

A Father, Chekhov Anton

"I don't deny it; I have had a drop too much. ... Forgive me; the fact is I happened to pass by the public, and, all owing to the heat, I drank a couple of bottles. It's hot, brother!"

Old Musatov took a rag from his pocket, and wiped the sweat from his clean-shaven, dissipated face.

"I have come to you, Borenka, angel mine, just for a minute," he continued, looking at his son, "on very important business. Forgive me if I am in the way. Tell me, my soul ... do you happen to have ten roubles to spare till Tuesday? You understand me ... yesterday I ought to have paid for the rooms, but the money question ... you understand. Not a kopeck!"

Young Musatov went out silently, and behind the door began a whispered consultation with his housekeeper and the colleagues in the Civil Service with whom he shared the villa. In a minute he returned, and silently handed his father a ten-rouble note. The old gentleman took it carelessly, and without looking at it thrust it into his pocket, and said:

"Merci! And how is the world using you? We haven't met for ages."

"Yes, it is a long time—since All Saints' Day."

"Five times I did my best to get over to you, but never could get time. First one matter, then another ... simply ruination. But, Boris, I may confess it, I am not telling the truth.... I lie.... I always lie. Don't believe me, Borenka. I promised to let you have the ten roubles back on Tuesday; don't believe that either! Don't believe a single word I say! I have no business matters at all, simply idleness, drink, and shame to show myself in the street in this get-up. But you, Borenka, will forgive me. Three times I sent the girl for money, and wrote you piteous letters. For the money, thanks! But don't believe the letters.... I lied. It hurts me to plunder you in this way, angel mine; I know that you can hardly make both ends meet, and live—so to say—on locusts. But with impudence like mine you can do nothing. A rascal who only shows his face when he wants money!... Forgive me, Borenka, I tell you the plain truth, because I cannot look with indifference upon your angel face...."

A minute passed in silence. The old man sighed deeply, and began:

"Let us make the supposition, brother, that you were to treat me to a glass of beer."

Without a word, Boris again went out and whispered outside the door. The beer was brought in. At the sight of the bottle Musatov enlivened, and suddenly changed his tone.

"The other day I was at the races," he began, making frightened faces. "There were three of us, and together we put in the totalisator a three-rouble note on Shustri. [1] And good luck to Shustri! With the risk of one rouble we each got back thirty-two. It is a noble sport. The old woman always pitches into me about the races, but I go. I love it!"

[1] Rapid.

Boris, a young fair-haired man, with a sad, apathetic face, walked from corner to corner, and listened silently. When Musatov interrupted his story in order to

cough, he went up to him and said:

"The other day, papa, I bought myself a new pair of boots, but they turned out too small. I wish you would take them off my hands. I will let you have them cheap!"

"I shall be charmed!" said the old man, with a grimace. "Only for the same price—without any reduction."

"Very well.... We will regard that as a loan also."

Boris stretched his arm under the bed, and pulled out the new boots. Old Musatov removed his own awkward brown shoes—plainly someone else's—and tried the new boots on.

"Like a shot!" he exclaimed. "Your hand on it. ... I'll take them. On Tuesday, when I get my pension, I'll send the money.... But I may as well confess, I lie." He resumed his former piteous tone. "About the races I lied, and about the pension I lie. You are deceiving me, Borenka.... I see very well through your magnanimous pretext. I can see through you! The boots are too small for you because your heart is too large! Akh, Borya, Borya, I understand it ... and I feel it!"

"You have gone to your new rooms?" asked Boris, with the object of changing the subject. "Yes, brother, into the new rooms.... Every month we shift. With a character like the old woman's we cannot stay anywhere."

"I have been at the old rooms. But now I want to ask you to come to the country. In your state of health it will do you good to be in the fresh air." Musatov waved his hand. "The old woman wouldn't let me go, and myself I don't care to. A hundred times you have tried to drag me out of the pit.... I have tried to drag myself ... but the devil an improvement! Give it up! In the pit I'll die as I have lived. At this moment I sit in front of you and look at your angel face ... yet I am being dragged down into the pit. It's destiny, brother! You can't get flies from a dunghill to a rose bush. No. ... Well, I'm off ... it's getting dark."

"If you wait a minute, well go together. I have business in town myself."

Musatov and his son put on their coats, and went out. By the time they had found a droschky it was quite dark, and the windows were lighted up.

"I know I'm ruining you, Borenka," stammered the father. "My poor, poor children! What an affliction to be cursed with such a father! Borenka, angel mine, I cannot lie when I see your face. Forgive me!... To what a pass, my God, has impudence brought me! This very minute I have taken your money, and shamed you with my drunken face; your brothers also I sponge on and put to shame. If you had seen me yesterday! I won't hide anything, Borenka. Yesterday our neighbours—all the rascality, in short—came in to see the old woman. I drank with them, and actually abused you behind your back, and complained that you had neglected me. I tried, you understand, to get the drunken old women to pity me, and played the part of an unhappy father. That's my besetting sin; when I want to hide my faults, I heap them on the heads of my innocent children.... But I cannot lie to you, Borenka, or hide things. I came to you in pride, but when I had felt your kindness and all-mercifulness, my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and all my conscience turned upside down."

"Yes, father, but let us talk about something else."

"Mother of God, what children I have!" continued the old man, paying no attention to his son, "What a glory the Lord has sent me! Such children should be sent not to me, a good-for-nothing, but to a real man with a soul and a heart. I am not worthy

of it!"

Musatov took off his cap and crossed himself piously thrice.

"Glory be to Thee, O God!" he sighed, looking around as if seeking an ikon. "Astonishing, priceless children! Three sons I have, and all of them the same! Sober, serious, diligent—and what intellects! Cabman, what intellects! Gregory alone has as much brains as ten ordinary men. French ... and German ... he speaks both ... and you never get tired of listening. Children, children mine, I cannot believe that you are mine at all! I don't believe it! You, Borenka, are a very martyr! I am ruining you ... before long I shall have mined you. You give me money without end, although you know very well that not a kopeck goes on necessities. Only the other day I sent you a piteous letter about my illness.... But I lied; the money was wanted to buy rum. Yet you gave it to me sooner than offend your old father with a refusal. All this I know ... and feel ... Grisha also is a martyr. On Thursday, angel mine, I went to his office, drunk, dirty, ragged ... smelling of vodka like a cellar. I went straight up to him and began in my usual vulgar slang, although he was with the other clerks, the head of the department—and petitioners all around! Disgraced him for his whole life!.. Yet he never got the least confused, only a little pale; he smiled, and got up from his desk as if nothing were wrong—even introduced me to his colleagues. And he brought me the whole way home, without a word of reproach! I spunge on him even worse than on you!

"Then take your brother, Sasha! There's another martyr! Married to a colonel's daughter, moving in a circle of aristocrats, with a dot ... and everything else.... He, at any rate, you would think would have nothing to do with me. Well, brother, what does he do? When he gets married the very first thing after the wedding he comes to me with his young wife, and pays me the first visit ... to my lair, to the lair ... I swear to God!"

The old man began to sob, but soon laughed again.

"At the very moment, as the fates would have it, when we were eating scraped radishes and kvas, and frying fish, with a stench in the room enough to stink out the devil. I was lying drunk as usual, and the old woman jumps up and greets them with a face the colour of beefsteak ... in one word, a scandal. But Sasha bore it all."

"Yes, our Sasha is a good man," said Boris.

"Incomparable! You are all of you gold, both you and Grisha, and Sasha and Sonia. I torture, pester, disgrace, and spunge on you, yet in my whole life I have never heard a word of reproach, or seen a single sidelong look. If you had a decent father it would be different, but ... You have never had anything from me but evil. I am a wicked, dissolute man.... Now, thank God, I have quieted down, and have no character left in me, but formerly, when you were little children, I had a character and no mistake. Whatever I said or did seemed to me gospel! I remember! I used to come back late from the club, drunk and irritated, and begin to abuse your poor mother about the household expenses. I would keep on at her all night, and imagine that she was in the wrong; in the morning you would get up and go to school, but all the time I would keep on showing her that I had a character. Heaven rest her soul, how I tortured the poor martyr! And when you came back from school and found me asleep you weren't allowed your dinner until I got up. And after dinner the same music! Primps you remember. May God forbid that anyone else should be cursed with such a father! He sent you to me as a blessing. A blessing! Continue in this way, children, to the end. Honour thy father that thy days may be long in the land! For your goodness Heaven will reward you with long life! Cabman, stop!"

Musatov alighted and ran into a beerhouse. After a delay of half an hour he

returned, grunted tipsily, and took his seat.

"And where is Sonia now?" he asked. "Still at the boarding-school?"

"No, she finished last May. She lives now with Sasha's aunt."

"What?" exclaimed the old man. "Left school? And a glorious girl, God bless her—went with her brothers. Akh, Borenka, no mother, no one to console her! Tell me, Borenka, does she know ... does she know that I am alive? Eh?"

Boris did not answer. Five minutes passed in deep silence. The old man sobbed, wiped his face with a rag, and said:

"I love her, Borenka! She was the only daughter, and in old age there is no consolation like a daughter. If I could only see her for a moment. Tell me, Borenka, may I?"

"Of course, whenever you like."

"And she won't object?"

"Of course not; she herself went to look for you."

"I swear to God! There is a nest of angels! Cabman, eh? Arrange it, Borenka, angel! Of course she is a young lady now, *délicatesse* ... *consommé*, and all that sort of thing in the noble style. So I can't see her in this get-up. But all this, Borenka, we can arrange. For three days I won't taste a drop—that'll bring my accursed drunken snout into shape. Then I will go to your place and put on a suit of your clothes, and get a shave and have my hair cut. Then you will drive over and take me with you? Is it agreed?"

"All right."

"Cabman, stop!"

The old man jumped out of the carriage and ran into another beershop. Before they reached his lodgings he visited two more; and every time his son waited silently and patiently. When, having dismissed the cabman, they crossed the broad, muddy yard to the rooms of the "old woman," Musatov looked contused and guilty, grunted timidly, and smacked his lips.

"Borenka," he began, in an imploring voice, "if the old woman says anything of that kind to you—you understand—don't pay any attention to her. And be polite to her. She is very ignorant and impertinent, but not a bad sort at bottom. She has a good, warm heart."

They crossed the yard and entered a dark hall. The door squeaked, the kitchen smelt, the samovar smoked, and shrill voices were heard.... While they passed through the kitchen Boris noticed only the black smoke, a rope with washing spread out, and the chimney of a samovar, through the chinks of which burst golden sparks.

"This is my cell," said Musatov, bowing his head, and showing his son into a little, low-ceilinged room, filled with atmosphere unbearable from proximity to the kitchen. At a table sat three women, helping one another to food. Seeing the guest, they looked at one another and stopped eating.

"Well, did you get it?" asked one, apparently "the old woman," roughly.

"Got it, got it," stammered the old man. "Now, Boris, do us the honour! Sit down!"

With us, brother—young man—everything is simple.... We live in a simple way."

Musatov fussed about without any visible reason. He was ashamed before his son, and at the same time apparently wished to bear himself before the women as a man of importance and a forsaken, unhappy father.

"Yes, brother mine—young man—we live simply, without show-off," he stammered. "We are plain folk, young man.... We are not like you ... we do, not trouble to throw dust in other people's eyes. No!... A drop of vodka, eh?"

One of the women, ashamed of drinking before a stranger, sighed and said:

"I must have another glass after these mushrooms. After mushrooms, whether you like it or not, you have to drink.... Ivan Gerasiuitch, ask him ... perhaps he'll have a drink."

"Drink, young man!" said Musatov, without looking at his son. "Wines and liqueurs we don't keep, brother, we live plainly."

"I'm afraid our arrangements don't suit him," sighed the old woman.

"Leave him alone, leave him alone, he'll drink all right."

To avoid giving offence to his father, Boris took a glass, and drained it in silence. When the samovar was brought in he, silently and with a melancholy air—again to please his father—drank two cups of atrocious tea. And without a word he listened while the "old woman" lamented the fact that in this world you will sometimes find cruel and godless children who forsake their parents in their old age.

"I know what you are thinking," said the drunken old man, falling into his customary state of excitement. "You are thinking that I have fallen in the world, that I have dirtied myself, that I am an object of pity! But in my mind this simple life is far more natural than yours, young man. I do not need for anything ... and I have no intention of humiliating myself ... I can stand a lot ... but tolerance is at an end when a brat of a boy looks at me with pity."

When he had drunk his tea, he cleaned a herring, and squeezed onion on it with such vigour that tears of emotion sprang into his eyes. He spoke again of the totalisator, of his winnings, and of a hat of Panama straw for which he had paid sixteen roubles the day before. He lied with the same appetite with which he had drunk and devoured the herring. His son sat silently for more than an hour, and then rose to take leave.

"I wouldn't think of detaining you," said Musatov stiffly. "I ask your pardon, young man, for not living in the way to which you are accustomed."

He bristled up, sniffed with dignity, and winked to the women.

"Good-bye, young man!" he said, escorting his son into the hall. "Atande!"

But in the hall, where it was quite dark, he suddenly pressed his face to his son's arm, and sobbed. "If I could only see Sóniushka!" he whispered. "Arrange it, Borenka, angel mine! I will have a shave, and put on one of your suits ... and make a severe face. I won't open my mouth while she's present I won't say a word. I swear to God!"

He glanced timidly at the door, from behind which came the shrill voices of the women, smothered his sobs, and said in a loud voice:

"Well, good-bye, young man! Atande!"