

At A Country House, Chekhov Anton

Pavel Ilyich Rashevich marched up and down the room, stepping softly on the Little Russian parquet, and casting a long shadow on the walls and ceiling; and his visitor, Monsieur Meyer, Examining Magistrate, sat on a Turkish divan, with one leg bent under him, smoked, and listened. It was eleven o'clock, and from the next room came the sound of preparations for supper.

"I don't dispute it for a moment!" said Rashevich. "From the point of view of fraternity, equality, and all that sort of thing the swineherd Mitka is as good a man as Goethe or Frederick the Great. But look at it from the point of view of science; have the courage to look actuality straight in the face, and you cannot possibly deny that the white bone^[1] is not a prejudice, not a silly woman's invention. The white bone, my friend, has a natural-historical justification, and to deny it, in my mind, is as absurd as to deny the antlers of a stag. Look at it as a question of fact! You are a jurist, and never studied anything except the humanities, so you may well deceive yourself with illusions as to equality, fraternity, and that sort of thing. But, on my side, I am an incorrigible Darwinian, and for me such words as race, aristocracy, noble blood are no empty sounds."

Rashevich was aroused, and spoke with feeling. His eyes glittered, his pince-nez jumped off his nose, he twitched his shoulders nervously, and at the word "Darwinian" glanced defiantly at the mirror, and with his two hands divided his grey beard. He wore a short, well-worn jacket, and narrow trousers; but the rapidity of his movements and the smartness of the short jacket did not suit him at all, and his big, longhaired, handsome head, which reminded one of a bishop or a venerable poet, seemed to be set on the body of a tall, thin, and affected youth. When he opened his legs widely, his long shadow resembled a pair of scissors.

As a rule he loved the sound of his own voice; and it always seemed to him that he was saying something new and original. In the presence of Meyer he felt an unusual elevation of spirits and flow of thought. He liked the magistrate, who enlivened him by his youthful ways, his health, his fine manners, his solidity, and, even more, by the kindly relations which he had established with the family. Speaking generally, Rashevich was not a favourite with his acquaintances. They avoided him, and he knew it. They declared that he had driven his wife into the grave with his perpetual talk, and called him, almost to his face, a beast and a toad.

Meyer alone, being an unprejudiced new-corner, visited him often and willingly, and had even been heard to say that Rashevich and his daughters were the only persons in the district with whom he felt at home. And Rashevich reciprocated his esteem—all the more sincerely because Meyer was a young man, and an excellent match for his elder daughter, Zhenya. And now, enjoying his thoughts and the sound of his own voice, and looking with satisfaction at the stout, well-groomed, respectable figure of his visitor, Rashevich reflected how he would settle Zhenya for life as the wife of a good man, and, in addition, transfer all the work of managing the estate to his son-in-law's shoulders. It was not particularly agreeable work. The interest had not been paid into the bank for more than two terms, and the various arrears and penalties amounted to over twenty thousand roubles.

"There can hardly be a shadow of doubt," continued Rashevich, becoming more and more possessed by his subject, "that if some Richard the Lion-hearted or Frederick Barbarossa, for instance, a man courageous and magnanimous, has a son, his good qualities will be inherited by the son, together with his bumps; and if this courage and magnanimity are fostered in the son by education and exercise, and he marries a princess also courageous and magnanimous, then these qualities will be transmitted to the grandson, and so on, until they become peculiarities of the

species, and descend organically, so to speak, in flesh and blood. Thanks to severe sexual selection, thanks to the fact that noble families instinctively preserve themselves from base alliances, and that young people of position do not marry the devil knows whom, their high spiritual qualities have reproduced themselves from generation to generation, they have been perpetuated, and in the course of ages have become even more perfect and loftier.

For all that is good in humanity we are indebted to Nature, to the regular, natural-historical, expedient course of things, strenuously in the course of centuries separating the white bone from the black. Yes, my friend! It is not the potboy's child, the cookmaid's brat who has given us literature, science, art, justice, the ideas of honour and of duty.... For all these, humanity is indebted exclusively to the white bone; and in this sense, from the point of view of natural history, worthless Sobakevitch, [2] merely because he is a white bone, is a million times higher and more useful than the best tradesman, let him endow fifty museums! You may say what you like, but if I refuse to give my hand to the potboy's or the cookmaid's son, by that refusal I preserve from stain the best that is on the earth, and subserve one of the highest destinies of mother Nature, leading us to perfection...."

Rashevich stood still, and smoothed down his beard with both hands. His scissors-like shadow stood still also.

"Take our dear Mother Russia!" he continued, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and balancing himself alternately on toes and heels. "Who are our best people? Take our first-class artists, authors, composers.... Who are they? All these, my dear sir, are representatives of the white bone. Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontoff, Turgenieff, Tolstoy.... Were these cook-maids' children?"

"Gontcharoff was a tradesman," said Meyer.

"What does that prove? The exception, my friend, proves the rule. And as to the genius of Gontcharoff there can be two opinions. But let us leave names and return to facts. Tell me how you can reply, sir, to the eloquent fact that when the potboy climbs to a higher place than he was born in—when he reaches eminence in literature, in science, in local government, in law—what have you to say to the fact that Nature herself intervenes on behalf of the most sacred human rights, and declares war against him? As a matter of fact, hardly has the potboy succeeded in stepping into other people's shoes when he begins to languish, wither, go out of his mind, and degenerate; and nowhere will you meet so many dwarfs, psychical cripples, consumptives, and starvelings as among these gentry. They die away like flies in autumn. And it is a good thing. If it were not for this salutary degeneration, not one stone of our civilisation would remain upon another—the potboy would destroy it all.... Be so good as to tell me, please, what this invasion has given us up to the present time? What has the potboy brought with him?"

Rashevich made a mysterious, frightened face, and continued:

"Never before did our science and literature find themselves at such a low ebb as now. The present generation, sir, has neither ideas nor ideals, and all its activity is restricted to an attempt to tear the last shirt off someone else's back. All your present-day men who give themselves out as progressive and incorruptible may be bought for a silver rouble; and modern intelligent society is distinguished by only one thing, that is, that if you mix in it you must keep your hand on your pocket, else it will steal your purse." Rashevich blinked and smiled. "Steal your purse!" he repeated, with a happy laugh. "And morals? What morals have we?" Rashevich glanced at the door. "You can no longer be surprised if your wife robs you and abandons you—that is a mere trifle. At the present day, my friend,

every twelve-year-old girl looks out for a lover; and all these amateur theatricals and literary evenings are invented only for the purpose of catching rich parvenus as sweethearts. Mothers sell their daughters, husbands are asked openly at what price they will sell their wives, and you may even trade, my friend,..."

Up to this Meyer had said nothing, and sat motionless. Now he rose from the sofa, and looked at the clock.

"Excuse me, Pavel Ilyich," he said, "but it's time for me to go."

But Rashevich, who had not finished, took him by the arm, set him down forcibly upon the sofa, and swore he should not leave the house without supper. Meyer again sat motionless and listened; but soon began to look at Rashevich with an expression of doubt and alarm, as if he were only just beginning to understand his character. When at last the maid entered, saying that the young ladies had sent her to say that supper was ready, he sighed faintly, and went out of the study first.

In the dining-room, already at table, sat Rashevich's daughters, Zhenya and Iraida, respectively aged twenty-four and twenty-two. They were of equal stature, and both black-eyed and very pale. Zhenya had her hair down, but Iraida's was twisted into a high top-knot. Before eating anything each drank a glass of spirits, with an expression meant to imply that they were drinking accidentally, and for the first time in their lives. After this they looked confused, and tittered.

"Don't be silly, girls!" said Rashevich.

Zhenya and Iraida spoke French to one another and Russian to their father and the visitor.... Interrupting one another, and mixing French and Russian, they began to remark that just at this time of the year, that is in August, they used to leave home for the Institute. How jolly that was! But now there was no place to go to for a change, and they lived at the manor-house winter and summer. How tiresome!

"Don't be silly, girls!" repeated Rashevich.

"In short, that is exactly how things stand," he said, looking affectionately at the magistrate. "We, in the goodness and simplicity of our hearts, and from fear of being suspected of retrograde tendencies, fraternise—excuse the expression—with all kinds of human trash, and preach equality and fraternity with upstarts and nouveaux riches! Yet if we paused to reflect for a single minute we should see how criminal is our kindness. For all that our ancestors attained to in the course of centuries will be derided and destroyed in a single day by these modern Huns."

After supper all went into the drawing-room. Zhenya and Iraida lighted the piano candles and got ready their music.... But their parent continued to hold forth, and there was no knowing when he would end. Bored and irritated, they looked at their egoist father, for whom, they concluded, the satisfaction of chattering and showing off his brains, was dearer than the future happiness of his daughters. Here was Meyer, the only young man who frequented the house—for the sake, they knew, of tender feminine society—yet the unwearying old man kept possession of him, and never let him escape for a moment.

"Just as western chivalry repelled the onslaught of the Mongols, so must we, before it is too late, combine and strike together at the enemy." Rashevich spoke apostolically, and lifted his right hand on high. "Let me appear before the potboy no longer as plain Pavel Ilyich, but as a strong and menacing Richard the Lion-Heart! Fling your scruples behind you—enough! Let us swear a sacred compact that when the potboy approaches we will fling him words of contempt straight in the face! Hands off! Back to your pots! Straight in the face!" In ecstasy, Rashevich thrust out a bent forefinger, and repeated: "Straight in the face! In the face! In

the face!"

Meyer averted his eyes. "I cannot tolerate this any longer!" he said.

"And may I ask why?" asked Rashevich, scenting the beginnings of a prolonged and interesting argument.

"Because I myself am the son of an artisan." And having so spoken, Meyer reddened, his neck seemed to swell, and tears sparkled in his eyes..

"My father was a plain working man," he said in an abrupt, broken voice. "But I can see nothing bad in that."

Rashevich was thunderstruck. In his confusion he looked as if he had been detected in a serious crime; he looked at Meyer with a dumfounded face, and said not a word. Zhenya and Iraida blushed, and bent over their music. They were thoroughly ashamed of their tactless father. A minute passed in silence, and the situation was becoming unbearable when suddenly a sickly, strained voice—it seemed utterly mal à propos—stammered forth the words:

"Yes, I am a tradesman's son, and I am proud of it." And Meyer, awkwardly stumbling over the furniture, said good-bye, and walked quickly into the hall, although the trap had not been ordered.

"You will have a dark drive," stammered Rashevich, going after him. "The moon rises late to-night." They stood on the steps in the darkness and waited for the horses. It was cold.

"Did you see the falling star?" asked Meyer, buttoning his overcoat.

"In August falling stars are very plentiful."

When at last the trap drove round to the door, Rashevich looked attentively at the heavens, and said, with a sigh:

"A phenomenon worthy of the pen of Flammarion...."

Having parted from his guest, he walked up and down the garden, and tried to persuade himself that such a stupid misunderstanding had not really taken place. He was angry, and ashamed of himself. In the first place, he knew that it was extremely tactless and incautious to raise this accursed conversation about the white bone without knowing anything of the origin of his guest. He told himself, with perfect justice, that for him there was no excuse, for he had had a lesson before, having once in a railway carriage set about abusing Germans to fellow-passengers who, it turned out, were themselves Germans.... And in the second place he was convinced that Meyer would come no more. These intellectuels who have sprung from the people are sensitive, vain, obstinate, and revengeful.

"It is a bad business ... bad ... bad!" he muttered, spitting; he felt awkward and disgusted, as if he had just eaten soap. "It is a bad business!"

Through the open window he could see into the drawing-room where Zhenya with her hair down, pale and frightened, spoke excitedly to her sister.... Iraida walked from corner to corner, apparently lost in thought; and then began to speak, also excitedly and with an indignant face. Then both spoke together. Rashevich could not distinguish a word, but he knew too well the subject of their conversation. Zhenya was grumbling that her father with his eternal chattering drove every decent man from the house, and had to-day robbed them of their last acquaintance, it might have been husband; and now the poor young man could not find a place in the whole

district wherein to rest his soul. And Iraida, if judged correctly from the despairing way in which she raised her arms, lamented bitterly their wearisome life at home and their ruined youth.

Going up to his bedroom, Rashevich sat on the bed and undressed himself slowly. He felt that he was a persecuted man, and was tormented by the same feeling as though he had eaten soap. He was thoroughly ashamed of himself. When he had undressed he gazed sadly at his long, veined, old-man's legs, and remembered that in the country round he was nicknamed "the toad," and that never a conversation passed without making him ashamed of himself. By some extraordinary fatality every discussion ended badly. He began softly, kindly, with good intentions, and called himself genially an "old student," an "idealist," a "Don Quixote." But gradually, and unnoticed by himself, he passed on to abuse and calumny, and, what is more surprising, delivered himself of sincere criticisms of science, art, and morals, although it was twenty years since he had read a book, been farther than the government town, or had any channel for learning what was going on in the world around him. Even when he sat down to write a congratulatory letter he invariably ended by abusing something or somebody. And as he reflected upon this, it seemed all the more strange, since he knew himself in reality to be a sensitive, lachrymose old man. It seemed almost as if he were possessed by an unclean spirit which filled him against his will with hatred and grumbling.

"A bad business!" he sighed, getting into bed. "A bad business!"

His daughters also could not sleep. Laughter and lamentation resounded through the house. Zhenya was in hysterics. Shortly afterwards Iraida also began to cry. More than once the barefooted housemaid ran up and down the corridor.

"What a scandal!" muttered Rashevich, sighing, and turning uneasily from side to side. "A bad business!"

He slept, but nightmare gave him no peace. He thought that he was standing in the middle of the room, naked, and tall as a giraffe, thrusting out his forefinger, and saying:

"In the face! In the face! In the face!"

He awoke in terror, and the first thing he remembered was, that last evening a serious misunderstanding had occurred, and that Meyer would never visit him again. He remembered then that the interest had to be lodged in the bank, that he must find husbands for his daughters, and that he must eat and drink. He remembered sickness, old age, and unpleasantness; that winter would soon be upon him, and that there was no wood....

At nine o'clock he dressed slowly, then drank some tea and ate two large slices of bread and butter.... His daughters did not come down to breakfast, they did not wish to see his face; and this offended him. For a time he lay upon the study sofa, and then sat at his writing-table and began to write a letter to his daughters. His hand trembled and his eyes itched. He wrote that he was now old, that nobody wanted him, and that nobody loved him; so he begged his children to forget him, and when he died, to bury him in a plain, deal coffin, without ceremony, or to send his body to Kharkoff for dissection in the Anatomical Theatre. He felt that every line breathed malice and affectation ... but he could not stop himself, and wrote on and on and on....

"The toad!" rang a voice from the next room; it was the voice of his elder daughter, an indignant, hissing voice. "The toad!"

"The toad!" repeated the younger in echo. "The toad!"