-master and order the samovar to be set."

Fedya, shuffling with his slippers, left the room. I went behind the screen. Zinochka sat on a broad sofa, surrounded by many pillows, holding up her lace collar.

"Show me your tongue," said I, sitting down beside her and knitting my brows. She showed me her tongue and began to laugh. Her tongue was as it should be — red. I felt her pulse. "Hm," I muttered, though I really couldn't find it. I don't remember what other questions I put to her smiling face. I only remember that at the end of my examination I felt such a fool that I really couldn't ask any more questions.

Fedya returned. The three of us were having tea. I wrote a prescription and I composed it as professionally as I knew how:

Pr.

Sic transit 0.05

Gloria mundi 1.0

Aquae distillatae 0.1

A tablespoonful every two hours

For Mrs. S'yelova

DR. ZAITZEV

In the morning when I was ready to depart, I stood with my traveling bag in my hand, taking leave of my new acquaintances, whom I thought never to meet again. Fedya button-holed me and persuaded me to accept a ten-rouble bill.

"No, you must take it," he said. "I always pay for honest work. You studied, worked. I understand. Your knowledge was attained by the sweat of your brow."

There was nothing I could do but take the money. Thus I spent the night previous to my trial.

I shall not describe the emotions I experienced when the door was opened and the court-attendant pointed out to me the section reserved for defendants. I turned pale and got confused. Looking around, I saw a thousand eyes gazing at me; I seemed to hear my own death-knell. I looked at the serious and important faces of the jury.

I can neither describe nor can you imagine my terror when, looking up at the table which was covered with red cloth, I saw in the prosecutor's place, whom do you think — Fedya! He was writing. When I looked at him, I remembered the bugs, Zinochka, my prescription — and I not only felt a frost, but the whole Arctic Ocean on my spine.

Having finished writing, Fedya looked up. At first he did not recognize me, but afterwards he opened his eyes wide, his lower jaw hung down, his hand shook. He got up slowly

and shot an icy look at me. I too got up, not knowing why, and stared back at him.

"Defendant, tell the court your name, occupation, etc.," the bailiff began.

The prosecutor drank some water and sat down. His forehead was covered with perspiration.

"Here's a fine kettle of fish," I

thought. I could see the prosecutor meant to have revenge on me. He was very irritated, and again and again he looked over the written evidence and grumbled.

But now it's time to finish. I am writing this in the building of the court during dinner recess. Directly after this the prosecutor will speak.

Oh, Lord, what will he say?



SONG FOR A WINTER DANCE

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

COME and go
If you must.
Life is slow,
But waiting is longer.

Tarry and linger
Another while.
Behold the mystic secret
Of my flesh.
But come and go
If you must.

Winter is a sweet stranger,
But falling snow
Can stab the soul.
Hope is cold,
But dreams are stronger.

Time's enigma
Alone can placate
My turmoil.
But all is vanishing
In fierce oblivion.

Do not tarry and linger.
Come and go,
Oh, come and go.